

THE AURORA CITADEL

A Warhammer: Age of Sigmar fanfic by Dan Morley

Chapter 1

Failure

Lightning struck the cracked, blasted ground as Sigmar reclaimed another fallen warrior. Sent back to the forges of Azyr at the hand of his Prime, a mercy killing for the Liberator too wounded to continue. Only a scattering of dead trees broke up the barren grounds, and under a brooding, overcast sky, the tang of ozone hung around them. The Strike Chamber was failing, a new and distasteful feeling for the Knights of the Aurora. For all their victories, for the hundreds of corrupted cultists strewn around Ancanna's feet and across the dark, cracked earth, and for the viscera smeared over his hammer's head, they were still failing.

'Eyes up, Prime,' a deep, echoing voice said from above. The dulcet tones marked him as Gallus, the Knight Azyros. 'Stay your reflectiveness--the day is won.'

The warrior descended from the sky, dropping into a crouch beside Ancanna as he landed, his wings of light folding back and fading to a dim glow. Chips and scuffs scarred his heavy armour plates, the bright silver worn to dullness. As the drizzle beaded and trickled down his hauberk, it left grimy trails.

Ancanna glanced to the Knight Azyros through his own silvery helm, as impassive as a death mask. 'You can tell through this?'

'I could feel your despondency while riding the winds, my friend, and you walk with the gait of a man defeated.'

At a gesture from the knight, Ancanna broke step from his Liberators, allowing them to march past while the two conferred under the blackened boughs of a gnarled and twisted tree. The chattering of slinking carrion-feeding beasts that glutted on the dead diminished in the wind clattering through the branches.

Two moons obscured most of the sun in a figure of eight and cast the rolling hills and woodland into gloom. The other three moons remained obfuscated by cloud. Ancanna thought little of it since this place had been in a state of partial or total eclipse since they arrived. A second sun didn't seem to change position with time of day, always lying to the east and only made its presence known by the golden halo it created on a distant black cloud.

'This one hit us hard, Gallus,' Ancanna said in hushed tones. 'Our Judicators have been annihilated. We cannot bring a single unit to bear. The few survivors have been reassigned to raise shields among the Liberators but we have not the supplies to arm them appropriately.'

The Knight Azyros waved the idea away. 'They are still Stormcast and even without joining the shield wall, they will account for themselves many times over.' He cocked his head which fluttered the sea-green crest of horsehair atop his angular helm. 'Though I grant we shall miss their tactical effectiveness.'

While true, Ancanna remained unconvinced, not at the Judicators' prowess, but how they arrived at such a situation.

'He's pushing too fast.' He voiced the opinion that had gnawed at him for weeks of slog through battle. 'That march left us too thin. Our last four skirmishes have been ambushes. Four! Tell me when the Knights of the Aurora have ever been ambushed.'

Gallus stiffened. 'The Angelos Conclave is serving better than any other Stormhost's would manage under the circumstances.'

'You know I don't mean our scouts, Gallus. I see how the mists here rise at a whim and how quickly they form impenetrable fog. These warbands have hit us harder and at a weaker point each time and we still exercise no caution, strung out across these hills. We have two thirds the number that passed through the realm gate. Attrition is killing us.' Ancanna became more animated, clenching and unclenching his fists, raising his arms. 'This rivalry Kimmani has with the Lord Celestant...ah, forget it. We counselled and he ignored it.'

From the marching column, a couple of Retributors glanced towards the outburst but Ancanna glared back at them and they thought better of taking issue with the Liberator Prime.

'Careful how loud you grumble, my friend,' Gallus cautioned, 'for he's in no humour to hear dissent. The Lord Castellant has his reasons for haste; are you really so angry with him?'

Ancanna ground his teeth and squeezed the grip of his warhammer. 'I could not reach them.'

He looked down at his shield, the great bulwark of sigmarite, displaying an image of Ghal Maraz, the Hammer of Sigmar, beneath embellished scrollwork. Useless if he could not plant it between his allies and his enemies.

The Liberator Prime maintained a clear picture of his place in the army. He was a defender. The shields and hammers of his Liberators had contained enemies many times their physical size and numbers, holding the line while Prosecutors harried from the skies or Paladins positioned for a devastating counter. Or protecting the bow-wielding Judicators. Powerful as each individual Stormcast was, the Strike Chamber performed at its most devastating when working as a unit. Now it had lost its ranged capabilities and Ancanna had been absent when his shield was needed.

His failure galled him.

While the Strike Chamber regrouped, Prosecutors glowed like fireflies in the distant gloom as they chased down those servants of Chaos that had fled the battle. Occasional flashes marked when a hammer struck home and they summoned another from the energy of the storm. Streamers of light trailed behind their wings and faded with the wind.

Light trails from Prosecutors above always showed their way. Of all the Stormhosts, the Knights of the Aurora housed the largest number of these winged warriors. The enhanced scouting capability this offered allowed them to cover ground quickly by avoiding dangerous terrain and, when used defensively, made them almost impossible to assail unawares. That made the loss of so many Judicators difficult to accept, but the Lord Castellant would be held to account for it in time. Ancanna took little solace from the thought, for recriminations could not heal what the Judicators would lose in the reforging process. Every Stormcast would come back changed, and with it the realms would become a little darker.

'Beautiful, aren't they?' Gallus said. When no response was forthcoming, the Knight Azyros growled as his patience frayed. 'Gather yourself, Stormcast. Your shield remains whole and another enemy is driven before us. We have brought death once more.'

Ancanna stared back. Had just some of their Prosecutors remained with the ground troops instead of ranging further and further ahead, they would have had warning of the ambushes. Had he been allowed to leave a contingent of Liberators as a rearguard, they might have held long enough for the

Strike Chamber to react and the Judicators to bring their bows to bear. But he let that issue lie for a greater problem troubled him.

‘That’s the problem. We brought death when we’re supposed to be bringing hope. Isn’t that what the Lord Celestant ordered before splitting the Strike Chamber? “Seek the people of Ulglu and rally them to the banner of Sigmar”.’ He gestured at the smoking ruin of yet another battlefield where silver-clad warriors marched past the corpses of cultists and mutants. ‘Where are these people? Who are we looking for? Duardin? I see nothing of their structures. Aelfs? The only magic I feel here crawls with trickery. We’ve seen none but the servants of Chaos since stepping through the realm gate.’

‘And we’ve crushed them by the score.’

‘Yet how many have we rallied to our side?’

The Knight Azyros clapped his friend on the shoulder. ‘Take care not to lose your own hope, Prime. Ordinarily I would leave you to your usual bout of post-battle reflectiveness but we’re both required in the vanguard. We’ve caught them.’

‘Caught them?’ Ancanna said. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The reason Kimmani pushed so hard,’ Gallus explained. ‘He was chasing a small band of people, maybe thirty or so. They call themselves the Ardency of the Storm God. It seems another warband took them captive. Our vanguard smashed them while you fought here.’

‘Truly?’ Ancanna’s disposition brightened and he stood straighter with this hint of their goal dangling before him.

Gallus raised his palms and took half a step back. ‘I wouldn’t hold out much hope; from the reports of our Prosecutors, they’re every bit as misguided and crazed as the warband we just smashed into the ground. They’re facing off against our vanguard now and I’m fairly sure they’re stupid enough to start something they can’t finish.’

Ancanna nodded. It was a start. His attention flicked to a cultist warrior, gangly and filthy in his crimson rags, who twitched near his feet. Eyes and eldritch symbols were inked and etched into the vanquished man’s flesh and he muttered a fell mantra. Though he crawled closer, clutching a knife, murderous zeal in his eyes, his breath formed a red mist from his shattered ribs and lungs. Ancanna arced his hammer around and crushed his skull.

‘Ardency of the Storm God? Disciples of Sigmar, perhaps?’ He paid the dead cultist no more mind.

The Knight Azyros took a moment before answering. ‘Not as we know him.’

None knew Sigmar as a Stormcast Eternal did. Part of the God-King’s power infused into the very forging of his armies. Ancanna took some heart from the possibilities. A group who worshipped a god so identifiably similar to Sigmar would surely rally to his champions.

Ancanna hooked his shield onto his back but kept his weapon to hand in case any more cultists made last ditch attempts to extend their spite. He glanced over the hill towards the vanguard. ‘Then we had better see what the survivors of this realm have to say. Many of our brothers have paid a high price for this audience.’

Chapter 2

Ardency of the Storm God

Ancanna's first view of the Ardency of the Storm God came over the shields of two ranks of Liberators holding them back.

Their cried accusations of blasphemy reached his ears long before he viewed their banner. The ragged thing, raised by gnarled branches lashed together, depicted something resembling two comets flying from west to east over a boar and a wolf that faced one another as though squaring off. These woven black images sat atop a crimson background. Dirty cord lashed the banner pole to the back of a lanky, wretch of a man, dark with blood where the tight wrappings had broken through flesh. Manacles covered the prisoners' wrists and rusted iron chains linked them all together. All but one.

A middle-aged man with shaven scalp and comet-like tattoos inked across his forehead, cheeks and neck paced at their fore, riling them up with zealous rhetoric. Spittle flecked his chin and his cheeks reddened from his tirade. Manacles still covered his wrists and chains the length of his forearms dangled from them, swinging with his animated gestures.

'These are no priests of Sigmar,' Ancanna whispered to the Knight Azyros by his side.

They lacked the regal, flowing robes worn by Azyrite priests, and instead wore tattered tunics or long shirts and breeches which clung to them, sodden from the lengthy drizzle. The leader strutted in his faded, mustard hues. Perhaps once they had been golden. Those behind him wore clothing of a similar style and condition but a mismatch of colours, many with crude comets, boars and wolves in imitation of their banner. Some sported ragged pelts thrown over their shoulders in the style of barbarian tribes though little skill had gone into the skinning of the animals.

More concerning though were their scars. Layer upon layer of healed and reopened wounds covered the crowns of many. Welts showed on them all, red and angry, in strips that matched the width of the leather whip-like devices at their waists. For their ragged appearance and malnutrition, these three dozen yelled and preached with a fervour that belied their state and levelled improvised weapons at the Stormcast Eternals. Though weapons was a loose term by Stormcast standards, their staves and wooden maces with comet-styled heads could still crack a skull and their knives could still pierce flesh. Blood stained a few of them.

'I warned you as much,' Gallus replied. 'Their leader got out first and distributed weapons around.'

Ancanna could only shake his head. The man had a strange sense of priority having left the others chained while securing weapons. Judging by their state, he wondered whether removing the chains would even improve their effectiveness with the weapons. He admitted he had not known what to expect from people surviving in the Mortal Realms under the boot of Chaos.

'Who bars our way?' the bald man shouted, jabbing his mace towards the Liberators. 'Who dares block the will of the Storm God?'

'This one is dangerous,' Ancanna whispered.

Gallus looked at him askance. 'I think this little rabble is within our capabilities.'

Keeping his voice to a whisper--not that he needed to with the shouting and jeering--Ancanna shook his head. 'We've killed enough without spilling the blood of those we vowed to liberate.'

‘Prime. Azyros,’ a voice called from behind.

The two turned and clashed fists to chests in salute. The Lord Castellant strode towards them, his gait purposeful. Despite a few scuffs to his armour, he appeared fresh and unaffected by the battle.

His sigmarite plate bulked him out more than Ancanna’s and Gallus’ more lithe versions. Comets and lightning bolts festooned the silver armour beneath draped scrollwork which offered praise to Sigmar in the language of Azyr. His halo of sigmarite lightning bolts further protected his helm and depicted recognition of his Stormhost by the word, *Aurora*. He wielded his halberd one-handed showing no concern at the noisome rabble.

‘Part,’ he commanded the Liberators and they stepped aside to let the Lord Castellant through while keeping the zealots at bay.

Ancanna and Gallus trailed him through the shield wall. They cast wary glances to the shaven-headed man and kept a solid grip on their weapons. The man’s wide eyes and feral grin told them he could snap at any moment. He did, however, quiet at the Lord Castellant’s approach though his breathing remained heavy.

Kimmani towered over the rabble. The tallest of them reached only to his chest and he had the width of two of them. He looked them over, his gaze lingering on their leader.

‘I am Lord Castellant Kimmani of the Knights of the Aurora Stormcast Eternals, Devoted of the God-King Sigmar. I lead this Strike Chamber. To whom do I address?’

The bald zealot paced in front of him, his crazy eyes fixed upon the Lord Castellant’s mask. His breathing intensified before he licked the spittle from around his mouth. While the grimy men and women behind him shrank back at the giant, he became only more incensed.

‘Sigmar?’ His voice sounded raspy, hoarse from shouting. His right eye twitched violently and he shook his head. ‘Sigmar? What Sigmar?’

Kimmani said nothing and stood watching the man as he increased the tempo of his pacing. Suddenly he stopped and thrust a metal talisman secured around his neck by leather cord under the Lord Castellant’s nose. Kimmani didn’t flinch.

‘This!’ the zealot shouted. He tore open his robes to reveal deeply scarred flesh beneath and thrust his chest forward. Though crude, the scars formed a comet over each withered pectoral muscle and a sledgehammer over his abdomen. ‘See the comets and great hammer, *Ghormirotz!* This is the sign of the Storm God himself. I am marked! Erwhal Vormust, I was, but now I am marked a god. By blocking my path, you block the avatar of the Storm God!’

In his fervent shouting, the man bit his tongue and a drop of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

‘You are mistaken,’ Kimmani said flatly, the tip of his halberd resting on the ground.

‘You deny me?’ Erwhal yelled. He staggered back and howled before deadly seriousness returned to his expression and he pointed a finger into the Lord Castellant’s face. ‘I see these effigies and idols across your armour. You are pretenders! Charlatans! Your blasphemy provokes vengeful wrath.’

Kimmani spread his arms as if to invite said wrath. ‘Your Storm God will not strike me down, Erwhal Vormust, for I am his champion.’

‘Liar!’

Erwhal’s mace clanged against Kimmani’s breastplate. As the shock went back up the man’s arm, he dropped the weapon and looked down upon its snapped shaft.

Kimmani gave no indication of retaliation. When Ancanna and Gallus went for their weapons, the Lord Castellant held them back with an open palm.

‘What are you within there?’ Vormust asked, rolling his shoulder as he turned back to Kimmani. He dipped his head and leaned in as though sniffing the Stormcast. ‘Daemon? Sorcery from the farms beyond the vale?’

Ancanna snapped a glance to Gallus who nodded. Without a word passing between them, Gallus quietly stepped back. As a Prime of the Angelos Conclave, he sent orders back through the ranks. Soon after, five flights of Prosecutors took wing and the Knight Azyros rejoined Ancanna just as the zealot worked up his fervour again. The Lord Castellant stood and watched, confident in his sigmarite plate. He preferred to let a man speak when it seemed words wanted to burst out of them, claiming the jumble of words showed more of their character and intentions than the words themselves.

‘Farms?’ Kimmani asked but the man was beyond listening.

‘The Storm God loathes duplicity. We shall cut you out of there and see for ourselves!’

His hands darted. In a flash of movement, he drew a knife and thrust it under the Lord Castellant’s breastplate. But the Lord Castellant moved faster. He seized the zealot’s wrist in an unshakeable grip.

‘Blasphemy!’ the man cried. ‘The daemon lays hands on the avatar of the Storm God! Strike them down!’

‘Shield wall!’ Ancanna bellowed.

He surged forwards and raised his shield. Twenty Liberators joined him with drilled efficiency. The opening slammed shut with Kimmani and Vormust behind a bastion of sigmarite that the Ardeny of the Storm God crashed against. Nothing broke that defence. Improvised weapons failed to even scuff the hardened shields.

‘On command,’ Ancanna called, waiting for his opportunity, reading the line of his shield wall for the most effective timing. ‘Push!’

They slammed their shields out as one, knocking the whole front line of zealots to the ground. Shackled together so, they pulled the rest down with them. The Liberators kept them pinned with their shields. When the warrior to Ancanna’s left made to raise his hammer, the Liberator Prime bid him cease. His target was not the enemy. Misguided and fanatical, but much as Ancanna disliked the reality of who Sigmar had sent them to liberate, they were not an enemy.

‘Cease your raving and answer me, fanatic,’ Kimmani growled, twisting Vormust’s wrist with infinitesimal effort. ‘Many of my brother warriors fell in our haste to deliver you from daemon warbands and you will answer my questions.’

Light flashed from the zealot, staggering Kimmani, and slick with rainwater, the man broke free of his grip. The talisman around his neck glowed faintly as its weak enchantment faded. He slipped around the Liberators and began pulling his followers free from under shields.

Ancanna allowed it, signalling down the line with a nod to the Liberators, and each shield raised enough for the people to wrest themselves free.

The shield wall parted again to let Kimmani through. He levelled his halberd at Vormust's chest. 'Begone from my sight, rabble. Your lives are your own, courtesy of the God-King Sigmar. Consider this boon and look to your own banners.' He unhooked a sigmarabulum from his waist, a small, metal token of Sigmar's twin-tailed comet, and tossed it to the zealot. 'The Stormlord has worn many guises through the ages.'

At a signal from the Lord Castellant, a dozen Liberators broke the chains that held the Ardency of the Storm God Together. He strode away, his anger palpable, back to the bulk of his force just as a Prosecutor swooped in and hovered above the Knight Azyros. The two spoke for a moment before Gallus took flight without a word. He shot, arrow straight, over the crest of the hill to their flank.

Ancanna and the Liberators watched over the Ardency of the Storm God while the Stormcast Eternals regrouped behind them and the zealots looked to their leader. Vormust restarted his invective, though, Ancanna noticed, he pocketed the sigmarabulum. The Liberator Prime wondered whether to even consider this a success. So many Knights of the Aurora returned to the forges of Azyr and not a single person rallied to their banner. At best, he decided, they bought the zealots some time before the next warband found and killed them. Perhaps the Stormcasts might have approached them differently but even he had expected to be welcomed with open arms and joined by whomsoever they freed from Chaos dominion.

Part way through whipping up his followers, Vormust stopped dead. His jaw dropped and he stared to the heavens, his eyes cascading. His followers looked on him in wonder while the Liberators readied their shields. Likely they didn't need it against any attack from the zealots, but Ancanna drilled his Liberators better than to allow complacency. Complacency killed.

Another light flashed from the talisman around Vormust's neck. To the quick witted, it projected a shaft of light upwards. Had someone been distracted, however, they would see a man basking in a beam of light from the heavens.

'So it shall be!' Vormust declared, raising his arms. 'As your manifested will, I shall lead them thus!'

As suddenly as his ordeal began, Vormust dropped to the ground. He curled into a shaking ball while his followers crowded around him and raised a cacophony of cries of worship and fealty.

'Very dangerous,' Ancanna muttered.

As though possessed of divine will, the Ardency of the Storm God hurried away from the Stormcast Eternals. They whipped one another as they went, using the leather whips that each carried. Ancanna watched after them in disappointment and wonder at how such an overt group managed to avoid the yoke of Chaos in a part of a realm so dominated.

So focused on the departing zealots, Ancanna missed the Knight Azyros returning.

'Look sharp, Prime,' Gallus said. 'New orders. We're heading over the ridge.'

'Why do you sound so pleased?' Ancanna said.

'They may have been lost to all reason, but they spoke truth about one thing.'

When Ancanna failed to respond, the Knight Azyros continued.

‘Farmland.’

‘What?’

Gallus laughed, his irritation at Ancanna’s despondency passed. ‘I didn’t believe it either. After the Prosecutors reported an expanse of farmland to the south, I checked it myself. True enough, there is a valley ripe with golden crops. Livestock graze on green pastures, and on the other side of the river, a settlement stands on the hillside. Crops grow, people work.’

‘In plain sight? That’s impossible.’

In a land so overrun with cultists and daemon worshippers, so choked by the iron gauntlet of Chaos, what culture could survive? The Liberator Prime considered the warrior he finished. He could not envision daemon worshippers like that taking to farming. The Stormcasts’ exposure to their enemy had been at the end of a hammer so they had seen only their warlike nature, manning defiled fortresses or swarming battlefields. The settlements of whoever lived here before Chaos domination were devastated and spoiled.

‘There’s more,’ Gallus added. ‘The Prosecutors have reported signs of a nomadic culture. Whenever they pursue, however, they melt away. It might be nothing, it might be what we’ve been searching for.’

That, at least, sounded more likely. Reports from Stormhosts taking the fight to other realms suggested that most of the people they had met, who had not fallen to Chaos, lived like scavengers or savages, hounded by warbands. But just as likely, the treacherous nature of Ulglu had them chasing shadows. Nothing but cultists, daemons and battle-hungry warbands beset them since they passed the realmgate, and suddenly the valley ahead promised farms and nomads. He kept a healthy dose of skepticism for abundant good news.

‘Tainted?’ Ancanna asked.

The Knight Azyros shrugged with a grinding of armour plates. ‘If so, we crush them with hammer and sword. If not...’

‘If not, we have our example,’ Ancanna finished.

‘Something like that. Lord Castellant Kimmani has given the order. Follow the march to the stone cairn at the foot of the next hill then turn your Liberators south. Since these nomads are so slippery, we’re heading to the settlement first.’

Chapter 3

Valescroft

'Unbelievable,' Ancanna breathed.

The Prosecutors were right.

They stopped atop a hill looking down into the valley. A few cobbles poked through the grass where once a road must have led, though it had long fallen to disrepair. It followed the contours of the valley into the settlement ahead, passing through a marbled archway whose sheen had weathered away. The arch stood alone without a hint of walls either side.

No other roads led out of the valley, nothing beyond the earthy-brown spider's web of trodden paths that quested out through the farmland and to a ford in the river. Though patches of fog still spotted the other hills and woodland around them, the valley ahead remained clear. Whoever lived here never left the valley, nor did others come here with any regularity.

People, humans they looked like from this distance, tended livestock on one hillside, along with the stepped rice paddies on the other. Between them, a water wheel attached to a small building turned in the river that ambled through the valley. The word Valescroft appeared on multiple signs either painted onto or planted outside wood and plaster buildings.

'It's like the realms never fell,' Gallus agreed.

Ancanna looked back to the warped forests and blasted plains that they had crossed to reach this valley. Every settlement in their wake lay in ruins long overgrown and not an acre of land survived without the mark of Chaos. Towers of sacrifice made from the bones of humans and Aelfs and Duardin along with crystalline pits oozing dark sorcery were scattered throughout that landscape, but this valley, this lone valley, existed like an oasis in its centre.

They all thought the same and it gave even the mighty Knights of the Aurora pause.

'Lord Relictor,' Lord Castellant Kimmani called. At the Relictor's arrival he gestured across the lush landscape with its seemingly civilised inhabitants. 'Is this illusion?'

'And is it us or Chaos who have been deceived?' Gallus added, hand on his sword. His wings twitched and his posture remained coiled ready to leap into the skies at the sign of danger. 'Do we look upon a trap to lure us closer or has some canny sorcery kept these folk hidden from the enemy's eye?'

The Lord Relictor remained silent while he surveyed the landscape, followed by the Knight Azyros, Liberator Prime and Lord Castellant. His gaze disquieted them. It was as though he searched as much for meaning in them as the land that they had indicated.

'Illusion? No. No more than anywhere else in this realm, yet the tang of Chaos persists. This place is not as untainted as it appears.'

Kimmani nodded. 'Knight Azyros, you dwelt in the Realm of Shadow before Sigmar claimed you, What do you know of this place?'

Gallus shook his head. 'I lived much further south in the Deepwave Archipelago. A kingdom spanned the valleys here, one that fell to turncoats. I can tell you little of the details.'

What about the mists?' Ancanna asked.

‘Normal, but they were never so thick or so frequent in the isles. We used mistweavers on some of our ships when we fought the Blood Fleet. They let us ambush the interlopers--it’s the only reason we lasted as long as we did.’ The Knight Azyros looked out across the valley. ‘One thing I can tell you about Ulglu is that from the island chains to its darkest woodland, it is a deceptive place. Expect tricks of the light, moving shadows, and above all, it rewards deception itself.’

‘What do you mean, “rewards”?’ the Lord Castellant asked.

‘Nothing definitive.’ Gallus sounded amused. ‘That’s the point. Those who wish to remain hidden may find the conditions suddenly advantageous to that.’ He shrugged. ‘Or they may find their hiding place illuminated at just the wrong time. The Realm of Shadow always has the last laugh.’

‘Pah!’ The Lord Castellant turned away. ‘Too imprecise. I cannot use that.’

‘Is it possible?’ Ancanna asked as he returned his attention to the settlement in the valley. ‘Could people have survived like this, beyond the reach of Chaos? In a settlement so prominent on the landscape?’

The Lord Relictor fixed him with a stare. His avian skull helm reminded Ancanna of the Soothsayer of Avos, the volcanic island off the coast of his homeland. The one that had warned him of the encroachment of enemies into his own lands many lifetimes past. The fetishes and talismans hanging from hooks around his bulky sigmarite plates only added to the comparison. Hurik Stormsworn the Lord Relictor, however, exerted a force of will that the soothsayer could never have achieved. When that empty gaze locked upon Ancanna, it felt like judgement and a weighing of his possible futures.

‘The taint runs deep here. We should exercise caution,’ Hurik said.

‘Caution,’ Kimmani repeated. He gripped his fists and cursed under his breath.

They did not have time for caution. The Lord Castellant didn’t need to say it; he had intimated such before. It was an argument the officers had fought repeatedly since the Lord Celestant had split the Strike Chamber, giving Kimmani command of half. Other Stormhosts referred to the Knights of the Aurora as *The Swift*, mainly due to their favour of winged Prosecutors and rapid assault tactics. A Strike Chamber, however, could only move as quickly as its slowest part which was where the Prosecutors skill as scouts came into its own. Such a commanding view allowed them to choose the fastest terrain, avoid ambushes and avoid dead ends altogether. In preparation for battle, the knew the enemy positions and where to hit them, making altercations quick and efficient. The ever-changing mists of Ulglu, however, often robbed them of this advantage.

In the Lord Castellant’s frustration, they had constantly pushed for haste. Sometimes their lightning assault smashed through an enemy before it had chance to react. Most recently it had cost them the Judicators. Whatever contest or rivalry the Lord Castellant had with the Lord Celestant wore at both the officers’ patience and their Strike Chamber’s numbers.

‘I can range ahead with a few Prosecutors and prepare then for our coming,’ Gallus offered, gesturing to the settlement.

Kimmani paced his agitation away, surveying the hillsides and the river running through the valley before turning to his commanders.

‘No. They will speak to me. Station our warriors on vantage points across the hills outside the town. Build a beacon at each point. If these people are friendly, I’ll not have them spooked by marching an

army on their homes. If not, I want Prosecutors patrolling the skies. Any trouble from outside, I want to know about it. Lord Relictor, Liberator Prime, Knight Azyros, you will accompany me.'

Breathing a sigh of relief at avoiding the recurring argument and pleased to hear a little more caution from his leader, Ancanna saluted. This was more the tactical mind upon which the Lord Castellant had built his reputation, why the Lord Celestant had entrusted him with command. Whatever they found in this settlement, the Strike Chamber would be prepared.

The Strike Chamber dispersed after the Heraldor passed orders through its ranks while the commanders kept to the old road, keeping only a small retinue of Liberators and Paladins with them. Naturally for the Knights of the Aurora, Prosecutors circled overhead and ranged all around in complex patrol patterns.

As though at some unheard signal, the people working the farmland, still far from the Strike Chamber, hurried into their village. Some discarded their scythes and shovels where they stood while others held sickles close, the curved blades glinting as their arms swung in haste. A few cast glances towards the warriors in silver plate who approached in force.

'It seems they are unaccustomed to visitors,' Gallus remarked.

'Wouldn't you be?' Ancanna said.

'Faster,' Kimmani muttered and they pressed on in the wake of his lengthening stride.

After their gross disappointment with the Ardency of the Storm God, and the toll levied upon the Strike Chamber to reach them, an air of eagerness hung over the Knights of the Aurora's advance. Each one of them hungered for a measure of success in this campaign of attrition. Despite the Lord Relictor's warnings, Ancanna let a sliver of hope into his heart. A settlement! Somehow he could not imagine the servants of dark gods taking the time to plough, sow and reap a crop.

'What about that place?' Ancanna asked, gesturing towards an extensive area of ruined buildings at the edge of woodland within a couple of leagues of the settlement. Mist covered great portions of it with the odd damaged bluestone spire piercing through. Some areas looked overgrown with green vines while others stood bare and dead, unclaimed, or abandoned, by nature.

'The townsfolk don't go near it,' Gallus responded. 'We've patrolled from above since we arrived. Whatever happened there, whatever that place was, those living here now give it a wide berth. Naturally, we've a couple of patrols of Prosecutors keeping a close eye on it. As close an eye as they can given the mists. They seem attracted to that place.'

When they arrived at the marble archway, the commanders cast their gazes over deep carvings in the stone. Though wind and rain had taken their toll and blurred many of the images, some elaborate artwork remained. Ancanna marvelled at how magnificent it must have been in its original glory, perhaps attached to walls and towers. The Mortal Realms were littered with similar remnants of extinct cultures, but they always fascinated the Liberator Prime. The craftsmanship, he appreciated from a professional level in a only remembered, but the stories they often told gripped him more, left him wondering about the people who created them and why.

Ever sharp-eyed, the Knight Azyros spotted a passage chiselled into the stone. The overhanging wings of a stone eagle sheltered it from much of the weather, leaving it in considerably better condition than the other images.

The writing read: '*For years we kept him, hid him, trained him. In the time of the moons and the marshes, on the eighth day of the eighth cycle he strode forth, he marked as the sight stealer, to ride the clouds and fell the terror in the skies and topple its bastion of stone.*'

'What do you make of it?' Kimmani asked.

Gallus shrugged. 'Typical "chosen one" myth. We've seen similar across the ruins of countless cultures. Probably a sorcerer of some kind, someone with a spark of arcane about him.'

'Who's he fighting?' Ancanna asked, tracing his hand over the stone, yet keeping it a hair's breadth from touching lest he damage the piece further. The craftsmanship was beautiful. He viewed the landscape again, looking for any terrain or structures that he might tie back to the carved story, but saw nothing beyond farmland and hills over the river. 'It refers to a bastion but we've heard nothing of it. Gallus?'

He shook his head. 'The Angelos Conclave has sighted nothing more than this settlement, a few outlying farms, ruins and woodland. We have covered the ground for two dozen leagues. Of course, there's no saying what lies within the mists.'

As the Knight Azyros finished speaking, a Prosecutor landed beside them and dropped straight into a kneeling position. He spoke in hurried tones, addressing the commanders as one. 'My lords, we have sighted a small force to the west.'

'Warn the Strike Chamber and prepare for battle,' the Castellant said and turned back to the Prosecutor. 'More Sightless? Zealots?'

The winged warrior shook his head. 'They're not like any warband we've seen; too organised and the banners are unfamiliar.'

'Composition?'

'Ranked infantry and a small group of cavalry which looks like an honour guard for a large warrior in blue armour. And sir, they are heading away from us.'

The Lord Castellant gazed to the horizon and thought about it. Without turning back, he said, 'Send a unit of Prosecutors and see where they go. Do not engage.'

Chapter 4

The Futility of Heroism

Axanthral the Cultivator sat cross-legged on his floating platform. The great iron rings of his astrolabe-like occulum spun around him, daemonfire burning blue and pink in the joints and casting moving shadows across the dark, circular chamber. His gaze roved over the plethora of images shimmering in the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes until it settled on that of a mounted warrior clad in blue armour at the head of a small host men.

He paid no heed to the numbers, composition or weaponry of the force. Instead, he inspected their faces, looked into their eyes. He watched as they gazed upon the colourful banners that each block of men carried, and when they looked up at their leader on his charger. In each, he searched for one emotion: hope.

‘The cycle reaches its peak,’ he hissed to the daemon familiar at his side.

The diminutive creature trumpeted in excitement, turning a somersault before sprouting bat wings from its amorphous blue flesh and landing back on the floating disc. More of its central mass stretched out to form arms holding a scythe which it swished about as though reaping corn while cackling. It spoke like the wind, asking of the Anguished Harvest.

‘Soon,’ the sorcerer said, his pallid face cracking into a sardonic grin. ‘Summon the garrison. Have Ulgoloth position a dozen of his warriors on Malefius Tor along with the prisoners and the Quietus Apparatus. When the enemy approaches, pull back to the citadel with the rest of the garrison.’

The familiar flapped away, through the turning rings and out through an archway. Its cackling screech diminished, leaving Axanthral with the whoosh and whisper of his sorcerous chamber.

A wave of Axanthral’s clawed hand swirled the colours of his scrying illusion and the vision of the human host marching towards him vanished. He spread his fingers and ten leagues away an eye opened. Daemonfire in the occulum flared and formed a new image for him inside its rings, that of a town in celebration. Bunting flapped in the rising wind and people drank deeply from pottery mugs. A line of women sat creating a tapestry depicting their saviour’s rise to glory.

Appeased by the prospect of a bountiful harvest and that his gathering storm would peak at the full eclipse, Axanthral made to dismiss the image when a sliver of sunlight glinted from a suit of shining armour. The distant eye refocused and revealed a handful of warriors clad from head to toe in silver plate. His forked tongue licked out and curled around a ram’s horn that curved from his temple to his mouth. He observed the way his crops looked at them, so awestruck. He could use them.

At a thought, his disc-shaped platform hummed into motion, the daemonic face on its surface scowling and pointed teeth gnashing. A host of minor daemons maintained his occulum’s motion as he passed through the arch onto a wide, spiral staircase. He would need its magic later.

He passed through the atrium and out of the citadel’s doorless archway. Two dozen warriors in heavy plate armour stood like an avenue of statues along the causeway, still in the shadow of the complex of high walls, arched bridges and many towers. Gaining a little height atop his daemonic mount, a glance along the ridge revealed a second, smaller group, dressed in more ragged armament, assembling the Quietus Apparatus atop the hill. Dark clouds gathered and broiled overhead and the wind picked up, driving a fine rain onto the sorcerer’s dry, lean flesh.

At the end of the avenue, a large, wide warrior stepped out to meet him. The Dreadguard, Ulgoloth. His armour gleamed silver although Axanthral’s reflection was not his own face. Something even

fouler grinned back at him. The overall features of the reflected face recognisably depicted the sorcerer but his horn was longer, his skin blue-grey and his features elongated and mutated with teeth sharpened to obsidian needles. Two weapons peeked over the Dreadguard's shoulder, strapped to the warrior's back, a mace and a sword, both blessed of the Realm of Chaos. He bowed his head.

'Attack when the trap springs and let the Winds of Change take their course in the hero,' Axanthral said. 'Let a few escape to their town to sow panic and then follow. We are not servants of excess, Dreadguard. Slay your fill. Feast on their fear and despair but there must be survivors for the next crop. Slay your own if needed; you will share in my punishment if your gluttony causes another Art Eruditia.'

The bulky warrior only nodded. At his upraised palm, the avenue of warriors turned as one and marched in two groups, deploying either side of the ridge. Rocks and sheer drops would funnel their crops into them.

Before the Dreadguard followed his warriors, Axanthral stopped him. 'A handful of outlandish warriors have arrived in Valescroft, servants of the Lord of Storms. Kill them in sight of the crop. As with the previous harvest, you will be reinforced.'

'The Eclipse will crush them,' he rumbled. 'But you will remember our agreement, sorcerer.' With another bow, Ulgoloth loped away and stood at the head of the garrison.

His pieces in position, Axanthral returned to the citadel, took his own place inside the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes and looked through images of sorcerous smoke and fire upon his prepared killing field. The humans had already taken the first bait and left to slay the bandits that had murdered and kidnapped in Valescroft for the past decade. And, of course, the mutated Lord of Chaos that led them. The second bait, the Quietus Apparatus, had caught their attention and the host of men marched upon it.

Without need for a signal, the warriors atop the hill hauled the first prisoners onto the fleshy platform of the apparatus. Nine nooses awaited on the wooden beam above, held up by another beam either side. In sight of the approaching army, nine warriors lifted nine prisoners into their nooses and dropped them. While they struggled and strangled, barbed whips formed from the fleshy platform and lashed at them, forcing strained and gargled screams from their constricted throats.

The eclipse reached totality, deepening the shadows and Axanthral drew from the magic of the occulum to project his own sight onto the dark clouds. There, the whole of his farm of Valescroft could watch their own die through torture, followed by their hero's demise. He would pluck them from the heights of hope and plunge them into abyssal despair. Only then would his daemons feed.

The huge display of his friends and family dying for all to see incensed the approaching hero and he broke into a charge. The blue-armoured man streaked ahead, followed by his cavalry, separating them from the infantry. He fought like fury incarnate as he barrelled into the garrison. The first fell, trampled under his horse's hooves. The second dropped to his spear through the neck, and a third from a blast of energy from the spear's tip as the hero spun it back around.

The remaining garrison formed an organised defence and slowed the hero's momentum. His spear-work was magnificent, each thrust and circular defence executed to perfection. As the speed of his movements increased, a purple aura spread around him. Two of his horsemen fell to the barbed whips which from the Quietus Apparatus but the hero alone took another four enemies, tearing a fiery line through two at once, impaling the third through the chest and crushing the

fourth's windpipe with a savage arc of the spear's shaft. He was too focused to notice the purple tendrils spreading across his body and through his bloodstream.

The threshold had been reached and the remaining garrison fled along the ridge. Rain now pounded them, making the ground slippery. A pursuing horse stumbled and broke its leg, sending itself and its rider tumbling over a sheer drop. Another two of the garrison were run down by the hero, the only remaining rider. His infantry rushed to catch up, a few also losing their footing in the crush to fit on the ridge. The fortunate few stopped and remained behind while others were either trampled by their comrades or forced over the edge to fall on jagged rocks.

When the infantry had committed to the attack, Axanthral delved again into his well of power and sprung his trap. The hillside shook, sending more men to their deaths. Cracks tore in the earth either side of the ridge as the barbed ribs of a gargantuan beast forced their way through the ground and formed a cage around the attacking army. On the rocky surface, it blocked many of the escape routes, but its greatest weapon was the chilling terror it inspired within those caught inside.

But the hero had no thought for those behind him. He focused on the single warrior standing before him, wielding mace and sword. The hero dug his heels into his mount and charged, his spear levelled and resplendent with energy as though he wielded a lightning bolt. Ulgloth, however, remained still, his implacable discipline holding until the last second when he stepped aside from the grossly telegraphed attack. He swung his sword around and severed the horse's hind legs.

Under Axanthral's influence, the battle still raged across the black clouds, visible for leagues around. It caught the hero's acrobatic dismount and landing into a ready stance, coiled to lash out with his spear. Two quick strikes scored the Dreadguard's armour but failed to penetrate. He responded with heavy arcs of his mace that forced the hero onto the defensive and far enough away that he could bring his longer swings to bear. The two titans warred on the clouds, the hero faster but Ulgloth's defence near impenetrable.

Drawing on ever more power from a source he did not understand, the hero's fervour yet increased until his movements blurred. A series of stabs, high then centre, followed by a thrust inside Ulgloth's guard opened the massive warrior for the final strike.

Then the hero dropped to his knees.

His scream of agony echoed over the hills and through the valley. Coloured smoke wisped from his eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth. He thrashed against his pain but the smoke kept coming. Atop the tower, Axanthral smiled. Daemonic presence sent a thrill through him.

Convulsions wracked the hero until he arched his back suddenly. Bony spines burst through, breaking ribs and piercing flesh. Fingers, long and gnarled and or a light, luminescent blue, grasped at his mouth from the inside. They gripped and pulled until they tore their host open and a nightmare broke free. A lupine creature, though parts of it suggested twisted remnants of humanity, lanky with stringy musculature, crouched over the destroyed body of Valescroft's hope.

Axanthral then lifted the veil that hid his fortress. A series of lightning bolts forked across the sky and illuminated the structure for the remains of the army to see. They cowered when they saw what they were up against: not bandits but nightmares and power. They could not take a fortress. They quailed at the gruesome death of their leader, and those that could, fled.

Ulgloth waited. He watched those that could fit through the giant ribcage scatter across the hill, and then ordered his assault on those trapped. With nowhere to run, their fear intensified. Instead

of facing the daemon and the citadel's warriors, many leapt over the ridge to their deaths. Others were cut down in short order.

Then came the chase. Axanthral drank in the power of the feral, intense emotions around him and used it to open his rift. This was the level of fear and despair that he had cultivated for decades, and now was the time to reap. The stones forming the front of the castle wall stretched. They morphed and shifted until they formed an enormous face, almost avian in its features. It let out a scream, the doorway forming its open maw, and a flood of daemons surged through. Three men on the ridge stared into the shifting light of that maw and screamed uncontrollably, tearing at their own flesh. One fell upon his own sword, another knelt and wept, while the third followed the terrified into a sheer drop.

The light burst forth from the citadel, green and pink and blue. It shot into the air, obliterating Axanthral's conjured image of the ridge, and formed a ribbon that danced across the sky. The fell aurora heralded ray-like creatures that shrieked and swam upon the wind, while nightmares in a score of changing forms raced along the ground. They all headed in the same direction: to Valescroft.

Chapter 5

A Night for Running

A flash of light caught Kell's eye. She spun to face the ribbons of ethereal green and blue light snaking in the twilight sky. Even through the trees she knew it came from the distant hilltop. Panic shooting through her, she dropped her bundle of firewood and ran.

She no longer needed firewood. This was a night for running, not warmth. If she ran fast enough, she might survive until dawn.

She pelted back along the path she'd made, leaping gnarled roots and dodging the draping branches of luma trees and their sharp thorns. As a rule, she stayed close to her clan, not ranging as far as the other foragers. It was far enough. The wails started behind her, shrill and piercing like a banshee, and carrying a chill, not of the grave but of horror. Distinct voices were discernible in the screaming, of people she knew long dead, others she still believed alive. The sound of her brother's scream troubled her, but the sound of her daughter's terror near-crippled her. Dancing lights, will-o'-wisps, beckoned between the trees, looking at first glance like one of the collective's lanterns. But even in her panicked flight, Kell knew better. This was Ulgu, the Realm of Shadows, and its lies would kill the unwary in a heartbeat.

Chattering joined the wails. They were getting closer. She ignored the aurora reflected on the swampy pools either side. She ignored the cries—human cries—sounding behind her. They called for help, for mercy. One voice stood out, calling Kell by name, pleading that she turn back and save him. It was Greeth's voice, another forager covering the same patch. She ignored it too.

Keep running, she thought and broke into a sprint. Just keep running. Don't be caught alone. Never be caught alone.

There was safety in numbers, of a sort. The things liked easy prey. They liked to toy with it, to frighten it, always remaining out of sight, letting its prey's imagination conjure to most horrific of ends. It tormented until fear overwhelmed its prey. Kell knew. She had been trapped before, separated from help. She would not be so again. Definitely not within the Shadasmire where daemons of the aurora constituted only half of her problems.

Mist rose from the swampy woodland and, though an aurora played above the canopy of trees, darkness began to close in. The tops of trees clattered as they caught one another in the rising wind, sounding the illusion of horses cantering or wooden swords clashing. Leaves rustled above and below where beasts either sought cover or sought prey and the fetid gases bubbling up through stagnant water wafted to her.

Kell burst from the Shadasmire to the clearing around a tall oak where her community were waiting. Should have been waiting. Scattered ash and disturbed ground spoke of a hastily covered fire where usually the collective passed without trace. Otherwise, the knee-high remains of a wall covered in moss and vines, and the uneven spread of roots from the tree sat undisturbed. She cast around as a wave of fear enveloped her. They hadn't waited. Screeches closed in behind her. She berated herself for her lapse of vigilance.

Courage, Kell, she thought. She knew their bolt holes.

Light up ahead caught her eyes. The ruins. They would have headed into the ruins, hoping to lose themselves and hide from the horrors of the citadel. Few of her community lived to old age but they

had children amongst them, her own included, and that made them slow. Kicking herself back into a hard run, Kell entered Art Eruditia, the Barren City.

#

Beacons flared across the hills. Prosecutors stationed around the town responded in groups to the Knight Azyros' signal. The focused beam of holy light shot from his lantern and burned through a pair of flying daemons which had swooped from the growing aurora. They took to the skies and relayed the command to the ground troops. The Knights of the Aurora responded with their own light show, trails of light streaming behind the wings of the Angelos Conclave, resplendent against the dark sky. This night their mission changed. They no longer hunted damned men and searched for survivors, they defended those beset by the ruinous powers.

The wind whipped up by the wings of Prosecutors stirred Ancanna's soul. It was not something he had known until becoming Stormcast. A rising wind was no longer a prompt to take cover, but to raise hammer and shield, and to bring his own thunder to the storm.

Clattering armour signified Paladins and the few remaining Judicators hurrying behind their shield wall of Liberators. A tide of warriors in silver sigmarite descended upon Valescroft. At the command of their Primes, the Strike Chamber split into packs, filtering through the streets to defend people and to put daemons to the hammer.

While some Prosecutors guided their ground-based brothers from above, others fought an aerial battle with snapping, shrieking daemons, while the remainder rushed to the defence of the few fleeing human troops. With hammers and javelins conjured from the storm, they ran sorties over daemonic pursuers.

The Knight Azyros shot from battle to battle. Wherever daemons gained sway against Stormcasts, he smashed into them from the sky, turning isolated fights with the light of his lantern and blur of his sword. No sooner did his blade pierce a daemon's heart than he took to the skies once more, searching for another defence to bolster or weak point to exploit.

As he streaked over the rooftops, his attention caught three bloodstained men fleeing their battle. Their pursuers, two armoured men and a nebulous creature of blue flesh, crashed through a burning wooden pillar supporting the upper floor of a tannery where it hung over the street. Fire spat from the daemon's fingertips. It shot a burning jet to the thatched roof of a house as it passed and cackled at the sudden inferno.

Spotting Ancanna and his Liberators, Gallus called out. 'Liberator Prime! Your shield is needed.'

Ancanna saw them. 'Liberators! Form up,' he snarled, and surged towards them.

His vision narrowed, blocking out all but the pursuit. Blood and adrenaline surged white hot through him and he clashed his hammer against his shield, positioning to meet the challenge. His Liberators formed either side of him, blocking the width of the street. When the retreating men neared, they shifted aside to let them through the centre. As the daemons followed, Ancanna yelled, 'Reform!' and the open jaws of their shield wall slammed shut on the pursuers, dazing the daemon that had bounded ahead.

Pink and blue fire sizzled off their shields, though the heat flowed right through Ancanna's armour. Perspiration beaded on his face, yet he brought his hammer down atop the daemon's great maw. His regiment followed suit and pummelled the creature under a hail of strikes. Gouts of fire exploded from it as it gurgled and shrieked. Its accompanying warriors used the flash to manoeuvre aside. One

great axe blade bit into a Liberator's shield, while the other warrior thrust his sword into the faceplate of a sigmarite helm to Ancanna's right. The Stormcast dropped with a cry of pain. The other Liberators reformed their wall, curving around at the ends to limit the flanking enemies' movements.

Ancanna ducked and angled his shield as a flying ray-like daemon screamed for him. Its teeth scraped the lip of his shield, rebounding it upwards and staggering Ancanna. Two spear-wielding Prosecutors pursued, flying either side of the Liberators, marginally above head height. Ancanna put them from his mind for his melee was not isolated and enemy reinforcements kept flooding in. Another armoured warrior joined their fight though what concerned Ancanna most were the creatures that ignored his Liberators and hunted townsfolk. Locked in his fight, he could not reach them. Their wails and screams resounded in his helm.

A solid blow on his shield punished his lapse of concentration with a shockwave through his arm. He dug his feet in and called for his Liberators to push forwards. The warriors facing them had the full range of their long axes. They needed to close the gap and bring their hammers to bear. In a flash of steel, two of the enemy attacked left. First, an axe smashed into a Liberator's shield, its force enough to snap the shield straps and send it clattering across the cobbles. The second axe hit through the gap and hacked deep into the Stormcast's collar. Ancanna's counterblow glanced from the attacker's paudron and, though it brought a grunt of pain and crumpled the Chaos warrior's stance leaving it open, his ally covered with a savage swing forcing Ancanna to raise his defence once more.

After both sides reformed, two of the Chaos warriors attempted the same move on Ancanna that had felled his brother Stormcast. The first strike hit his shield, but wise to the tactic, Ancanna changed the angle of his grip and kept hold. The second, however, paused before his axe raised. He couldn't lift it. Ancanna's hammer blow had mangled the joint, restricting his enemy's movement. In the second of confusion, a spear thrust between the line of Liberators. It punched through the armour plates around the debilitated warrior's groin and dropped him.

'Now,' Ancanna's brother Liberator called to his left, covering the Liberator Prime with his shield.

Ancanna used the opportunity to land repeated hammer blows on the helm of his opponent. They snapped the curved horns on the helm and clanged against the metal, each blow denting deeper until the warrior's skull caved and he fell. With only two more of his Liberators beside him, Ancanna reformed his defensive position and stole a glance back at the spear-wielder. It was a human, one of the three that they had saved. Though his grip on the spear shook, and his eyes strained wide with fear and shock, the man stood.

'For Valescroft!' Ancanna boomed, partly to thank the brave man whose spear never should have been able to penetrate plate like that, partly to signal a push against the remaining two warriors in their melee.

They did not remain isolated for long.

A screech pierced the air overhead, followed by a pained gurgle as a Prosecutor crashed to the ground. It collided with a Chaos warrior, knocking him off his feet, and barrelled into Ancanna's shield. The flash of lightning as Sigmar reclaimed his warrior saturated Ancanna's vision while the force of the blast staggered both sides and sent their melee into disarray.

The Prosecutor's slayer shrieked its descent, a winged creature with many eyes like a spider and long claws like the ghouls of the death god. A fury of Chaos. Ancanna recovered first and placed himself

between the fury and its target, the unarmoured human. Taloned feet swiped at him but shield work and agility kept him safe.

While others still recovered, wheels rumbles over cobbled streets, accompanied by fell screams. Harried from above, Ancanna faced the new terror heading his way. A great chariot rumbled through the town's central plaza, scythes on its wheels sending sigmarite-clad limbs flying as it rolled over a Retributor too focused on his own fight to see the danger. Four flying daemons pulled it and two imposing forms stood atop its spiked and bladed surface, one a large warrior in silver armour, the other a bluish amalgamation of man, wolf and Chaos-twisted mutation. Heads of both men and Stormcasts decorated spears around them. This was the only street wide enough for such a contraption meaning it had only one way to go and it was not slowing.

The fury regained Ancanna's attention by scoring his chest plate and kicking his helm. Ancanna tried manoeuvring to a doorway to avoid being run down by the chariot but the fury kept blocking his path, each failed step bringing the screaming daemons and rattling wheels closer and louder.

Salvation came in a bolt of silver lightning. A sword burst through the fury's chest and ripped out of its side. Resplendent light flared from the Knight Azyros as he landed in the street. Such divine wrath intensified that light that the screamers pulling the chariot disintegrated, flipping the chariot as it careened out of control. The scythed wheels severed the head of a Chaos warrior and the chariot crushed both the other warrior and the Liberator whom he fought before it crashed through a wall.

The Knight Azyros closed the front shutter of his celestial lantern and bowed his head to Ancanna. 'Brave to face so many at once. I didn't mean to steal your glory, my friend.'

The Liberator Prime could not help but smile at the relief and hope buoyed in him at the knight's arrival. 'I don't mind who lands the final blow, as long as the enemy falls and we stand.'

'Then stand with me,' Gallus said and gestured to the gaping wall that the chariot had crashed through as the leaders of their enemy stalked from the wreckage.

Daemon and Chaos lord circled Ancanna and Gallus, at first not committing to anything more than short flurries, testing their defences. Every blow against Ancanna's shield felt like a battering ram and uprooted his footing. Gallus matched the daemon for speed but each strike also brought gnashing teeth from its limbs which cut at his armour.

Another figure strode into the street. Cloak trailing behind. Halberd extended towards the Chaos lord, he spoke in the deep, echoing tones of the Lord Castellant. 'Face me, slave of a falling god. Your reign has ended.'

Unable to ignore the direct challenge, the Chaos lord broke off his attack and, with a tip of his weapon to the Liberator Prime, he strode towards Kimmani, leaving Ancanna and Gallus to face the daemon.

The thing glared back at them, its eyes a maelstrom of purple and black. The merest hint of humanity remained in those eyes, though no human could exude malice. It stood on thick, wolf-like legs but almost doubled over, its arms looking more like a dog's, ending in sickly-green claws. On its chest, and around its shoulders, an eldritch symbol pulsed with purple and blue light while its back hosted stumps of deformed wings as though they had failed to grow properly. The reprieve lasted no more than an instant before its wild swipes resumed.

The Chaos lord's absence allowed Ancanna and Gallus to fight together. Every raking claw met the Liberator Prime's sigmarite shield. While Ancanna faced the onslaught, Gallus darted around the

creature, thrusting and slicing with his sword. Each time the daemon went for the agile Knight, Ancanna intercepted and took the hits. The creature whirled and snarled. With a savage swipe, it batted Ancanna's shield aside and snapped. Its stinking breath made the Liberator Prime gag while its teeth carved the edge of his war mask. Before it could bite again, Gallus' darting sword scored another cut on the beast's neck.

In the instant bought by the strike, Ancanna spun around to see the Lord Castellant beset by daemons. Two bogged him down in a brutal melee while a third crawled over the wreckage of the chariot and set to join. The silver-armoured warrior that had been facing him stood back and observed Kimmani's defence.

'They're swarming him,' Ancanna said, taking in the host of daemons descending on their fight as though to a beacon. 'Go!' he cried to the Knight Azyros. 'The beast is slowing. Help the Castellant.'

Gallus broke away from him and streaked into the sky to assist his Lord Castellant. He covered half the distance before one of the flying ray-like daemons crashed into him, knocking him into the path of another winged creature. Its great maw snapped closed around the sigmarite armour but failed to cause more than a couple of dents where its fangs displaced over the armour's curvature. The Knight Azyros responded with a flash of lantern light which bought him enough time to raise his sword and regain stable flight.

The light trailing behind Gallus was still fading when Ancanna burst through the wreckage to his lord's aid. His upward hammer swing lifted a blue daemon clean off its feet and slammed it against the building's back wall. Masonry and timber frames collapsed onto the creature, extinguishing any spark of life it clung to after the hammer blow. His second crushed the shoulder of another, the crunch of bone lost under Ancanna roaring his fury. The rim of his upthrust shield shattered the jaw of a third daemon, its head then severed by a sword. He then fought beside Kimmani, hammer and shield, sword and lantern, against claws and magic.

Through the afterimage of daemonfire that scorched Kimmani's greaves, they caught the image of the Chaos lord walking away, and them unable to break free of their melee.

'The daemon?' grunted Kimmani as his axe whirled.

Ancanna smashed his shield into flailing blue limbs before responding. 'We have our choice of daemons.'

'Do not test me, Prime.'

'I crushed its skull, my lord. Not even a Khorgorath could have...'

The Liberator Prime trailed off as a flicker of pale blue flesh caught his eye. Wreathed in daemonfire, the lupine creature jerked into view, its body convulsing as barbed, spidery legs burst from its body. While they still grew, stinking liquid wept from where they emerged and the daemon skittered up the wall of the tallest building that still stood. It coiled, ready to pounce on the Stormcast Eternals.

Gallus swooped past and scored a cut on one of the new legs' joints, narrowly dodging a rake from its sharp claws as he changed direction with the agility of a hornet. The cut stole the force from the daemon's jump and bought Ancanna a chance to tuck his shoulder behind his shield to meet it. Pushing from his legs, Ancanna's solid stance caused the daemon to rebound and sprawl over the cobbled ground where Kimmani struck. The halberd severed the beast's head and a second thrust from the long weapon pierced its chest.

Stormcasts encircled the remaining daemons, putting them to the hammer between the now-regrouped Strike Chamber and its leaders. A group of Prosecutors flew overhead in formation and cast hammers of lightning into the fight, dropping a bulbous, fiery daemon in impacts of sparks and crackling energy. As the last daemon fell, a second Prosecutor unit landed on the ruined street. Two took positions on buildings with roofs remaining while a third stepped forward to the Ancanna and the Lord Castellant.

'The enemy flee the field,' the Prosecutor said. Claw and teeth marks scored his armour, including a deep gash across the faceplate where blood glistened.

'Harry them, Prosecutor, and find out where they came from.' Lord Castellant Kimmani dismissed the Prosecutor. He stared out at the fleeing enemies and quickly picked out the reflective armour of the Chaos lord. The blackguard had walked away from battle with the him and his simmering rage was tangible. Holding his halberd in a death grip, and counting a score unsettled, he addressed the Knight Azyros. 'Fetch me the Aurora Banner; it's time we introduced ourselves to these people.'

Chapter 6

Liberators

The Knight Castellant headed for the largest building in the main square. Bodies; human, daemon and Stormcast littered the ground amidst burning timbers and the detritus of houses and shops damaged in the battle. It reeked of death and ash and lightning, and the groans of the injured carried over the clatter of Kimmani's armour. Though many buildings smoldered or had collapsed in the fighting, he found one with an upper floor balcony.

At Kimmani's order, terrified people filed into the square at the urging of victorious Stormcast Eternals. Their homes burned around them and their friends and family lay dead or wounded at their feet. Those survivors who held weapons either dropped them or clutched them with trembling hands.

Kimmani hung his lantern behind him, letting a trickle of light through. When he reached the balcony railing the light formed a halo around him. It silenced the crowd.

'A new power is here,' the Lord Castellant boomed. 'We arrive this day to deliver you from the yoke of tyrants. You have witnessed the strength of our arms, the breadth of our shields and the fury of our wrath. We take the fight back to the enemy. Our enemy.'

Kimmani clashed his fist to his chest in salute and paused to cast his gaze over the crowd. 'So take up axe and knife and sword. Fight under our banner, under the wings of angels.'

He raised his arms, expecting applause. He expected raised weapons and a muster to war.

He received silence.

Broken, tearful people huddled together, corralled into the wreckage of their town square. In a sea of the dead, they looked up at the unholy aurora and the shadows of skulls, faces and beasts that played across it as it rippled across the sky in blue and green. They saw the armoured giants wielding great hammers and swords that barred the streets with their ranks of shields.

'What is the matter with them?' Kimmani asked the Knight Azyros who stood behind him on the balcony. 'Have they no gratitude? Have they not waited generations for deliverance from Chaos?'

'Likely they are in shock, my lord. They are not as attuned to battle as us.'

'But we faced their foe, and we have delivered them victorious. Their fear is now redundant.'

Gallus clashed gauntlet against his cuirass. 'Sigmarite has a way of instilling confidence against the servants of the enemy. I doubt their cloth has the same effect. Perhaps they have gone so long without hope that they cannot recognise it when it arrives.'

Movement stirred in the square below them. A man stood, blood drying over his face and encrusting his beard. In silence, he walked towards one of the streets blocked by Stormcasts. With hesitant steps, a few others followed his lead until they reached the wall of sigmarite.

They stopped.

'What is this nonsense?' Lord Castellant Kimmani sputtered. He raised his voice again. 'We are your rally point!'

'Let them go, my lord,' Gallus said.

‘Let them go?’ Kimmani’s anger gave his voice an edge. ‘This is our purpose! We have not spilled the blood of Stormcasts to free these people from Chaos just for them to walk away. They are to join our crusade.’

‘Give them time,’ Gallus pressed. He grasped the Lord Castellant’s shoulder and leaned in closer, softening his voice. ‘Kimmani, this is not the way.’

‘No!’ Kimmani shrugged him off. ‘We have no time. The next town or village or community could be awaiting our aid and our dallying here may spell their end. No. They must be made to understand.’

He called down to the regiment of Liberators where the first of the humans had paused. The armoured warriors looked to one another, some edging back, others adjusting their grips on their hammers, unsure of their task as more humans joined those trying to leave. ‘Close your shield wall!’

A commotion rose behind the Liberators. Over their heads, the red plume of a Liberator Prime jostled as Ancanna shoved his way through Stormcast Eternals. ‘We are liberators not conquerors!’ he roared. ‘Part your shields immediately!’

The Liberator in front of him hesitated but Ancanna didn’t give him a second chance. He seized the lip of his warrior’s shield and snatched it from his grip. In the same movement, he hurled it across the street away from the crowd and slammed his shoulder into another Liberator, parting the way.

‘The way is open,’ he called. ‘Sigmar curse me, I will strike down any who block their way!’ His armour shimmered and energy crackled from the head of his hammer he wielded aloft as though Sigmar’s glory manifested in his words.

Though caught between the will of their Lord Castellant and their Prime, the Liberators kept their position and let the humans filter through.

‘*Prime!*’ Kimmani yelled. ‘Stand down your weapon.’

Ancanna stood his ground. ‘I shall stand down when these people are free from tyrants: Chaos or Stormcast.’

He knew there would be a reckoning with the Lord Castellant but it didn’t matter. These were the first humans they had found in Ulglu that had not fallen thrall to Chaos or madness. His cause felt righteous, it energised him, lent strength to his limbs otherwise weary from fighting. These were not stones and earth, these were people. These were something to fight for, and for them he would face any foe, whatever its guise.

The people did not thank him for it. They walked past with downcast eyes and slow gait. Many still trembled from the terror. Every face wore the haunted expression of shattered hopes and lives in ruins. Every person wavered at the mangled body of the lupine daemon that had burst from their hero. *That* was their rally point and symbol of hope, not the Stormcasts. They had seen the folly of hope.

Lord Castellant Kimmani stormed from the balcony and out of the building towards Ancanna. His outstretched finger pointed in accusation. ‘You go too far, Liberator Prime.’

Ancanna stood. He turned his shield to further position himself between his commander and the people still filtering out of the street. Liberators covering other streets also followed suit and let the people of Valescroft leave.

‘It is not I who forces his will on innocents, Lord Castellant.’

Kimmani paused before the Liberator Prime with fists gripped around his halberd. He surveyed his Strike Chamber, all watching for his reaction to such public insubordination and brought his attention back to Ancanna. Even Stormcast Eternals relied on a command structure and obedience, especially for the distasteful orders. At the site of their battle with the Chaos lord and the wolf daemon, the wreckage of a chariot shifted under weight of a falling stone and drew his attention. It was quiet, and away from an audience, so Kimmani pointed to it. 'In there. Now.'

'Not until these people have gone free, my lord.' Ancanna's stance remained wide and tension ran through his limbs. The Lord Castellant inspired no fear in him but his nerves jumped at confronting one of his own. Worse were the implications of having to.

'You're testing my patience, Prime,' Kimmani hissed. 'You have this last chance--'

A Prosecutor rapidly descended and skidded to a halt between the two. He paid the tension between Liberator Prime and Lord Castellant no mind and reported directly to Kimmani. 'Sir, we have sighted the nomads.'

Kimmani paused, his heavy breath misting through his faceplate. 'Report,' he said, though his glare remained fixed on Ancanna.

The Prosecutor glanced between the two Stormcasts, picking up on their conflict. 'It's an organised retreat, not a rout. Though the armoured ones make for the higher land across the far side of the valley, many of the daemons have headed to the woods and the ruins.' He hurried to head off the Lord Castellant's interruption. 'Prosecutor units Glaive and Exodus gave chase. That's where we sighted the nomads.'

'The ruins,' Ancanna filled in and the Prosecutor nodded.

'It was only a fleeting glance, but there was no mistake. We believe the daemons that split from covering the retreat are hunting them.'

'And the retreat; what is their destination?' the Lord Castellant asked.

'Unknown, my lord. We're hard pressed just to follow. Sorcery and daemons protect the armoured ones and daemonfire has grounded a number of our brothers.'

Kimmani saluted, fist to chest. 'Then you should lend your strength to your brothers who do remain.'

As the Prosecutor coiled ready to spring back into the sky, Ancanna stopped him with an iron grip on his arm. 'Lord Castellant,' he said, 'we cannot leave the nomads to the whims of daemons.'

'And I cannot spare any Prosecutors to chase shadows. Every hammer and spear could mean another Stormcast lives to carry on the fight.' He leaned closer to Ancanna and dropped his voice to a low growl. 'Unless you believe you can reach them. Prosecutor Eurellus, can you show our Liberator Prime where you last saw these nomads?'

'Of course.'

'Then do so.' Kimmani turned back to Ancanna. 'Five Liberators. Find them, Liberator Prime. Find them and perhaps I shall meet your insubordination with leniency.'

The Prosecutor hesitated but spoke up. 'Sir, we observed more than a handful of daemons headed to those ruins. Five Liberators... Perhaps a larger force would be prudent.'

Lord Castellant Kimmani rounded on him. His armour battered and scraped from battle, he leaned on his halberd for support. ‘We pursue the enemy in front of us, save the people around us, those that we can see. These nomads have eluded us enough already and I am not committing resources to another fruitless chase.’ He paused and a trickle of Sigmar’s light spilled from his lantern. ‘I just saw Liberator Prime Ancanna’s shield hold against a lord of daemons. I believe he has the mettle for this task. Have I the measure of you, Liberator Prime?’

Whether being sent to his doom or praised for his courage, Ancanna could not tell. His duty as a defender, however, told him all he needed. ‘I am the shield of order, my lord.’

‘Then make haste. The Strike Chamber shall regroup with you in the ruins before first light.’

Ancanna gestured the Liberators in the street nearest him closer. At the Prosecutor’s almost nervous posture, he cocked his head. ‘Are you with us, Eurellus?’

‘To the end of the Mortal Realms, Prime.’ He straightened his spine. ‘I just hope your shield arm is as strong as the Lord Castellant says.’

As the five Liberators joined them, Ancanna clasped the top of the nearest warrior’s shield. ‘I’ll give you *six* shield arms that live up to the Lord Castellant’s words. Light the way.’

Prosecutor Eurellus saluted and streaked into the air over the smouldering Valescroft and towards the ruins. Below him followed six Liberators, battered and scorched, but forcing a punishing march.

Chapter 7

Nomad

The sound of crying rose again, but it *felt* different to what she had heard in her flight from the woods. Though it sounded the same, it carried a weight of anguish that illusion could not imitate. It was subtle, but life in Uglu attuned her to subtleties. They were the difference between life and death.

Kell dared a glance behind, along the alleyway that she had ducked into. With no visual sign of pursuit, she risked a pause and listened for the source of the crying. There were at least two sources: adult and child. Kell recognised the stuttered breathing between sobs. Diella. Her sound was muffled, her voice strained, feigning confidence for another's benefit. Likely the second source, the infant. Diella must have been looking after the children and become separated from the collective as they fled. Perhaps she was injured and fell behind. That, along with a nightmare of other potential fates, entered Kell's mind.

The respite allowed her to concentrate through the weird acoustics that made the wails sound like they came from every direction. Calm and mindful, that's what Orinstar always said they needed to be to survive in these valleys. She had little time for either but through her concentration she picked up the echo that placed Diella somewhere in the columns of the old stadium, the Hippodrome Excelsior.

The silhouette of a winged terror banked across the two visible moons which now shone since the suns had set. Kell ducked into a building, an ancient eating house by the look of the bowls set into a counter, and clambered through a hole in the adjoining wall to the next building. She knew Art Eruditia well enough to avoid unwelcome eyes but the obstacles threatened her ability to reach Diella before something else did.

That was how they got you, the daemons. They separated the vulnerable and trapped them alone, toying with them, letting their imagination conjure images of horrors in forms far worse than even the daemons could assume. They tormented until fear overcame their quarry, and then they killed and fed. That's why they preferred the vulnerable. Or so the Aelf told her. Whether more wisdom or just something to keep the collective close; Kell knew enough to accept the theory.

She had no intention of letting Diella get caught, not with the children. She had been there. She knew. Vile chattering and glimpses of a horror that should not exist returned to her every time she closed her eyes. The babble of daemons carried through the ruins, echoing in the relative quiet.

But she was close enough.

Kell rounded the wall. It opened into a building with a single room, the front wall destroyed and only a quarter of the roof remaining with the rest on the verge of collapse. In the corner, Diella sat hunched against the stone, bedraggled and weeping while hugging her knees. Two children clung to her tattered cloak. In front of her loomed a vile creature, some amorphous blob, cackling and taunting her. Pink fire crackled from its fingers while it tore at the flesh of the terrified woman. In her spike of fear at, Kell retreated a step. Her foot caught a rock and sent it clattering across the ground.

Then it noticed her too.

#

‘Push them, Stormcasts!’ Ancanna yelled as he drove his hammer into the fleshy skull of a twisted creature. ‘No break! No respite for the wicked!’ Viscera sprayed from the impact over the Liberator Prime’s shield. His style was not pretty. His regiment fighting in the shield wall acted more like a team of workmen building than warriors killing. Their shields remained high, defending themselves and their brothers, until their hammer swings responded like the cannons of the Ironweld Arsenal.

Crackling energy burst across Ancanna’s shield, hissing as the sigmarite displaced a magical blast. It shook Ancanna’s arm and sent tingling sensations up through his shoulder, distorting his vision and setting his ears abuzz. But Ancanna’s Liberators maintained their advance. A mobile fortress, they pushed on behind the shield wall: defend and strike, defend and strike.

They made for a row of small buildings, probably single-room houses before time and war had ruined them. Two hammers of celestial energy flashed above them and slammed into the last two daemons with bright flashes. The first dropped under the blow while the second only teetered, stunned. Ancanna’s Liberators needed no wider opening. Their hammers pulverised the creature, allowing room for Prosecutor Eurellus to land. The rim of his shoulder plate sported two holes where a daemon’s fangs had punched through but missed the flesh. Claw marks raked his chest plate and almost every inch of his armour was blackened and scorched.

He rested his hand against a pillar and stumbled as it slid. ‘Fleshy,’ he said, inspecting closer, curling his lips in distaste at what looked like a patch of stretched skin, still moist as though living from the stone pillar. More patches of the fleshy substance marred other walls and the few roofs that had not yet caved in.

‘Tainted?’ one of the Liberators asked.

The Prosecutor leaned closer and ran his gauntlet over it once more. At the instant of contact, the flesh rippled and expelled a shimmer of blue haze. As the Stormcasts shielded their eyes, they heard the scream of Eurellus.

Snapping to attention, shields and hammers raised, the Liberators turned back to their brother Prosecutor. All they caught was a glint of light on his greaves as something dragged him into the pillar.

The Liberators cast about, searching for an enemy to meet their hammers, but spied nothing through the haze. No enemies, nothing physical upon which to release their wrath.

‘Shields up, Liberators,’ Ancanna yelled.

They formed a defensive circle, each holding a ready posture. ‘Can you see anything?’ one asked.

‘What took him?’ another added.

Ancanna hushed them and listened. Voices carried on the wind, indistinct and meaningless. Directionless. Though the vile aurora above illuminated the ruins, it also cast dancing shadows all around them. So long had this area of the ruins been abandoned that the woods had encroached upon them. Branches creaked and leaves rustled with the breeze, and not even they escaped the reach of the fleshy substance. Rot blackened the bark around the patches and sap dripped beneath them.

When the blue haze dissipated, the stone pillar showed no sign of being anything other than mineral and quiet veiled the Stormcasts again. Ancanna tapped his hammer against the pillar and it responded with the scratch of stone.

‘This way,’ Ancanna said. ‘Remain vigilant.’

Nothing indicated his choice of direction, just a need to move. Their Prosecutor brother was gone and the street offered no trace of the nomads. As he led his Liberators away, he glimpsed the vague outline of a trapped Stormcast clad within the pillar. A second glance revealed lifeless stone.

Overgrown ruins enveloped them in the complex of streets, alleys and plazas. Closely-built structures and flora denied them vantage or bearing even of the route from which they came. Screeches and cackles from daemonic maws echoed around them, through empty windows and from the gutters of uneven streets.

‘Did you hear that?’ A Liberator gestured at a winding street with his hammer. ‘That way, I think. It sounded closer.’

‘A man can go mad, straining to hear through this,’ another replied which met with murmurs of assent.

With nothing else to go on, Ancanna led them into the winding street indicated by the Liberator’s hammer. Then he heard it too. The daemon’s cackle and gurgling sounded gleeful. He also heard weeping.

A hand signal from Ancanna stopped the Liberators and brought them from their dispersed search pattern back into close quarters. He indicated their route of approach. They edged forwards, shields raised, watching for ambush. Slowly, they skirted around a fleshy patch on another wall where, again, Ancanna caught a flash of the Prosecutor’s face, and reached the corner of a larger building beyond which held the source of the noises.

Ancanna counted down on his fingers for the Liberators to see. When he reached two, a shriek pierced the quiet. It mixed with a human cry and resounded from hollow buildings. The Liberators rushed around the corner, hammers high to smite their foe.

Ancanna cried out.

His outstretched arms held his Liberators back. Before him stood a woman. This malnourished, dirty creature had grime over her arms and face, and angry red grazes where rips turned her tunic to rags. Matted hair covered most of her face and draped half way down her back. Her arms hung limply by her sides, in one hand, an axe, in the other, a knife. At her feet lay the twitching corpse of a daemon.

Her head jerked up and she gasped as she noticed the Stormcasts and she spread her arms wide. Behind her lay another corpse, that of another woman, and two wailing children, one newborn, the other perhaps less than a year old. Her hands shook but she kept her eyes focused on the Stormcasts, their grey depths displaying fear but also the fierce unpredictability of a cornered animal.

Ancanna stowed his hammer in a loop at his belt and handed his shield to the Liberator beside him. He took a step closer to the woman.

‘Prime,’ the shield bearer began, ‘you don’t know whose blood is on that axe. She could have killed the woman too.’ He offered the shield back while others formed a semicircle behind their leader.

‘Careful, sir,’ another warned. ‘This would not be the first time we’ve been tricked by illusion this side of the realm gate.’

Ignoring the protests of his warriors, Ancanna approached the woman, palms raised. 'It's okay,' he said, more to the woman than the Liberators. She did not feel like daemon trickery or the illusory nature of Ulglu. Ancanna remained focused on her, watching her posture for indication that she might strike, but mostly searching her eyes. That depth of fear, and grim determination to protect her loved ones, he had seen many times before. Before Sigmar reforged him as Stormcast. That look was inimitable.

'It's okay,' he repeated, edging closer.

The woman backed away half a step, keeping herself between Stormcasts and children, just as Ancanna had protected the people of Valescroft from the Lord Castellant.

'Who are you?' she asked, the words stuttering in her throat and quavering past her trembling lips.

'My name is Ancanna.'

The Liberator Prime outstretched his hand but the woman recoiled, raising her weapons.

'I won't let you hurt them!' she blurted.

'I'm not here to hurt them. I'm not here to hurt you either.' He stopped his approach to give her space. 'What's your name?'

She stayed defensive, raising her axe an inch. 'What are you doing here?'

'We are here to help. My brothers and I fight against that which hunts you.'

'There's no help in Ulglu, only tricks and terrors.'

Her eyes kept darting, searching for an escape. Cornered in the building's remains, Stormcasts blocked the only other exit.

'I assure you, though long in coming, help has arrived.' Ancanna offered his hand. 'Please. While my warriors and I stand, your children, and yourself, are safe. Would you tell me your name?'

'Kell,' she said, but raised her knife. 'No tricks, daemon. I know how you toy with your prey.'

Ancanna kept his voice calm and steady. His voice was a rumble like distant storms at the best of times, and like a thunderbolt when his ire was raised, and his battle helm only amplified it. 'We are no daemons, Kell. We are the chosen of Sigmar, and we prey only on tyrants and monsters.'

Emboldened by the slight opening of learning the woman's name, Ancanna decided to offer a little more. He gestured behind to the warriors behind him.

'These are Liberators, clad in sigmarite and imbued with the strength of the storm. We are but a few of a mighty Stormhost that even now protects the people of Valescroft.'

'Do you lie to me, daemon? You promise too much. Get away from me!'

'There is no lie.' Ancanna inched closer. 'Our Stormhost is called the Knights of the Aurora, for the wings of our--'

Kell's expression turned to wide-eyed horror. 'Aurora,' she mouthed, and lunged at the Stormcast with her knife. As Ancanna, wrong-footed, reacted, she scooped up the children under her arms. She was viper fast. Before Ancanna regained his balance, she used his chest plate as a springboard, vaulted over the edge of the wall and ducked into the nearest alley.

The Stormcasts pursued. Though the woman carried two children, she pelted away from them. At best, they caught a glimpse of her ragged tunic as it disappeared over a mound of rubble or rounded a corner into another alleyway or the echo of her footsteps bounced off the walls in an empty street.

Concerned that if the woman went to ground, they may never find her again, Ancanna ordered the Liberators to disperse and search separately. It lasted only moments before blue fire erupted through a nearby window, hitting a Liberator square in the face and incinerating his head through the gap of his visor. Sigmar's reclamation, the arc of blue lightning and resounding peal of thunder, shone as a beacon for miles around. Drawn by the event, a blue-skinned creature followed through the same window, clawing its way over rubble and babbling in some unknown tongue. Another of the winged creatures swooped from the opposite side of the street and raked Ancanna's vambrace. Growling his frustration, Ancanna ordered his Liberators reform their defensive block and advanced their shields towards the blue creature just as another two crawled over the walls either side of the building.

Ancanna slammed his shield into the horror in front of him, shattering three of its teeth and opening its defence for the Liberator to his left to land a solid blow atop its head. Chattering daemons swarmed throughout the ruins while silhouettes of winged furies over the fell aurora flashed in the corners of the Stormcasts' eyes.

'Stand firm and raise shields, Liberators,' Ancanna said. 'We're in for a long night.'

Chapter 8

Art Eruditia

Dawn crept through the ruins, casting its gloomy light over the bodies of dying Stormcast Eternals and the char of lightning strikes where Sigmar had reclaimed his dead. Around them lay six times their number of warp-spawned terrors, pummelled into disfigured flesh and viscera. A single, battered form moved in the carnage. He rose to one knee, his shaking arm pushing down on his hammer for support, the head scraping across the ground in his unsteady grip. A pained grunt and bloody-minded effort forced his leaden limbs into pushing him to his feet and holding him upright. Panting, he swung his hammer into a felled daemon's twitching head. Ancanna, the last man standing, surveyed his fallen brothers and closed his eyes, naming them all in his mind as sorrow welled in his chest.

He had watched Sigmar's lightning call them back to Azyr and every bolt lent strength to his hammer blows. One by one, they had fallen, each accounting for themselves by exacting a brutal toll on their oppressors, but trickery, sorcery and weight of numbers had gnawed at them until it fell to Ancanna and his rhythmic hammer work. The Liberator Prime stood back as a final bolt claimed the rest.

In the light of a new day, he scrambled over a pile of aged marble blocks and strode through an alleyway. Even in daylight, the place was a maze. The woman that had attacked him the night before--Kell, he reminded himself--could have disappeared anywhere. Most of the tall buildings had at least one wall remaining making a decent vantage from the ground impossible. She still lived, he told himself. Though he replayed their meeting in his mind's eye countless times, he thought of nothing that could explain why she had turned on him. Perhaps she was just cornered, or saw the opportunity to flee. After all the fighting and fruitless searching, he did not want to consider her an agent of the enemy.

As morning spilled a little more light into the ruins, Stormcast Eternals trickled in from the country. As usual for the Knights of the Aurora, a unit of Prosecutors found him first. Their Prime landed beside him while the rest of the unit guarded above, their stormcall javelins poised, glinting in sunbeams whenever the shifting clouds allowed them through.

'Liberator Prime,' the Prosecutor Prime said, dipping his head. Wind rippled through the plume atop his helm as he steadied Ancanna's shaky stance with a supporting arm. 'You walk at the brink of death.'

'My shield remains whole,' Ancanna replied, clasping his comrade's forearm, partly in greeting, partly to stop it supporting him. Though his body screamed at him for rest, he would stand strong before his brother warriors, unassisted. 'The villagers...' he began.

'Remain unharmed and free.' The Prosecutor Prime stared at him before finishing Ancanna's thought though his tone conveyed nothing of his feelings on the matter. 'You are alone?'

Ancanna nodded. He coughed up scratching dust. It tasted of dried blood. He could not bring himself to talk of his fallen brothers, and the imperative to find Kell still burned within him. It was all that kept him on his feet. 'The nomads are within the ruins. I lost one of them over...' Ancanna cast around but recognised nothing. There were fewer plants here, and dried out buildings obscured his view. 'I lost her,' he finished with downcast eyes.

At the Prosecutor's urging, Ancanna described the night's events as well as his memory could muster. His story came out in a jumble but the Prosecutor gleaned a description of the woman and

vague area in which she had evaded Ancanna. A stadium in the area of the ruins nearer the woodland at least narrowed it down some.

‘Take some rest, Ancanna,’ the Prosecutor Prime said before taking wing and relaying the descriptions to his unit.

From the air, the Prosecutors suffered as much with overhanging structures and rubble offering infinite hiding places. Likely the Stormcasts would have to take the ruins apart stone by stone to find the nomads, assuming they had not already stolen away through the woods.

Unwilling to remain still for long, Ancanna resumed his search and eventually found a break in the high walls where the alley opened into a large courtyard surrounded by a series of ruined arches that once formed a wall. Sunlight gave the arches an ochre hue. As he glanced across the structure, picturing what a sight it would have been in its original form, his gaze rested on carvings in the stone that crowned the archways.

He entered the courtyard, perhaps once a gymnasium or a hall for whoever once lived here, and followed the carvings over the arches. Many were missing or weathered into illegibility. The furthest wall, however, remained intact and Ancanna lifted his head to the humanoid figures carved thereon.

Like the tapestries in the halls of Azyrheim, a pictorial story read from left to right. It depicted a great terror hanging in the clouds over a settlement, people kneeling in despair or tearing at their own flesh in madness. A warrior with shield and polearm followed. The people changed from cowering to worshipping the figure. More images followed in which armoured warriors joined the hero in battle against creatures of strange shapes, all under the malicious eyes of the terror in the clouds. The last image on the wall had fallen to the elements, leaving only the shaft of a broken polearm visible on the crumbled stone.

From what Ancanna could gather, the other walls showed much the same story, but with different heroes. Some looked like wielders of magic, others rode great beasts, but the same terror remained on each story.

Shadows moved beside Ancanna. He ignored them. The shadows could not be trusted in Ulglu, the Realm of Shadow itself, and crippling paranoia lay down the path of explaining their behaviour.

This shadow coughed.

‘Prime? You’ve been here a long time. What are you looking at?’ It was Gallus. He rested his folded arms on top of a broken stone pillar.

‘Who they were.’

Gallus swept his gaze over the carvings. ‘Whoever they were, they’re long dead.’

Ancanna grunted. ‘The people in that town, did the Castellant leave them be?’

‘Relax, Ancanna, they’re unharmed. No further, at least.’

A wave of relief washed over Ancanna. Much as the Prosecutor had told him as much, Ancanna trusted the word of the Knight Azyros above any other. At least something had gone well, or not exacerbated, that night. ‘Will they join us?’

‘No. They keep to their houses, not rebuilding, not talking to us, or even one another.’ Gallus sighed and opened his palms. ‘It’s like they’ve given up. They’re as broken as the structures that surround

them. For the most part they just sit and stare at the ruined walls of what we can only guess were their homes.'

So they had gained little from the battle at Valescroft. Ancanna told himself that the people lived, that they had escaped a tortured, agonising death at the whims of daemons, but it felt like hollow reassurance. He wanted their objective in Ulglu to yield success, but to deliver the remnants of people from under the boot of Chaos, not for Stormcast glory.

'And the nomads? Have we found any sign of them?'

'We'd all know about it if we had. Kimmani is looking for anything to rebuild his reputation after the Judicators were massacred, and, of course, Valescroft.' The Knight Azyros nudged him. 'Obviously, he's blaming you for the latter and cursing the day Sigmar forged you anew.'

Ancanna didn't even shrug. He regretted nothing from his actions in Valescroft, and though he would follow his Lord Castellant into the Realm of Chaos itself, he would always put his shield in the way before Kimmani forced the unwilling in first. He had not yet felt the Strike Chamber leader's wrath, and he expected more severe consequences than being sent undermanned into hunting packs of daemons.

'No sign even from the Angelos Conclave? A rubble-strewn building through a series of twisting alleys, not far from the forest, that's where we lost her. Have they checked there?'

Gallus snorted and shook his head. 'They're *all* rubble-strewn buildings and twisting alleyways. Evidently the nomads know the city better than us and the buildings, such as they are, shield them from the eyes of our Prosecutors. If they leave the ruins, we'll see them. We still have our new quarry. What does it matter?'

'It matters. It has to matter, otherwise... Otherwise why are we here?'

'Again, Ancanna? We're here because Sigmar willed it, to reclaim the Mortal Realms from the maw of Chaos.'

Ancanna knelt, grasped a handful of earth and let it slip between the fingers of his gauntlets. A grub wriggled between dead roots in the dirt and even that showed mutations; an extra half-maw beneath an oversized eye. 'For this?' He grimaced and cast the dirt back to the ground. 'No. I won't fight for tainted land. Sigmar would not have clad us such and unleashed us for stone and earth.'

'And you think the answer is in these carvings? You're tired, Ancanna. The struggle wears at us all; that's why Sigmar stole us from the grip of death, clad us like this, because we're the only ones who will keep fighting. You cannot let it grind you down, Liberator Prime.' He used the title like a crown and mantle. 'If it takes the slaughter of a hundred thousand cultists, if a thousand fortresses must fall to free this realm, then it is us that must do it.'

It was not the first time the thought had gnawed at Ancanna. They had found nothing but madness, tainted land and servants of the enemy, depravity and nightmares. Many of his brother Stormcasts had undergone Rememberings after being reforged and sent back out to fight after the enemy had struck them down. Despair welled inside him at the prospect of an endless cycle of dying and reforging, losing a little or a lot more of himself every time, to keep fighting an enemy of endless number. This campaign into Ulglu, the ideal of rallying and uniting other free people to join them resonated. It sparked that glimmer of hope within him, that their actions might tip the balance instead of locking them in an eternity of futile war. He needed that hope. The men and women of Valescroft needed that hope.

‘It means something,’ Ancanna said, approaching the carvings along a low wall. He traced his hands over a stone, spear-wielding man at the head of a host of warriors. At Ancanna’s lead, the two Stormcasts walked by the long wall of what was perhaps a temple. ‘It’s the same story repeated over and over, but with a different lead each time. This one wields a spear, over there, magic, the image above shows a woman with two swords. They’re all in the same cycle. What do you see, Gallus?’

The Knight Azyros surveyed the carvings, taking them in at a glance.

‘I see decoration. Religion or mythology, most likely; same as countless cities across the Mortal Realms, Shake yourself out of this, Ancanna, you’re going to need your wits when the Lord Castellant catches up to you. And we’re going to need your will behind your shield and hammer when we next meet the enemy.’

The large building ended abruptly as though sheared by a giant axe and gave way to a square of open ground. In the centre stood a giant bowl of carved marble. Within the bowl, crumbling but still proud, stood a statue of a man in robes, one hand outstretched, the other cradling an astrolabe. A hole in the outstretched hand formed a spout but the fountain itself was dry.

‘Perhaps you’re right, Gallus. I sincerely hope you are not.’

Ancanna turned and strode away to help reorganise the Liberators into combat ready units. Behind him, the spout on the statue’s hand blinked.

Chapter 9

The Aurora Citadel

A Prosecutor of the Boreal unit circled over the large, open structure which the Lord Castellant had commandeered to regroup his Strike Chamber. The winged warrior landed beside a long stone table in the centre of the room and knelt atop a pile of vines that had been cleared from its surface. His wings folded back, their pale green glow subtle in the afternoon light where sporadic clouds veiled the suns rather than the near-perpetual state of partial eclipse.

‘Tell me some good news, Prosecutor,’ Kimmani said while studying a map of the valley provided by the Angelos Chamber after their initial scouting. A worrying amount of it was missing, or had sketchy detail, and little had been filled in since the first pass.

The Prosecutor stood unsteadily. Gouges and dents covered his armour and scorch marks blackened his shield, hiding the hammer and lightning bolt motif. The worst damage showed on his leg where the sigmarite had been punctured and dried blood flaked over the rent metal as though a barb had been torn out.

‘My lord, we have traced the route of the enemy and have sighted a fortress, less than ten leagues away.’

The Lord Castellant paused. He crushed the map in his hand and rounded on him.

‘A fortress? We are the greatest scouting force in all Sigmar’s Stormhosts, and you tell me that we failed to see a fortress within ten leagues?’

His raised voice carried through the structure such that two units of Paladins wielding great stormstrike glaives rushed towards him from their stations around the surrounding columns. When they saw only the Lord Castellant and the Prosecutor, half of them returned to their positions while the remainder kept a closer vigil within the surrounding columns.

The Prosecutor bowed his head. ‘It’s the damnable mist, my lord. One minute there’s clear skies, the next, a thick fog rises from nothing. Our patrols and scouts have crossed that area a dozen times but found no sign of it. Curse my eyes if I didn’t lead a band of Prosecutors there personally.’ He shrugged. ‘We saw only shadows and fog.’

‘Show me,’ Kimmani said and shoved the crumpled map towards the Prosecutor’s face.

Smoothing out the map on the stone table, the Prosecutor took in the contours of the land and gained his bearings. He jabbed his finger onto a hilly area at the far side of the valley.

‘Along the ridge, here, it opens onto wider ground and a higher hilltop. There’s the fortress.’

‘A fortress,’ Kimmani mused, his ire still raised but simmering beneath the surface. ‘This is what we need to draw out the nomads and break that town from its despondency. Where is Liberator Prime Ancanna? Summon him, Prosecutor, along with Knight Azyros Gallus. And give me a watch on that fortress. I want to know defences, composition, curtain walls, towers, war machines, chambers of sorcery, murder holes, escape routes, supply lines, and have detailed maps drawn out by three different patrols. Anything moves, anything changes, I want a report. Are my orders clear?’

With a salute, the Prosecutor spread his wings and green, blue and turquoise light shimmered along their surface. Though with laboured movements, he took to the air, spiraling out of and around the structure.

Lord Castellant Kimmani returned to his map. The ridge would string out the Strike Chamber and funnel them right into the stronghold's front gate, no doubt the most heavily defended area. One side offered only a steep climb and high walls whereas going around constituted a lengthy march. Though none of the options seemed palatable, even before intel on its defences, Kimmani had the backing of the Knights of the Aurora.

The wind stirred the map under his grip and he looked again. His confidence grew.

From their airborne vantage, difficult terrain was an advantage for his mighty hosts of Prosecutors. And this Strike Chamber was more than just its winged warriors: the light of Sigmar carried by the Lord Castellant and Knight Azyros themselves was anathema to the daemonic defenders, and their Liberators and Paladins formed an implacable defensive wall against enemy archery.

The lengthening shadows of dusk stretched over the open structure by the time Ancanna approached the Lord Castellant. Though engrossed in planning his assault, Kimmani's acute senses picked up the clashing metal of the Liberator Prime's salute to the Paladins guarding the structure and the clatter of his footfalls on the stone floor. Just the presence of the man stoked Kimmani's anger.

'Your failure shames us all, Liberator Prime,' Kimmani said without looking up. Annotations and arrows indicating attack vectors now adorned the map, many crossed out and inked again after his Prosecutor scouts drip-fed him details of the fortress and its defenses through the day and he refined his plans.

'My lord.' Ancanna stood to attention.

He knew this was coming, though he expected a more public dressing down for defying his commander in front of so many. Neither defiance nor subservience would avail him so he stood and he stared. He was just going to have to take it.

'You were entrusted,' Kimmani continued, 'to secure the nomads, using the best opportunity we have seen since passing through the realm gate. Not only did you allow them to escape from under your nose, but a Prosecutor and five Liberators under your command were reclaimed by Sigmar. Your entire unit, Prime.' He looked up from his map and glared through his visor at Ancanna. 'Five stalwart warriors lose a piece of themselves and the other,' he paused to glance at the statue of a Prosecutor atop the central column at the far side of the structure. Its back was hyperextended, limbs flung wide behind and wings furled, everything contorted and tortured. They both knew it was the Prosecutor that had supported Ancanna's foray into the ruins yet this was not where he had died.

'You have nothing to show for it,' Kimmani finished.

The Lord Castellant paced around Ancanna who only stared at the all-too-real statue. 'Nothing to say, Liberator Prime? You were not so silent yesterday when those people needed to see a strong, unified Strike Chamber.'

'Those people,' Ancanna said, his fingers shaking as anger rose in him. He had watched every one of those Liberators die, unable to save them. He had seen the Prosecutor disappear into solid masonry before he could react. Every one of those deaths tore at him and his inability to defend them, but it was the mention of the people of Valescroft that opened the floodgates of his rage. His vision narrowed as he returned Kimmani's glare and his voice became a growl. 'Those people had had their

fill of subjugation and desperation. Strength inspires only the strong, Lord Castellant. It doesn't matter that you spoke with the force of a Stormhost, you offered them only more war.'

'Pretty words. You think they make you sound noble? Well, here's a truth for you, Liberator Prime--they don't have a choice. The fight will rage around them whether they like it or not. Many of them will die whether they raise arms or not. They were beaten and leaderless and I gave them strength and leadership. And they need it, Ancanna. They need someone to take control for them because they are in no state to do so themselves.' He paced closer. 'Out of his mighty armies where every soldier is a hero in his own right, do you know why Sigmar chose me as a Lord Castellant? Your moral standing gives you the will to defend, Liberator Prime, but I can make the sacrifices we need to defeat the enemy.'

'Nonsense,' Ancanna said. 'You mistake your standing--'

'Silence and be seated!' Kimmani roared, shoving Ancanna down onto the bench. His feet kicked up and crashed into the table, taking a chunk from the corner and toppling it onto its side. As the stone slab crashed to the ground, the Paladins around the structure rushed in again.

Kimmani raised a palm in warding but remained focused on the seated Liberator Prime. 'Keep your distance, Paladins. The Liberator Prime is learning his place.'

At a hand signal from Kimmani, the Paladins halted. This time, all of them remained inside the structure instead of returning to their posts though their postures spoke of unease, a few closing some distance between the Lord Castellant and Liberator Prime. He wanted them to see it. The Lord Castellant dashed closer to Ancanna and loomed over him.

'This ends now, Liberator Prime. I will not allow dissent and insubordination to fester in my Strike Chamber. When I command, you obey.' His voice lowered to a hiss, too quiet to carry to the Paladins. 'We are here for unity, Prime. How can we inspire others to join our union if they see our leaders ignored? That town's unwillingness to join us is on you, Ancanna. I showed them war, you say? Good. They will see more of it. You showed them division when they needed strength. We have our orders--those people will join us. Get up.'

Ancanna stared at Kimmani's outstretched hand, feeling his commander's anger, before taking it. The surrounding Paladins relaxed their postures and stood down as a winged figure alighted atop a stone column. The Knight Azyros looked every bit the avenging angel of Sigmar.

He hopped down, falling like a feather. In the instant that his gaze swept across the structure, Gallus took in the scene and made straight for the Lord Castellant. 'I see our target is set, my lord,' he said, reaching Kimmani's side and guiding him back to the table where their battle plans lay. He kept Ancanna on the other side. 'Tell me our strategy. The Strike Chamber stands primed for battle and my sword hungers for daemon flesh.'

'Calm yourself, Knight Azyros,' Kimmani said. The dangerous edge left his voice, replaced with a more companionable tone. 'Your blade shall have its fill. Had I more who shared your eagerness, our foray into Ulglu might yet have yielded more success.'

'A rapid strike, Lord Castellant,' Gallus said, tracing over a series of arrows on the map, diverting the attention from Ancanna who took the opportunity to right himself.

Though most of the Paladins guarding the structure maintained their composure, still and expressionless in their death-mask helms, one offered an almost imperceptible nod to Ancanna. The Liberator Prime returned it and joined the two commanders at the map. Despite a glance from

Gallus, Ancanna stood tall beside the Lord Castellant. Though his respect for him had dropped again, he would not display wariness. The Lord Castellant had command over Ancanna, and this was not a challenge to his leadership, only his morals.

Casting his eyes over the plan, Ancanna held back the desire to immediately pick fault. The Lord Castellant was a sound tactician and a superlative warrior, and though a first glance of the plan highlighted room for improvement, Ancanna remained silent while he considered the thought process that translated to symbols and arrows on the map. Kimmani always found a weakness. For all his faults, his methodical approach always exploited that weakness.

‘Have you something to say about my plan, Liberator Prime?’ Kimmani asked.

Ancanna looked again at the attack directions and the spread of troops. Despite the disagreements between them, Ancanna’s duty came first. And he never could hold his tongue. ‘Not without further knowledge of the citadel’s defences, Lord Castellant. We appear heavily reliant on our Prosecutors. If they meet more than expected resistance, our ground troops will be exposed and trapped in those ruins.’

‘Knight Azyros,’ Kimmani said. ‘Have the Prosecutors scout the citadel for our easiest breaching point.’

Gallus shook his head. ‘Forgive me, Lord Castellant, but that is the reason for my tardiness. I received their scouting report before entering this chamber. No system of hill forts, no ramparts. The curtain wall is more rubble than masonry. There are many towers but in such disrepair that they could never house siege weaponry. This is nothing to us. My lord, we need to hit them fast while their forces are in disarray from how we punished them yesterday. We should not allow them time to regroup or call in reinforcements, or before any of the roving warbands catch wind of our intent. We are the Knights of the Aurora, shock troops of the celestial realm--a mantle we must keep earning.’

‘And so we shall,’ Kimmani said. ‘Does this allay your fears, Liberator Prime?’

Ancanna gazed at the distant fortress, a dark smudge on the landscape now he knew what to look for. He hesitated to disagree with the Knight Azyros who had been his greatest friend among their host of brother warriors, but while Gallus had courage for a dozen warriors, he could be impetuous, particularly when planning an offensive.

He considered the way the Chaos warriors had retreated, the unseen dangers and warpcraft at play in the ruins. ‘I believe we may be rushing into unknown danger, my lord.’

‘Lost your nerve, Prime?’ Gallus asked.

‘Do not mistake my caution for cowardice, Knight.’

‘Have faith,’ Gallus replied, taking no slight, ‘unknown danger is what we do best. Our Prosecutors will harry them from above while our ground troops splinter the gates. We are too fast, too manoeuvrable, even for their magic. We shall breach their defences before they know they are under attack.’

Though he maintained his doubts, Ancanna couldn’t help but be swept along by Gallus’ confidence. The Knight Azyros spoke true; they were the Knights of the Aurora, Stormcast, mighty warriors with strength, weapons and armour greater than anything the realms had seen before. They had smashed all resistance and slaughtered their enemies in droves. No fortress could stall them, certainly not one with as many ruined walls as fortified ones.

The Lord Castellant gave a sharp nod. 'Then we strike with the dawn. Positions, Stormcasts. When the night ends, Azyros, light the way.'

'What of the nomads?' Ancanna asked.

'I suspect they will not be found unless they wish it,' Kimmani said. 'Last night's daemonic incursion will have them spooked. They need to see someone stand up to the tyrant, to inspire them. That's what will draw them to our banner.'

'And we shall topple this fortress with our lightning assault.' Gallus toyed with his blade and his wings twitched. 'I shall lead our Prosecutors through the woods into position for the dawn. They will not see us coming.'

A marble head, carved into the wall, closed its eyes.

Chapter 10

Chamber of a Thousand Eyes

Mist and magic swirled around the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes. Tiny comets of blue and green arced from the disappearing image and back into the turning circular arms of the chamber. Atop his floating disc, Axanthral mused on the intrigues playing out between these newcomer warriors. He extrapolated a dozen potential schemes for each of them, weaving them together, and considering which strings to pull and which served his purpose.

His familiar slithered around him in the form of a miniature hydra, its many heads snapping.

‘It seems your whispering has already taken root with this one they call the Castellant. He is more susceptible than the others. Why?’

The familiar squawked and trumpeted. Its tail curled and two pairs of bat-wings morphed from its body as it took to the air, spiraling around its master. In a voice like the stirring of wind, the familiar’s response formed in Axanthral’s mind.

‘Continue to leverage this leader of theirs,’ the sorcerer said. ‘Draw him in. Show him the open route through our outer defences. And should the opportunity arise, there is another--’

Axanthral’s daemonic platform shrivelled and winked out of existence as the chamber rumbled. Coloured motes of magic whirled and darted around him, screeching and thrumming with ethereal energy. His arms windmilling, he fell backwards while his familiar bolted through the great, arched doorway.

The giant turning rings of his oculum arrested his fall with a crunch of bone. No sooner had his body slumped either side of the ring than the ring itself morphed just like his familiar had. It grew two heads, each larger than his own, on long grey-feathered necks. They bit into each of his shoulders and held him upright, lifting his body from the ring, their curved beaks drawing purple blood from beneath his ashen flesh. Suspended in mid air and feeling as though something was rearranging him from the inside out, Axanthral grunted and winced, his every fibre seeking to prostrate himself before the power that had entered the chamber.

A voice spoke in his mind. It sounded like a hurricane and hit him with such intensity that his eyes slammed open and he gasped his lungs full of air that tasted of burning pine. It spoke of an insufficient harvest, of crippling failure and dire consequences. Words were beneath the creature whose presence dominated the spherical chamber. Instead its meaning entered Axanthral’s mind fully formed and carrying a weight of emotion, like the way his familiar spoke only far more powerful. Disgust, disapproval and wrath dripped and simmered in the psychic message.

So awed by the onslaught, Axanthral could do nothing beyond hang from the cruel beaks and reel from the force of its message. It wasn’t coming. That, at least, gave him some relief. A feeling of amusement emanated from the presence at the lack of mental discipline in letting the thought surface. This operation was one of many and unworthy of the power’s physical intervention, though it intended to send an emissary and relinquish some of Axanthral’s control.

The sorcerer wailed at the threads of his schemes passing to another. Likely it would cut them to spite him, or reshape them to either unravel or hurt him as punishment. All of it paled against the loss of his plans.

As the presence receded from the chamber, the daemon heads that held him snapped their necks around and flung him across the chamber, sending him skidding over the patterned tile floor. He

stopped at the armoured boots of the garrison captain, Reaper of the Mortal Crop. The Dreadguard of the Citadel.

Axanthral glared at the outstretched hand and levitated from the ground. A quick incantation summoned hisemonic platform back from the realm of Chaos. The air between the two lords of Chaos twisted and tore as the sorcerer's disc chewed its way between realms with its fanged maw and rows of pointed teeth. Axanthral raised himself atop the daemon so that he stood higher than his captain and sneered down at him.

'Wipe the grin from your face, Dreadguard, or you may yet be granted audience with that same power. Then we shall see the depths of your resolve. Prepare for an aerial assault from the woods to the west and a large scale ground offensive through the fallen city. Our new enemies come. Let them. Wait until they are deep within the outer ring of towers.' His lips curled into a wicked smile. 'And our associate has provided you a...gift.'

'I have no interest in gifts from our associate, sorcerer. You will provide me the answers I requested.'

Axanthral bristled. The flesh around his cheeks and temples writhed as though grubs crawled beneath it. Feeding from the sorcerer's emotion, hisemonic platform turned a deeper red and snarled and snapped towards the Dreadguard. 'Answers? You were driven back by the whelps of an upstart deity! The harvest is incomplete. You are in no position to make demands after your failure.'

At the impudent response from his captain, Axanthral willed his disc closer. The sorcerer peered down into the visor of that fearsome plate helm and searched. 'You still resist the change. Consider the strength it has given you. Such gifts should not be balked at. It is an affront to our patron.'

With viper's speed, the Dreadguard seized Axanthral by the throat. Frost rimed the steel gauntlet and spread onto Axanthral's flesh. It froze the blood that welled where the ridged steel had broken the skin.

'Answers, sorcerer,' the Dreadguard repeated.

He released his grip to let the sorcerer speak.

'What use to bite the hand that feeds, Dreadguard?' Axanthral rasped. He willed his disc back and hovered beyond reach. The daemonic mount flashed a deep, angry crimson. 'You must dance the jig that I tell you. Results get you answers and you have failed to reap. Our host is not appeased.'

'The paltry distance between us will not be enough, sorcerer,' the Dreadguard warned, still glowering through his helm.

'So it shall be.' The sorcerer bowed his head. 'The nature of the change is change itself so I must divine its purpose. To treat its current state will not do. You must treat the state that it is going to be.'

'And in what state shall it be?'

'The threads are there for those with the sense to see them.' He traced a symbol in the air which produced a trail of multi-coloured smoke. Without further warning, a thin violet beam shot from his eyes and transfixed on Ulgoloth, energy pulsing in an arc over the warrior's breastplate. Convulsions wracked the Dreadguard whose head threw back, 'Nine cuts and the hands of nine immortals. Nine banners to rise at the fortress base around a pit of glory, the cutting of threads.'

To the Dreadguard's credit, he kept his footing when the magic dissipated. Without further word, he turned on his heel and stalked from the chamber.

'Remember to acquaint yourself with your gift from the wall walk of the Sentenimus Battlements,' Axanthral called after him, amusement in his voice. He paused to grin with further relish. 'And take care, Dreadguard.'

Chapter 11

Ritual Sacrifice

The clatter of armoured forms moving at pace echoed from ancient stone. Deep within the inner rings of towers, the Eclipse stalked their prey. A complex of walkways joined three of the towers, some of stone, others of coruscating light, each fading in and out of existence or their matter changing from stone to writhing flesh with slick tentacles, or viscous liquid that defied gravity. Warriors of the Eclipse spread through the area, some inside chambers while others navigated the walkways outside in the darkness of swirling winds. This was a hunt; few, or one, against many.

He watched the noose tighten around the hunted warrior caught near the chamber below. An arrow clattered far to the prey's left. Never intended to hit, the impact sounded more like an armoured warrior jumping down a level, and the prey changed direction away from it. They were herding him. They wanted him cornered in one of the outermost towers where the walkways flickered, indicating an imminent change of state. The alchemical apparatus and storage crates and chests within would offer limited hiding places from the barbaric pursuers who closed in.

He smiled.

He waited for the hunters--six in total--to commit to their attack and he leapt onto the platform behind them. The first spun around, weapon raised, and met an armoured fist squarely in his helm's noseguard. The second didn't even see him coming and only appraised the situation from his back two walkways beneath after a sudden tumble and hard landing. He had to scramble to his feet and leap inside a lower chamber as that walkway faded.

The others were ready for him and met him with a coordinated attack: two central while the other two flanked either side. They lasted two and a half seconds. As they groaned, an armoured heap of bruises and, in one case, broken limbs, he discarded the sword that he had taken from one within the pile.

'I had that under control,' an irritated voice said from within the chamber's clutter. Somewhere near the back wall, though the glass jars and alchemical apparatus reflected only a confused mess of colour, repeating shapes across their surfaces before reflecting something else though nothing in the chamber appeared to move.

He stepped inside and saw through the ambush. With a mirthless laugh, he kicked away the leg of a table behind which an armoured form crouched, poised for attack. As books, tools and glassware crashed down atop the form, so too did the floor beneath his feet.

He fell, arms windmilling. The platforms around him changed to coloured smoke and no solid surfaces remained for a hundred feet below. As he felt the lurch of sudden movement, a hand snapped out and caught him by the wrist. The strong, human hand came from beneath a rough white shirt.

'I told you it was under control,' the saviour repeated and hauled him up with the aid of two other warriors that had been in the pack of hunters. 'Evidently there is still something an old man can teach you.'

When all felt solid ground beneath their armoured boots once more, the man in the white shirt and other warriors knelt, heads bowed, before the returned man in his glimmering silver armour, though none of them perceived a reflection of themselves.

He ignored the comment and addressed the other warriors, their training drill completed. 'Retrieve the prisoners and assemble at the gatehouse.'

In a crash of steel gauntlets to breastplates, all but the he and the white-shirted man left.

'Another ritual?' Ven asked with a sidelong glance to the departing warriors. Damp with sweat from the hunt, his shirt clung to his rounded shoulders. Age had done nothing to diminish those muscles, only made them gnarled and stubborn. 'Dreadguard.'

'Lambent Protector,' he corrected, grimacing and suppressing no little shame at the use of the sorcerer's name for him. *Geltz*, he corrected himself. *Lambent Protector Geltz Dalewarden. Seven houses of noble birth, three cities*, the old mantra began in his mind before he shook it away.

'Is it?' Ven probed, raising an eyebrow. 'Protector, Avenger, Dreadguard. It's a progression. *Geltz*? Or *Ulgoloth*?' He glanced at a talisman shaped like a dirk which hung from *Geltz*'s armour. 'I see you still carry the sorcerer's token.'

Hearing the name *Ulgoloth* twisted his insides. His armour constricted around him and a vile, tortured face, full of malice, warped across its reflective surface. With titanic will, he battered the feelings down. It left him breathless and on the verge of vomiting.

'*Geltz*,' he panted. 'I am Lambent Protector *Geltz Dalewarden*.' He swallowed and steadied himself as he regained control. 'And I know what you would say. This discussion is old ground.' *And I would have anyone else's head for bringing it up.*

The thought chilled him. It had surfaced unbidden and he knew exactly from where. Worse, he knew that the Dreadguard was not a foreign entity but a fragment of himself. A wave of malice and anger accompanied his thoughts though he battered that down too as quickly as it came.

'My goal, our duty, remains unchanged,' *Geltz* replied when his composure returned. Ven was his compass, he knew that, it had always been so. Teacher and guide. Through all *Geltz* had endured, perhaps only Ven exceeded his stoic endeavour. Falling into the old man's trap should have reminded him of that instead of drinking from the pit of resentment that he had instead tapped into.

'And yet you proceed.' With no answer forthcoming, Ven pressed. 'What tidbit did he offer? More half-truths and promises?'

'What other option is there?' *Geltz* snapped.

'Axanthal is not the only power we might tap into.'

Geltz shook his head. 'Whoever our silvered foe was, whoever this Sigmar is that Axanthal claims they fight for, an accord cannot be reached. "Arms raised against the Kingdom of Vales be met with __"

'Shield and sword and unyielding vengeance by whatever means,' Ven finished. 'I know what we swore.' The lieutenant tidied some of the detritus from around them while retrieving his armour from his trap and getting himself back into it. Inside the room, their floor was at least stable, unlike the changing walkways outside. 'Our landscape has somewhat changed since then, however. Perhaps we should adapt.'

'Adapt? And you berate me for sounding like the sorcerer? An oath is binding. Forever.'

Ven paused while putting on his vambraces and his shoulders sagged. 'Our charges should have died of old age long ago, and the both of us with them. How many of these Harvests have we reaped?'

This sorcerer has given nothing but promises and will-o-wisps to chase, and in return?' Ven bowed his head and screwed his eyes shut before expelling a deep sigh and looking through Geltz's visor. 'Are they *any* better, Lambent Protector? You hide them even from us. Have these rituals and unguents and spells of his devising improved their state at all?'

'This conversation is over, lieutenant. We are committed to this path,' Geltz growled. Perhaps this was the time. His confidence rose from having forced the truth from Axanthral at last. His mind fogged. Or had he thought this before? No, this time it was different. 'The sorcerer shows his fear of me. I could have crushed his neck into flakes of parchment and he saw it. He knows there will be a reckoning if this yields no results.' Geltz did not feel the rising rage until his fists were clenched and tension gripped his arms. 'We have grisly work to do.'

Realising the lost cause, for the moment, Ven nodded and made for a spiral walkway down towards the ground before heading out to the Arquian Gate. It by no means marked an end to the issue and they both knew it.

The crystalline shards that formed most of the Aurora Citadel's inner towers loomed behind them, spearing into the sky atop walls which reflected in a quicksilver sheen. It was spreading further, the silver. Much more so since the start of this Harvest. Lights and shapes always played across the surface and within the crystal depths. To stare inside invited a murky reflection of the Realm of Chaos, a realm that looked back at the observer, seduced, corrupted and bound them. Even the Dreadguard of the citadel grunted and turned away before it pulled him in.

Dreadguard. He caught himself slipping into the sorcerer's pet name. *Lambent Protector*, he reminded himself.

His lips curled with distaste. He did only what he must. Sacrifice in duty and his duty had not ended. Whatever means necessary. And so he mobilised the villains under his command. Once known as the Lambent Order, these blackguards now referred to themselves as the Eclipse. The radiant sunburst that once adorned their tabards and embossed on their armour plates was now joined by a dark circle.

Clad in steel twisted by daemonic powers, he strode past the high archway, armour clattering against the chitinous ground at the base of the citadel. Bone? Carapace? It didn't matter; another day and the ground would assume another texture. Such was the way around the citadel. A dozen armoured warriors followed in perfect step, their armament less ornate but still offensive to the eye with its carved symbols and daemonic faces. A disconcerting sight for their leader who remembered a purer garb.

They dragged covered sleds behind them and gathered at the base of one of the towers. Where many of the towers and walls had been enveloped into the growing silver structure, the original stonework of men ages-dead stood starkly against the refracting crystal of other towers. A dozen eyes, each larger than a man's head, watched from their fleshy growths on the stone tower's side, snapping their attention to the grim procession. Some resembled human eyes, others cats, wolves and even creatures spawned in the Realm of Chaos.

The sorcerer could watch all he wanted.

Beyond the archway, they marched into the old city once protected by the defences of the Aurora Citadel. Most of the buildings remained intact in this inner section, unlike the blasted remains that crumbled in the outer ring. Defensive towers still rose all around, though all required extensive repair. Or would have if such a force existed that could break the citadel. Nothing had challenged

these walls for generations. Geltz glanced at the flickering lights cast from a few of the towers. Nine individual cults populated them, each with their own debased rituals which they performed in isolation from the others. They were waiting for him, their parts in this ritual already underway.

At Geltz's direction, the warriors rammed nine pikes into the ground, eight in a circle around the largest. That central one sagged under the impaled body of the hero of Valescroft, deformed and fallen yet with enough humanity remaining to show recognisable agony. The remaining pikes held the bodies of his honour guard. In the strange, refracted light of the crystalline towers, the shadows of the pikes formed an eight-pointed star on the ground.

It didn't take long before the flesh drained from the bodies. Their skin paled and shrivelled until it hung prune-like over empty skeletons. A creeping, wet sound came from the wall as the fleshy matter advanced further over the stonework of the tower and an overwhelming presence of malice swept over Geltz. The citadel's daemonic custodian, a being so vile that he would have relished the opportunity to run it through, had it a corporeal form.

The remainder of the Eclipse marched through the arched entrance, this time drawing large cages on wheeled contraptions. The living stock. Terrified prisoners taken from Valescroft huddled within, whimpering, sobbing, or staring blankly into oblivion. They were for the moat, the black, abyssal trench that encircled the citadel.

Ven approached while the other warriors busied themselves with the prisoners. 'Word has it the warband we faced is making for the citadel. Perhaps we should be preparing.' He glanced at the rough, depraved treatment of the prisoners being hauled from their cages, beaten and defiled, to the gruesome pikes, and then back to Geltz. 'Or perhaps this is preparation?'

Geltz gave no answer. Instead, he oversaw the first of the prisoners' wailing plunge into the depths. Pleading turned into screams as the woman plunged over the edge, not into water but extreme wind that surged within. It buffeted the body against walls, howling as its speed increased and jostling other bodies as they tumbled within, not letting any hit the ground, however far below it was.

He stared down after her, a light wind stirring his midnight blue tabard.

'Sacrifice in duty,' he muttered to himself. 'By whatever means.'

Kicks and squeals caught Geltz's attention. It was a boy in the throes of adolescence. Geltz sneered. A body and mind undergoing such levels of change was the preferred sustenance for the daemon spirit. Geltz loomed over the boy. He tasted the fear before plunging his sword under the boy's ribs and twisting the blade. It was not a mercy, though the daemon spirit would have taken its time over killing him. Even if the Lambent Protector could not hurt the daemon spirit itself, he could still extend his cruelty onto it and deny its cravings.

The magic of the Realm of Chaos swirled around him, exciting his skin and making it crawl at the same time. Its power and potential invigorated him. They were the literal Winds of Change and they would help his charges. Somehow. He paused. Did he need to do something, to direct them? The sorcerer had not specified and he had been so swept up by gaining advantage over Axanthral he had not considered further details.

Geltz, Ven and the Eclipse needed no chanting or symbols for the ritual. The cults dealt with that. They were the death dealers, and with the ritual complete a fell aurora bloomed in the sky.

'Is that what you're looking for?' Ven asked. Doubt carried in his voice.

Geltz didn't know. His confusion over his confrontation with Axanthral made his head swim. Surely it had done something. It must have. Something else stirred upon the battlements, something awful. It called to him, a call that grew ever more insistent the more he ignored it. There was only one way to resolve it but Geltz had a priority that paled all others into insignificance.

'I must check on them,' he said and hurried into the citadel.

Chapter 12

Aid Unlooked For

A clatter of sigmarite heralded the arrival of a Liberator as he hurried to the front of the arrayed Strike Chamber. The front lines were a gleaming wall of shields, an immovable object that many foes had crashed against and been repelled. Behind those ranks, the Paladins hefted their mighty lightning hammers or long glaives--the hammer that came after the anvil. Above him, Prosecutors circled, trails of light streaming behind them in a spectacular show of the might of the Knights of the Aurora. Their beauty would last only as long as contact with their enemy, for this formed Sigmar's lightning strike, the fastest of all Stormhosts, and their grace was matched by their brutality.

Through the warriors, he sought the commanders and found Lord Castellant Kimmani in discussion with the Liberator Prime, Knight Azyros and Knight Heraldor. He glanced from Ancanna to Kimmani as though unsure whom to address. He settled on all of them.

'My lords. Forgive my intrusion.'

Kimmani cut off his conversation and bid the Liberator proceed.

'It's the nomads,' the Liberator said.

'Another sighting?' Gallus asked but Kimmani ended that line of questioning.

'Now is not the time to chase our tails, Liberator.' Kimmani said. 'Your vigilance is worthy but our task is set. The counteroffensive must start immediately. Once the fortress falls, and the Aurora Banner flies atop the wreckage, we shall find your nomads.'

The Liberator shook his head. 'Quite so, my lord, but the nomads are *here*. They are few but they are dressed for war.'

'Are they indeed?' The Lord Castellant gave the messenger his full attention. 'Show me.'

The Liberator hesitated. 'They are asking for Ancanna, Lord Castellant.'

Ancanna felt Kimmani's rage surface over the ten paces between them. The nomads arriving could only mean that Kell had spoken to them, but considering that she had tried to stab him when last they met, he had to wonder what had changed.

'Liberator Prime Ancanna does not lead this Strike Chamber,' Kimmani said tersely. 'They shall speak with the Lord Castellant.'

The messenger stole a glance to Ancanna. 'Of course, my lord. Their leader, an Aelf, awaits us at the Hippodrome Excelsior.'

Kimmani regarded his commanders. 'Begin the march onto the citadel. Gallus, take the Boreal, Solarus, Corona and Gale Prosecutor units to the west. Make haste but do not take wing until the Liberators reach their staging area. I will rejoin you shortly.' He crashed his gauntlet to his chest in salute and gestured for the Liberator to lead on. He stared Ancanna down as he passed but neither spoke. The Liberator Prime stood to attention, stoic and unflinching as the death-mask of his battle helm.

Under the Liberator's lead, Kimmani weaved through fallen pillars and over uneven cobbles until they reached the oval expanse of the Hippodrome Excelsior. There was no Aelf.

‘You put a watch on him?’ the Lord Castellant asked, impatience clear in his clipped tones.

‘A watch?’ Melodious words chimed as though from a dozen different columns at once. ‘Do you consider me your prisoner, Storm Warrior? Have a care, for you have not caught your quarry just yet.’

‘I have no time and even less patience for games.’ The Lord Castellant dismissed the Liberator back to the ranks where his shield would be most needed. He wielded his halberd one-handed near the blade while scouring the ruins for movement. But of course, this was Ulglu, and not a moment passed without something moving in the periphery. Real or otherwise. ‘My charge informed me of warriors here, arrayed for war. Show yourself and state your intentions.’

‘You do not sound like Kell told me, though your attire matches her description.’ The Aelf paused, allowing his soft words to echo between columns. ‘I wonder, is this Ancanna whom I address?’

‘Liberator Prime Ancanna stands at the head of my army. It is his shield that shall take the brunt of the enemy’s malice. My name is Kimmani Keepwarden, Lord Castellant of the Knights of the Aurora. I speak for the warriors assembled here, including Ancanna, and carry the will of the God-king Sigmar.’

Silence fell between them. Kimmani used it. He was a defender by nature. A glance at a building and he could find every entrance, every exit, every defendable position. Every hiding place. He stalked between the columns and onto the packed dirt of the arena away from the cobbles of the streets. Something looked out of place by the stage in the centre of the hippodrome but the voice could not have come from there. Keeping an eye on the stage, he narrowed the Aelf’s location down to three possibilities.

‘Our collective is based on trust,’ the Aelf continued, narrowing it to two hiding places. ‘We have elected to extend our trust to Ancanna of the Storm.’

Kimmani extended his axe head around another column and traced a line in the dirt. That left one hiding place. The Aelf stepped from behind it.

He wore none of the resplendent colours and fabrics that the Aelfs in Azyrheim clad themselves in. His garb matched the aged marble and drab cobbles of the ruins with intricate folds holding the cloth in place.

‘My Liberator informed me that you bring warriors clad for war.’

At a call from the Aelf, a handful of men and women emerged around the great stadium. Some from the stepped seating which surrounded a raised stone stage in the centre of the elliptical track. Others slid out from trap doors in the ground or spidered down columns. The last rose from a crouch in front of one of the large letters embossed onto the stage which spelled, *Hippodrome Excelsior*. Invisible against the stone until he moved.

The Lord Castellant inspected the line of rag-tag nomads. His gaze passed over their ragged clothes in hues of dirty green and brown, grey and blue, and onto the dull, notched blades of their hand axes and spears. They were fed enough, not malnourished, he credited them that but when he compared them to the gleaming sigmarite armour and hammers of his Stormhost, he shook his head.

‘We can get you into the citadel, Lord Castellant,’ the Aelf said. Even without the acoustic effect of the hippodrome which he had lost since stepping into the open, his voice formed musical notes like wind chimes.

Kimmani shot him a hard stare. 'We are fully capable of getting ourselves into the citadel, Aelf. Our hammers strike with god-forged fury and crush stone as easily as they crush skulls. But tell me why you show yourself now? Why do you offer your help instead of staying in hiding?'

'Because the cycle is broken,' the Aelf explained. 'We could have avoided them indefinitely, by watching and following the Harvests. Your defence of Valescroft has interrupted that. Now the agents of the Aurora Citadel scour their territory. The blood and souls of their crops kept us from notice, but now they are searching.'

The Lord Castellant spread his arms. 'We are here. We make no effort to hide ourselves. If they seek battle, they need look no further than these ruins. Yet you cannot avoid them?'

'Open battle is not their way, Stormcast. We are not of their scheme. If they knew of us, they did not care, for they had a far more bountiful Harvest in Valescroft. Now, they would snuff us out like a candle.'

'And suddenly you have the backbone to fight them?' Kimmani leaned closer, looming over the Aelf. His shoulder pad alone was half again the size of the Aelf's head.

The nomad wrinkled his nose, a gesture that looked out of place on his fair, delicate features. Unintimidated by the Lord Castellant's bulk and proximity, he held his ground. 'We have little choice. Now they have had their noses bloodied, there will be a reckoning and they will scour the valley until they get it. Unless they are destroyed, they will destroy us. Unless you accept our aid, they will destroy you.'

Kimmani stiffened. He stepped back from the Aelf and drew himself to his full height. Sunlight from the only visible crescent glinted from his armour plates, showing the terrible glory of the Lord Castellant.

'We are Stormcast Eternals, Aelf. We have faced daemons and thrice-dead abominations. Ghost stories do not scare us, nor can any fortress stay our wrath.'

The Aelf looked solemn and shook his head. 'Your storm-forged armaments are not enough, nor is your posturing or your arrogance. You will be taken apart in the city surrounding the citadel before you even reach the gates. Your servant, Ancanna, he has tasted a little of the horrors in the walls. Nearer the citadel you can expect much worse. The lords of the citadel see much, Storm Warrior, but they do not see everything.'

The sky darkened. A whisper of wind brushed through the hippodrome. *Failure*, it said. *Replaceable. Liberator*.

'What is that?' Kimmani said, looking up to where the night had arrived long before its due.

The nomads were gone.

#

The Knights of the Aurora reached their staging area with no sign of the Lord Castellant returning to lead them. The constant twilight made the time of day and duration of their march difficult to discern but the Stormcast Eternals remained fresh and prepared for their task. Ranks of Liberators showed their discipline with precision lines of shields, all sturdy, not a single weary arm. Behind them, the Paladins continued their relentless advance, unphased by their massive armour and weaponry until they reached the ridge where their paths would part. Without need of a signal, four

flights of Prosecutors landed behind the bulk of the force while the remainder circled above. With the enemy's eyes on the larger force, their crippling blow could hit them unawares.

A flock of gloomlarches sawed and banked overhead, drawing the Stormcasts' attention to the Aurora Citadel which dominated the horizon. Their target loomed ahead of them, a once-mighty structure of towers and walls constructed on many levels as it covered a hillside. How the Prosecutors could have missed such a monstrosity was a subject of much debate within the Strike Chamber. Thick fog obscured its base, enough that the tops of damaged towers stuck out from it like rotten teeth. No two fortresses of the dark gods were alike. While slaves conquered in the wars of ages past built many, most that the Knights of the Aurora had seen had been repurposed after they fell. While the Duardin or Free Peoples, or even Sigmar's own to a degree, built their fortresses to a similar plan for speed and efficiency, Chaos-built structures often relied on armies of slaves sacrificed in their construction.

It appeared, however, that little effort had gone into re-fortifying this one with most of it in disrepair. The central spires and the citadel itself told a different story. Situated so high, above the mists, the base of the citadel gleamed silver in a mirror-like sheen, mostly on its lower half, but patches shone through across its whole surface.

As with most battles fought by the Knights of the Aurora, their scouting had reduced the number of variables they had to react to. Dealing with the agents of Chaos always meant something unexpected, but knowing their flanks were covered, knowing the terrain and what could come, allowed the Knights of the Aurora to focus.

Ancanna signalled the halt and left the front rank to confer with the Knight Azyros.

'Our goal lies ahead, and yet our leader remains absent,' he said. 'It seems we have a choice, Knight.'

'To strike now or wait for the Lord Castellant,' Gallus agreed. He rolled the shoulder of his sword arm. 'I have never relished the wait before battle and our orders were clear.'

Ancanna considered the possibilities. Perhaps the nomads brought information that changed their plans. Perhaps their Lord Castellant walked into a trap. Or perhaps he was simply delayed.

'There's no way of telling,' Ancanna decided. 'If we delay, we lose our advantage. We are Stormcast. Any one of us could lead this army.'

'It's talk like that which has Kimmani suspicious of you.'

'Suspicious?' Ancanna led Gallus a little distance from the other Stormcast Eternals, trudging up the rocky ground as if to observe their paths from higher ground. 'Every one of us is a veteran of countless battles. Even before the God-king claimed us, we had all led campaigns, however large or small. However unsuccessful,' he added.

Ultimately, they had all failed. Ancanna had died along with every man, woman and child he had attempted to save. Gallus' own story followed a similar, tragic theme where his sacrifice delayed the slaughter of his guild and their families by only a matter of moments. Similar themes played throughout the Knights of the Aurora. True, many who these warriors had defended in their previous existence had lived out their lives, survived the dominance of Chaos by fleeing or hiding. Ancanna hoped their descendants lived on.

'Well, there's no shortage of heroes then,' Gallus said, amused. 'Have a care with Kimmani though, when he returns. He thinks you want command of the Strike Chamber.'

‘Nonsense,’ Ancanna said with a frown. ‘I have made no such claim. Nor would I.’

It put him in mind of the first time he emerged from the reforging chambers. Whe refused the God-king himself. But now wasn’t the time for his reverie. He returned his focus to the battle ahead. It was too late to send a Prosecutor back with the force so committed; their waiting would only alert the enemy to their approach. Without further information, he would stick to orders.

And he would see them carried out by the Strike Chamber. The Lord Castellant could think what he may. The Knights of the Aurora had a job to do and if it required Ancanna to take up the mantle to achieve that goal, so be it.

‘Even so, he’s taken your insubordination at Valescroft and your link with the nomads as a challenge to his leadership. After you met with him yesterday, he believed the issue resolved when he offered you his hand. He’s taking it as a slight.’

The audacity of the implications took Ancanna aback. ‘You believe me wrong? You would have allowed the Lord Castellant to force the people of Valescroft into submission?’

‘He wouldn’t have gone that far.’

‘Wouldn’t he? I saw your reaction when he gave the order and saw him shrug you away too.’

‘Like I say, he’s treating it as a bid for leadership and not an isolated incident.’

‘You were present at my Remembering, Gallus. You know I’ve never had designs on command.’

‘Not then.’ Gallus held his silence for a moment. ‘But reforging changes us in ways we haven’t even discovered yet.’

The words pierced him. ‘You doubt me? Even you?’

‘I don’t doubt your intent, Ancanna, but whether by design or circumstance, you fall into leadership time and again.’

‘Only by necessity, I assure you.’ Tired of the discussion, he cast his attention back to the citadel. ‘We attack. You are needed to strike the first blows so cannot stay with the bulk of the force. Who else is going to give the order?’

Gallus smiled. Though obscured by his death-mask faceplate, it shone through in his voice. ‘Who else indeed? May your shield remain whole, commander.’

‘May we all remain whole,’ Ancanna muttered before clashing his warhammer against his shield and calling to the army. ‘Knights of the Aurora! Raise hammers with me.’ As the Strike Chamber did so, he pointed his hammer towards the citadel. ‘It appears that yonder fortress did not fall hard enough the first time. We shall do a better job of it. Brother Stormcasts, we face sorcery and daemoncraft. Stand firm and lay low the tyrant! Breach their walls before they know we are upon them! Show them why they call us the Swift!’

No sooner had the Strike Chamber responded in a thunderous clash of sigmarite when the sky turned dark and a fell aurora bloomed across it. Within its lights, twisted faces with elongated maws and empty sockets cried enormous, silent screams while dark specks moved across its surface. Lightning crackled but not of Sigmar’s doing. This spread in unnatural forks, glowing purple around a midnight core.

And then the daemons came.

Chapter 13

Endless Horde

Battle with daemons stalled the attack before it gained more than a dozen steps of momentum. The Strike Chamber got within a mile of the mists surrounding their fortress goal before the flyers swooped into them, shrieking, biting and clawing, or burning them with the daemonfire that crackled around their bodies.

With the ground troops so harried, Knight Azyros Gallus abandoned his objective and brought his four wings of Prosecutors into the fight. They found themselves hard pressed into the flood of daemons that came screaming from the aurora their advance halted altogether. Prosecutors reported to Ancanna in his shield wall at regular intervals and carried his orders to reposition where most needed. Much as the Knights of the Aurora could operate with considerable autonomy borne of experience and drilled techniques, the extra direction made the hammerblow land that much harder.

Soon after they formed their defensive formation and gained the upper hand over the daemons, one of the Prosecutors arrived in a flurry of celestial hammers thrown from his hovering position. He reported that the Lord Castellant had been sighted holding his ground alone against a score of daemons. Prosecutors had already been sent to assist but Ancanna judged the ebb and flow of the battle. At his direction, they fought a retreat back to the ruins and linked up with Kimmani.

A trail of vanquished foes marked Kimmani's path out of the ruins towards the rearguard. When the Strike Chamber arrived, they were met with an ichor-soaked killing machine. Two deformed spawns from the Realm of Chaos that had battered against the rearguard's shields fell from a single slice of the Lord Castellant's gleaming halberd.

'Sigmar strike me down if I see a retreat before me!' Kimmani yelled his fury not at the daemons but his own Strike Chamber. 'About turn, you cowards!'

He speared a flying ray-like daemon before grabbing the nearest Liberator by his gorget and hauling him closer. 'Who ordered the fall back? Speak.'

Ancanna answered for himself after slamming the lip of his shield into the maw of a horror that exploded from the sundered form of a larger daemon and had the advantage on Kimmani. The admission only incensed the Lord Castellant further. Halberd spinning, he plunged into a trio of daemons and sliced them all, his form perfect, his weight transfer between his elliptical parry and thrust impeccable despite his explosive rage.

'Smash them, Knights of the Aurora!' he shouted, making his way through to the front of the Strike Chamber. 'Smash them back to the very walls of the citadel, and then smash down those walls!'

It was never going to happen.

One man's fury, even at the head of a mighty Strike Chamber, counted for only so much. Constant, unyielding assault bogged the Stormcast Eternals down and reduced their advance to a few steps every minute. Numbers. It always came back to numbers and though warriors as powerful as the Knights of the Aurora counted for many, the enemy always had more.

They pummelled and thwarted the horde through the night and still failed to close on the fortress. When dawn came and the final hammer blow struck, Lord Castellant Kimmani called a halt.

‘Wasteful,’ he growled before barking orders to regroup the Strike Chamber.

Sigmarite clad warriors spread in pockets across the ridge and back down into the valley. Golden crops lay trampled and splattered with viscera, both daemon and Stormcast. Across the battlefield, the scent of ozone and fresh rain mixed with the acrid filth of dying daemonfire. Movement as far back as the ruins showed just how far the unexpected attack had spread the Knights of the Aurora. Just regrouping the Strike Chamber would take hours.

It crossed Ancanna’s mind whether to expect these auroras and daemonic incursions every night, whether they were linked to some form of beacon within these valleys. The Claws of Dracothion, the scouts had called the complex of valleys as from above, they claimed, they looked like the great drake had swiped great furrows in the earth. The Liberator Prime hooked his shield onto his back, looped his warhammer at his waist and sought out Kimmani.

He found the Lord Castellant on the highest point of the ridge and had to step on the corpses of a dozen daemons to reach his side. Without their daemonfire, their shrieks and their malevolent fury, the daemons weren’t much to look at once vanquished. These lay flat and shrivelled like dried fruit, even their once-bright colouring lost its vibrancy.

‘What of the nomads?’ Ancanna asked. ‘Will they join the fight?’

‘I cannot use them.’ Kimmani kept staring out, focused on the black and silver fortress.

It was well placed, high and difficult to reach. While the Knights of the Aurora stood a better chance than most given their air superiority, Prosecutors formed only part of the force. Narrow pathways and steep cliffsides would funnel the ground troops.

‘What did you say?’ The Lord Castellant asked.

Ancanna frowned. ‘Nothing my lord.’

‘Perhaps just the wind,’ Kimmani said absently, hesitantly as though it was a sensation he had experienced before.

The mists lay lower with the breaking of dawn, as though the sunlight permeating the thinner clouds burned them away. While they still covered most of the streets around the fortress, the tops of buildings peeked through. Many lay in ruins though a band of almost untouched structures remained nearer the citadel itself. Arches stood tall attached to colonnades, spherical structures to the arcane arts lay scattered amidst houses and the odd industrial premises built into the often steep hillsides.

‘Sir,’ Ancanna said. ‘There is--’

Kimmani spun around so suddenly that he stole the words from Ancanna’s tongue. A hard night of fending off daemons spewed from the aurora left him wearied but it was being forced to postpone the attack on the citadel which left the Lord Castellant in poor humour. ‘Don’t think I have forgotten your orders to fall back, Liberator Prime,’ he snapped. ‘You cost us this fight.’

Taken aback by the stretch of logic, Ancanna cocked his head. ‘My lord, the daemons were upon us and swarming you. Even if we had reached the citadel, they would have crushed us from the rear.’

‘Rot and nonsense, Prime. Striking the sorcerous heart of that fortress would have sealed the aurora and made the enemy’s defence falter before it organised. Our banners would be flying atop those towers now.’ He slammed the butt of his halberd into a downed daemon and heaved a breath. ‘I

have made my decision. The nomads wield the tools of hunter gatherers, not weapons of war. The first hint of danger and they bolted. They are cowards, not warriors.'

Ancanna hesitated but chose his words with care. 'There was a time, Kimmani Keepwarden,' he whispered deliberately omitting the Lord Castellant's title, 'when none of us were warriors. My own hammer was used for nails, not skulls. Your mighty halberd was, back then, a lamplighter's pole. Do you remember?'

The Lord Castellant fixed him a baleful glare through his helmet. 'Do not second guess me, Liberator Prime. I have made my decision. The time to which you refer is long past. We are warriors now.'

Ancanna gripped his fists as his choler rose. This approach, rejecting help out of hand, sounded nothing like what their Lord Celestant had told them as they passed through the realm gate into Ulglu. Sigmar's message spoke of unity with whoever stood against Chaos, of the old alliances forged anew. Though mighty, the Stormcast Eternals could not retake the Mortal Realms alone. Wielding such might, one could forget that.

'Do you forget your own journey, Kimmani? Has reforging stripped you bare? Need we hold another Remembering?'

'A Remembering?' Kimmani stiffened at the insult. He closed on Ancanna until their faces were inches apart. 'We are Stormcast now. Remember that, and remember your place, Liberator Prime. Yes, I remember where I came from. I remember being unable to defend my family and friends, just like you.'

Before they were reforged as Stormcast, every Knight of the Aurora came from humble beginnings, soldiers of circumstance only when war was thrust upon them and they took up arms. Despite their background they were no less heroes, no less fierce, than the Hallowed Knights or Hammers of Sigmar. With the assistance of his brother Stormcast Eternals and a Remembering, Ancanna knew most of his previous life even if some of the images had blurred. He, along with no more than a dozen other craftsmen, held for three weeks against a force of darksworn warriors and their daemon sorcery. They had repurposed their tools for fighting and used every ounce of their ingenuity to defend.

'And so you defend these people by keeping them out of the fight? We cannot inspire others to join us by showing what we can do. We must show them what *they* can do. We were forced into it at the edge of a blade. We can arm these people, give them the training they need.'

'I am keeping them out of our way,' Kimmani growled. He matched Ancanna's anger with his own. 'We are to be an inspiration to these nomads. I called the people of Valescroft to fight and they hid. I tested the mettle of the nomads and they fled. Lifetimes of running and hiding has left them weak. They will watch us smash through the citadel, see our mighty armaments smite its defenders. That is what they need to follow in our wake. They must see our strength. We do not indicate that we are so weak to need other races to bolster us.' Kimmani spread his arms. He cut an imposing figure in full armour atop the ridge, the remains of his vanquished enemies at his feet. 'Look at our stature, our armour. We *are* a symbol of hope!'

'Just like the hero of Valescroft was?' Ancanna gestured to the distant town, the damage of their battle still very much evident in the wreckage of buildings and the black smoke still wisping from them. 'He gave them hope but was no match for what he fought. This,' he gestured around him, 'I believe that this was not an isolated event. While searching the ruins, we saw carvings which showed

a similar sequence of events over and over again with different heroes. A hero always rises, and the hero always dies. I believe that whatever is in that fortress is linked to these people.'

'Nonsense. Every culture has its myths and that's all they are.' He gestured his halberd towards the fortress. 'That is definite. Real. Its walls have form that I will tear down. I will not devise a strategy based on stories.'

'Is it nonsense? How can a town such as that survive in a realm dominated by Chaos, in the shadow of that fortress? How many warbands did we smash between the realm gate and here? If they wanted to wipe out these people, they could have done so at a whim.'

Kimmani shook his head. 'Show me something convincing and I'll listen. Until then, my orders stand. We regroup and strike at the citadel.'

The two warriors stared at one another. Ancanna, grudgingly, admitted to himself that he did not know how to integrate these nomads into the Strike Chamber either. He glanced back to the fortress and breathed. The ozone tang brought him comfort and steadied his temper.

'Very well, but think on this, my lord. If we had warriors available before we became Stormcast, imagine what we might have achieved, how many more we could have saved.'

'If we had warriors back then, none of us would have become Stormcast. We would have allowed them to fight for us and remained as craftsmen or merchants or farmers, just as these savages should allow us to fight for them.' Kimmani's voice remained steely but he hesitated. 'I presided over your Remembering, brother Stormcast. I know the distaste you felt when you repurposed your hammer from a tool to a weapon.'

Ancanna frowned at the Lord Castellant's assessment, for it cut close to the bone. Rememberings forged the Knights of the Aurora close, like the rings of mail armour, all connected. Each knew one another's history, their triumphs and failures. It allowed them to coordinate and fight together with ruthless efficiency but meant that nothing was hidden from their brother Stormcasts.

Would he have remained a builder if fighting had not been forced upon him? He expected he would. It would have denied him the opportunity, however grisly, to grow into the warrior's guise that he now occupied. And though much of what the Castellant said rang true, Ancanna disagreed on their proposed action. These nomads wanted their chance to fight, and the Lord Celestant had ordered for people to be rallied to the Stormcasts' cause. They should be allowed their fight.

At Ancanna's silence, the Lord Castellant continued. 'Your defender's instinct betrays you, Liberator Prime. Would you have our forces split, held back to protect these savages? You are the only Prime I keep in my close counsel, Ancanna, and that is because I need your backbone, but must you fight me at every decision?'

'It is not my intention to oppose you without reason, Lord Castellant.' Ancanna considered the phrase of his words before speaking further. No fear stirred in him at another disagreement with Kimmani, but his volatile nature needed careful tempering. Ancanna, however, was not one to hold his tongue or sweeten his words. 'We have suffered greatly since passing through the Ulglu realm gate.'

Kimmani eyed him. His heavy breath fogged slightly as a black cloud blocked the suns and cast a temperature-plummeting shadow.

'The loss of our Judicators weighs on me also but I do not regret my orders. The Prosecutors were needed for scouting. This realm has been choked by Chaos for generations which meant that anyone

who opposed the ruinous powers must have been stealthy. We needed every resource to find them. And now we have our target. We must smash the walls in a lightning assault, eyes on our target only.'

It was a common tactic for the Knights of the Aurora. Their abundance of Prosecutors gifted the element of surprise. Countless flanks had crumbled against their hammer blow before they could react to the attack. With the enemy forces split and in disarray the Liberators and Retributors would move in to finish the job. From what he had seen of the nomads, Ancanna perceived not the dishevelled remnant of a dying people, but grim determination and fighting spirit. A spirit that lacked the means to fight until now.

'Sir, our object here in Ulglu is to rally others to our cause. These are the first we've met who are willing to fight. Sigmar must have his reasons.'

'I wouldn't be so arrogant as to guess Sigmar's will,' he snapped. 'They will rally to us, in time, but our strategy relies on the shock of a lightning assault. We lack the time to train them in our formations, tactics and combat drills. I will not risk this assault on untrained elements disrupting our disciplined manoeuvres. Perhaps another day, when they are properly trained, they may support us.'

Ancanna relented. He had tried a last ditch attempt and failed. The Castellant was entrenched, and whether behind fortifications or resolved in his orders, there would be no shifting him. Instead, Ancanna decided on a different approach.

'Then if they cannot fight with us, perhaps we can use their knowledge. Our Prosecutors are blinded by the mists of this realm. These nomads move stealthily through the woods. They can gather information without being seen. If they have remained unseen for so long, they must know the land. Let them scout for us. We do not even know with whom we fight.'

That, at least, gave Kimmani pause. Part of the Knights of the Aurora's success relied on advanced knowledge of the enemy and the battlefield terrain. They rarely needed to change tactics because they knew the variables in the conflict, minimised them, and planned their strategy around them.

'Then find out what you can,' Kimmani said. 'But anything they say is taken under advice only. There may be other reasons how they have survived in Chaos-choked lands. Any strategy will be a Stormcast strategy, not a nomad one. Is that understood, Prime?'

Ancanna acceded with downcast face and a rotten feeling in his gut. He knew he had overstepped by giving more than just voice to his concerns. 'Yes, sir. The Strike Chamber attacks alone.'

The Lord Castellant nodded and strode away, cloak trailing behind him, leaving Ancanna seething at their exchange. Worse than their disagreement--their repeated disagreements--Ancanna worried about the Castellant. The Knights of the Aurora put great importance on their heritage, taking great pains through their Rememberings never to forget their lives. The alternative was to become fully Stormcast, a soldier that existed only for battle. If that came to pass, what would separate them from the Orruks? Or the fanatics of Chaos? The Stormcasts had to be more than empty suits of armour.

'At least we get their knowledge, that's something,' Ancanna muttered to himself but when he stalked back to the ruins to find them, the nomads had gone, leaving no trail. His own unit of Liberators waited outside the walls while he searched. The scrape of sigmarite armour plates dwindling into the distance marked the departure of the rest of the Strike Chamber and its second muster for battle on the edge of the ruins.

It left Ancanna in silence, sitting on the stone stage until Knight Azyros Gallus joined him. 'I believe I warned you about his mood.'

Ancanna looked back at his friend. 'Have we lost him, Gallus? Is he forgetting? I fear what another reforging would do to him.'

Gallus refrained from his usual quick answer and considered the implications. 'We are everything we were and everything we have become.' He gestured back to the regrouping warriors. 'Come. The Knights of the Aurora need the morals of Ancanna the builder and the shield of Ancanna the Stormcast.'

Chapter 14

It Began with Thunder

Akin with the woods, Kell scampered up a rough trunk and into the boughs of an eshanut tree as easily as climbing stairs. The long, curling leaves matching her drab clothes kept her hidden although the warriors' attention remained ahead. That was the trouble with many predators, she thought, they rarely looked behind. They didn't think they needed to.

Though all the warriors here were of the winged variety, they remained on the ground, waiting for the dawn. In Uglu, however, dawn did not always provide much more light, its moons keeping the realm in a near-constant state of partial eclipse and its heavy cloud formations already gathered and broiled. There had been no aurora the previous night, she thanked the gods. With the cycle disrupted, not even Orinstar could predict the actions of the Aurora Citadel and that heightened Kell's wariness. A dark day approached, a day for laying low, for hiding out the storm. The warriors maintained discipline like Kell had never seen, and surprising quiet given their heavy armour which let out only the odd scrape as a warrior limbered up his muscles in preparation.

The thought of these giants in their burnished armour and wings of light seeking stealth struck her as odd but in spite of their arrogance, at least they had some sense to keep themselves hidden, however futile. The woods might conceal them from without but the enemy also had eyes within, or so the Aelf maintained. Eyes, hidden in walls, trees and beasts, he would say, though Kell had never seen one.

She cocked her head at the hint of a whisper. She strained to hear more but only the susurruus of leaves around her sounded. The word ' betrayers' surfaced in her mind though she could not say why. It felt slick and dirty somehow, unbidden, like an interloper. Whether these Stormcasts were betrayers remained to be seen. Perhaps the warrior she met had tried to help, perhaps he was attempting to trick her, more likely the latter for help was rare in Uglu. The enemy had played elaborate schemes before, and, according to Orinstar, bringing despair from the brink of salvation constituted its grander schemes. Adjusting her position after a shudder, she gazed back out to the horizon.

From her higher vantage point, the first glimmer of dawn cast its light over the valley. It would begin soon.

#

It began with thunder.

Not from the clouds, but from sigmarite boots pounding the ground. Over their rumble, the mighty peal of a trumpet blasted from the ruins of Art Eruditia. The Azyrite host marched in a burnished spectacle of armoured power, banners displaying the sigmarabulum held aloft. They marched in the open, through the valley and into the hills towards the Aurora Citadel. It was an open challenge to the fortress' inhabitants: your time is over. Face us.

For a large force on foot, they covered the ground with amazing speed. Their steps landed in perfect synchronicity, their formation changed to deal with the varied terrain, switching to a snake-like column in the thinner passes and ridges and back to more defensible blocks as their path widened. Flawless. This was a force used to rapid marches, drilled and experienced. Yet in the gloom of dawn, where the light crept over the hilltop and fell on the partially ruined city at the base of the Aurora Citadel, nothing moved.

Such an open challenge had brought roving warbands upon them ever since they passed through the realm gate into Ulglu, and still only the light breeze and fell, tattered banners stirred in the grim drizzle. Still none answered the Stormcasts' challenge even when they reached the outer ring of defences, devastated though it already was.

'Defiled,' Ancanna said, wrinkling his nose at the sickly odour that overpowered the scent of ozone which often followed the Stormcast Eternals.

He swept his gaze first over the buildings within the outer ring of towers and crumbled curtain wall. Like much of the mortal realms, many stood as ruined shells of their former stature. Others here remained in tact. Built on a hillside, as the town gained height, so too did the buildings gain in stature and grandeur. The architecture resembled much of Art Eruditia from where the Stormcasts had marched. Here, however, the lines of blue stone columns supported roofs or higher levels of buildings, and the closest carved decorations depicted fields and harvests and an effigy of a river god crumbled, moss covered and worn, in a dry fountain. They all, however, stood empty and soulless.

The buildings ended abruptly where a chasm cut through them. At the bottom of a lengthy, rocky drop flowed a river, churning blue-green and spitting froth where large crystals protruded from it like tusks and fangs. A single bridge crossed the span. Its gothic arches and thick stone offered room for entire regiments to cross. Statues lined its sides, but portraying nothing as tame as a river god. On one side these depicted cruel visages of warriors in bulky armour, mutated warlords and sneering sorcerers. On the other side, they assumed a more daemonic nature, growing in stature and gruesomeness from amorphous objects to a mighty bird-headed creature with an all too human--if impossibly muscled and mutated--torso and legs.

They paved the way to the Aurora Citadel itself. Ancanna was not the only Stormcast to gape.

Just as Gallus had described, disrepair did not come close. Moss and ivy grew wildly, covering much of the blue stone walls though an odd silver sheen covered the rest. It might have proved a formidable bastion a thousand years before. No soldiers manned the battlements, crumbling gaps marked where siege weapons had once defended towers. The curtain wall was already breached.

At the head of the army, the Lord Castellant, turned to the Heraldor and Primes marching nearest him. 'Disappointing. We need only a handful of men to take this place, not an army of Stormcast Eternals.'

'My lord,' the Knight Vexillor said, gesturing towards the citadel with his banner pole. 'The third tower left of the centre--'

Near the top of the spire, the structure bloated into a sphere like an enormous ball stuck in the throat of the tower. From within, lights flashed and motes of magic in purple and blue and green swirled in and out of the glassless windows.

'Sorcery,' Kimmani said, 'I know. This is a Silver Tower, or the makings of one. I want Prosecutors to hit that first. A well-placed Stormcall Javelin could make this a very quick siege indeed.'

'And behind,' Ancanna said. 'People watch from the hilltops.'

'Friend or foe?' the Vexillor asked while Kimmani kept his quiet stare upon the citadel. 'The nomads?'

Ancanna shrugged. 'Could be. A warband would have been down on us by now. Perhaps hope smoulders still in a few from Valescroft.'

‘Then they shall see Sigmar’s banner fly atop the sorcerer’s tower by noon.’ Lord Castellant Kimmani hauled himself up onto the open first floor of a damaged building with dexterity that belied his heavy armour.

At Kimmani’s outstretched hand, the Knight Vexillor handed over his banner. Celestial light spilled from the lantern at the Lord Castellant’s waist, casting a halo around him. He turned to his warriors, halberd raised, the Aurora Banner at his side crackling with energy. Everyone could see him: his foot troops, the Prosecutors waiting in the woods, the people atop the hill and whoever defended the citadel. He stood as a paragon of virtue, an angelic liberator, and as a further challenge to his enemies.

‘Warriors of the God-king Sigmar,’ he called. ‘Sorcery and tyranny reign in this tower, imposing their will on those too weak to resist. No longer! Strength has come. At the behest of Sigmar himself, the Knights of the Aurora bring liberation and retribution. Break the walls and lay low the tyrant, Stormcast Eternals. Consecrate the land. The reign of blood and treachery ends now at the hammer and blade of Sigmar’s wrath. Sound the note, Knight Heraldor, for the eye of the storm strikes Ulglu!’

Lord Castellant Kimmani swiped his halberd low as the note blasted from the Heraldor’s instrument, enough to shake the foundations of the citadel and echo through the valley and into the woods where the Prosecutors waited.

They took to the air in an eruption of light. Dozens of Prosecutors opened their wings with a resounding thrum like regiments of archers letting fly. Glowing streamers of pale green and blue trailed behind them.

From the woods, they caught the winds and soared in a wide arc around the jagged spires of the citadel’s western wall which jutted out like uneven, rotten teeth. Gallus, the Knight Azyros, led them from the fore, flights of Prosecutors wielding shield and stormcall javelins flanking him like an honour guard. At his direction the Prosecutors folded their wings back and dived like hunting falcons, picking up immense speed. When they drew level with the battlements atop the front wall, they unleashed a salvo of celestial hammers and stormcall javelins. Drawn from Sigmar’s storm itself, the magical weapons pummelled the structure which groaned and shook at the impacts. Great chunks of stone cracked and tumbled from the wall, crashing into lower spires and reducing them to rubble.

As the Prosecutors summoned more celestial weapons, so too the storm overhead grew and a great boom of thunder heralded that Sigmar’s attention had been caught. They did not stop to assess the damage but rather angled their wings to regain height and fly in a helix around the sorcerer’s tower.

Still no response surfaced from the citadel’s defence.

‘He means to take the sorcerer,’ one of Ancanna’s Liberators said.

The Lord Castellant heard and, having rejoined his troops on the ground, gestured into the buildings surrounding the citadel with his halberd. ‘The Knight Azyros takes the fight to the heart of the enemy,’ he cried. ‘He is an example to us all. Let him fight with the Knights of the Aurora at his back.’

He led the march and the might of his Strike Chamber followed, focused and resolved behind their sigmarite death masks.

Ahead, Ancanna caught sight of something that caused him to stumble. Pikes formed a circle in an expanse of cleared ground, possibly once a plaza beside a gaping moat. A bridge lay across the gap, inviting them over. Bodies drained of all fluid and life lay impaled on the pikes, skin pulled tight over their faces in eternal screams of terror. Caught in the light of Kimmani’s lantern, sigmarite cast a

silver reflection. A cluster of gauntlets formed a strange symbol in the ground. As a Liberator broke ranks to look closer, Ancanna called them back into place with a sharp reprimand. Whatever ritual had taken place here was long done and there was no sense disturbing its residual magic.

They crossed the bridge with caution, keeping to small groups. Such blatant lack of basic defence perturbed the Stormcast Eternals to a man. They had faced experienced warriors in Valescroft. It didn't feel so much like overconfidence as a trap. Still the Lord Castellant rushed them on into the streets beyond the windy moat.

The streets forced the Stormcast Eternals to split into smaller units though their objective remained clear and imposing at the highest point of the long-deserted town. Still, the streets remained deathly quiet though the buildings housed more corruption than the ruins from whence the Stormcasts' attack began. Fleshy growths like those in Art Eruditia occasionally spread, boiled, stretched and pockmarked across entire walls. Ancanna passed a house in which every wall, floor and ceiling was covered in profane symbols and fell prayers to dark gods. Whether trick of the breeze stirring the bone and bronze fetishes dangling from empty windows, a low voice whispered those scrawled prayers.

‘Where are they?’ a Liberator said, peering into the whispering house.

Ancanna adjusted his grip on his hammer. Clad in sigmarite with a host of Azyr around him, he marched tall, ready to meet any threat. The voices were disconcerting but he knew he had vanquished what they represented time and again.

‘Eyes sharp, Liberators,’ he said to his unit.

The house was soon lost in the distance behind them as Kimmani pushed a rapid pace through the twisting streets, higher and deeper into the town, ever gaining on the citadel. Flashes of celestial hammers finding their mark still lit the gloomy dawn though their source became obscured by taller buildings. It remained quiet until the rearguard passed through the ruined area of the town and into the band of larger, fuller structures.

A chill passed through Ancanna as he watched the path ahead. Something was amiss. His Liberators hesitated a step and though they would not need it, Ancanna spoke to bolster their courage. Yet no words sounded. He spoke again but heard only silence, not even the scrape of armour or clatter of boots on cobbled streets, steps which became unstable stumbles. Complete silence. A couple of Liberators near him clashed their gauntlets to their chests but they raised no sound. It dizzied Ancanna. His head swimming, he signalled a halt and stopped to shake the disorientation away.

Then all the screams of hell tore through the street.

Shoals of flying ray-like creatures burst from wells, shrieking their piercing din. After their pocket of silence, it hit the Liberators as a physical force, slamming the nearest into a wall, blood dripping from his ears and out of the slits in his helm. The others ducked and grabbed their heads.

One of the rays wrapped the falling Liberator in its rippling tail and tossed him through the air into the savage jaws of another. Three fought over the body, their teeth crushing and eventually puncturing the sigmarite shell around the Stormcast's body. A hammer blow from a Liberator that recovered the quickest spun one of the daemons around and it responded with a lash of its tail. It merely scuffed the armour but bought enough time to right itself and rejoin the other daemons as they circled for another pass.

‘Shields together, Stormcasts!’ Ancanna cried.

For the good it did him, he realised what had been bothering him beyond the absence of sound. The layout of the buildings. A spire rose from each, not made of their original material, all connected by blackened lines along the ground. They formed the eight-pointed star. A place of power, a link to the Realm of Chaos. Glancing to another two units that had split to find their way through the streets, Ancanna saw that they had also stumbled into a place of power and fought creatures wreathed in fire for it.

The Angelos Conclave had reported these places but the Lord Castellant convinced them that they were dormant. He had claimed that their lay lines had been interrupted. He had been very wrong.

The daemons' next pass met a wall of sigmarite and rebounded from the tower shields. As the last one passed, Ancanna used his hammer as a hook and wedged the head under one of the spikes on the daemon's back. A sharp twist at his waist and dropping his weight disrupted the screamer's flight. With a hiss and a shriek, it flared its rippling wings to display its full, horrific width, the barbs and tentacles under the twisted flesh. But Liberators were forged in battle and not to be intimidated by such a display. They responded with a pounding of hammers. The impacts squelched into daemon flesh, turning the beast into squealing, thrashing mush. No sooner had their hammers fallen than the shield wall reformed and tilted upwards ready for the next attack.

The attack came from below.

Tentacles erupted from churning, shimmering ground. They wrapped around the Stormcasts' legs, suckers clinging and barbs seeking to puncture sigmarite greaves.

The calls of Stormcasts carried through the streets; the enemy had beset more than just Ancanna's Liberators.

Chapter 15

Defender's Bane

The chattering of daemons diminished and a great shadow fell over the Lord Castellant. Flicking the blood from his halberd's blade, he looked up to the towering beast that had entered his arena. Its thick hide shimmered midnight blue, speckled with brighter spots. When it moved, the spots rippled, subtly glowing like constellations. Behind its left shoulder, a ragged wing bobbed, its membrane ripped and bones disfigured. Only a stump remained of its right wing.

Two long necks writhed around one another, one ending in a dragon's head, the other avian, and burn scars spattered them both. They snapped at one another and a razor beak opened to reveal a forked purple tongue as it shrieked at the snarling dragon head through a wisp of acrid, black smoke. Where a third head once grew, mutated flesh and scar tissue supported a saddle upon which sat a warrior in heavy, ornate armour.

'You should cover your light, axe bearer, for it makes you easy to find,' the warrior said and reared his mount. 'Is this more like the challenge you crave?'

Kimmani recognised him, remembered the bruises of their previous encounter. Fixing his gaze on the Chaos lord he resolved that there would not be a third.

'It is I who sought you, doomed one, and before my work is through the light of Sigmar will shine from your towers over the corpses of you and your followers.'

The chimaera snapped towards Kimmani and whipped its tail while its heads growled and screeched. Presenting its weaponry, Kimmani thought, taking in the huge claws and sharp end to its tail. The muscled bulk of its body tossed the Chaos lord around. The rider responded by twisting a sword that had been jammed into the beast's neck up to the hilt. The daemonic face on the pommel matched those on the lord's armour. With a pained jerk, the chimaera snarled louder but controlled its behaviour.

'His name is Kareanthros Ulgoloth,' the Chaos lord said edging the beast closer. 'After the one who subdued him, Ulgoloth Skyreaper, Dreadguard of the Aurora Citadel. I would have your name, stormlord, that I might create a plaque for your severed head and display it in my collection.'

The Lord Castellant kept his stare. 'I have only death for you.'

'Then I bid you fight well, warrior,' Ulgoloth said and clashed his fist against his chest in imitation of the Stormcasts' salute.

His attack began before the words had left his mouth. A billow of smoke from the chimaera's dragon head masked his charge, stinging Kimmani's eyes and stifling his breath. The chimaera burst from the smoke, snapping with both heads. Kimmani met the dragon's head with a brutal crack from the haft of his halberd. The turn of his shoulder saved his neck from a savage snap of the other head's beak which instead glanced off his pauldron. With the Lord Castellant so focused on the writhing necks and snapping heads, Ulgoloth twisted the sword in his beast's back again and ran it straight over Kimmani.

The weight of the chimaera spun Kimmani around and sent him tumbling over the ground. He kept rolling to avoid being trampled by heavy paws though the beast's whipping tail caught his vambrace. The crab's claw at the end of the tail clamped on and scored sigmarite before Kimmani slammed his other elbow down on it, creating forked cracks in the carapace.

Scooping up his halberd, Kimmani rolled back to his feet. The wide street gave the Chaos lord and his beast room to manoeuvre, to turn and gather momentum before slamming into Kimmani again. A jab and arc from his halberd kept the heads at bay and deft footwork earned him only a scratch from the chimaera's front claws instead of it barrelling into him again.

Light swelled inside the Lord Castellant's lantern though he kept it covered. The knowledge that Sigmar's eyes were on him lent him strength and focus. He faced the beast as it reared for another pass. It shook its bird-like head and with a screech, spittle showered from its beak. Though the rider fought for stability atop the jerking beast's back, he emitted a slow, deep laugh. But Kimmani maintained his calm. His halberd poised by his side in a solid grip, he waited.

'Come for me,' he whispered.

The chimaera took a high route, springing from walls, seeking to overwhelm Kimmani with its size. The Lord Castellant held his ground and let a little more light spill from his lantern, focused in a beam at the beast's chest. The celestial ray burned into its flesh like a branding iron, stealing the momentum from its approach and forcing it to rear. Belying his heavy armour, Kimmani shot forwards and tore a gash into the chimaera's underbelly. Twisting his hips into the strike, the halberd bit deeply. Both of the mutated heads screamed and in their flailing, tossed Ulgoloth from the throne and into a chunk of masonry.

Kimmani used the opening. He landed a series of cuts and thrusts into the thick hide, systematically disabling the creature's thrashing weapons, first severing the muscle and tendons around its fore-paws, then slicing its tail and finishing it by decapitating the avian head and impaling the dragon head.

The beast collapsed in a bleeding lump and fell still.

'Now face me without allies and sorcery, fallen one,' Kimmani said as Ulgoloth pushed himself upright.

One of his weapons still driven into the chimaera, he drew the other sword from his hip. The dark metal glimmered and exuded a sense of wrongness. He spared little more than a glance to his fallen mount before casually walking towards Kimmani.

'Commendable,' he said. 'You bested Kareanthros almost as quickly as I did. Of course, he was a more complete beast then. He reached to his back and unhooked a shield covered in stretched flesh of midnight blue, the remains of a large boar's head forming the top rim, its eyes replaced with firestones.'

Kimmani kept a firm gaze on his enemy's approach and rolled his shoulder that had deflected the chimaera's bite, working it loose. 'There is nobody to cover your retreat this time.'

'Then we fight to the death, stormlord.' He clashed his sword against the side of his shield which caused a burst of purple sparks and a fell screech.

The Chaos lord's almost civil demeanour disconcerted Kimmani. He reminded himself that he was not facing a warrior of the blood god, but one who revelled in plots and schemes. Everything he did was calculated, meant to perturb and unhinge his foes, to affect their behaviour until he pulled their strings.

Kimmani narrowed his focus to his enemy. On the off chance that some modicum of sincerity underpinned Ulgoloth's words, the Lord Castellant graced him with a sharp nod of respect, but only while the warrior remained at a distance. They had fought before, and though it galled Kimmani to

admit it, his foe had outfought him. He shook the moisture from his halberd's blade. It would not happen a second time.

He had already tested his foe, and Kimmani jumped straight to the offensive sweeping high and low with his halberd. Even with a larger, heavier weapon, the Lord Castellant's arcing style struck with speed and only Ulgoloth's measured stances and footwork let him get away with only scratched armour.

After their first exchange, their blades clashed with celestial aura flaring and purple sparks sputtering. The Chaos lord attacked tentatively, testing Kimmani, luring him with deliberate openings of his guard and slamming them shut whenever Kimmani positioned to strike them.

Neither gained any ground after minutes of fighting and Kimmani began to feel the strain of a battle hard pressed. Still the challenge of the powerful opponent exhilarated him. Making minimal gain with his halberd, he slammed a low kick into Ulgoloth's leg, seeking to take it from under him. Sigmarite clanged against daemon steel, knocking the Chaos lord's balance, but he quickly recovered and drove his shield down onto Kimmani's ankle. The Lord Castellant grunted and changed his stance, responding with a halberd thrust towards Ulgoloth's helm.

That broke them apart and they resumed a more tentative dance. As a daemon charged into their arena, wielding a knife in each of its three hands, Ulgoloth snapped his sword around and split the creature in two.

'I will not allow the sanctity of our combat to be defiled, stormlord,' he said.

Kimmani rushed him. The initial attack crashed against his enemy's immovable defence but the arcs of the sigmarite halberd tested that defence to its limit. A dozen rends and scratches scored Ulgoloth's shield and armour. A backhand strike knocked the shield aside and Kimmani roared, driving the spear tip of his halberd in. It punched through the daemonforged armour and into the flesh beneath. Daemonic faces across the metal plates screamed as the Chaos lord staggered.

'Speak not of sanctity,' Kimmani said and wheeled his halberd behind him. He leaned over his enemy as the Dreadguard fell. 'This place will only know sanctity when the light of Sigmar shines over these hills and through the valleys, when the priests of the God-king have consecrated the land and removed your taint. Your downfall begins here, and in a hundred other places in the realms, and the people will know liberation by whatever means.'

The Chaos lord coughed a red mist. In his convulsions, he snatched the talisman from around his neck. His hands shook as he poised the dirk-bladed object above him. The cat's eye or swirling blue and purple that formed the hilt flicked its gaze either side before focusing on the Chaos lord's wound.

'By whatever means,' he croaked and slammed the talisman into his wound. Black energy whirled around it like a maelstrom with the talisman its centre. Rotating around the outside was the whisper of a man's face, there like a wisp of smoke or trick of the light. It was not a man that Kimmani recognised by face but someone he knew by instinct, by combat, someone that fought with daemonforged sword and shield. The maelstrom sucked the image in and compacted.

Blood trickled down the Dreadguard's helm from the visor as he looked up.

Kimmani glanced between the blood and the dark maelstrom still turning beneath the puncture he had made in the cuirass. He edged away and tried to bring his halberd back into a guard but something held him, like gravity dragging him back down and closer to his enemy.

No matter how the Lord Castellant struggled and raged, the force was too strong. In a flash of motion, Ulgoloth clasped Kimmani's neck in his gauntlet.

'By whatever means, stormlord.'

The blade entered him like molten metal. Beyond the searing pain, Kimmani felt like he was being stretched, pulled into the sword, before rapidly expanding again. The Chaos lord rose to his feet, pushing Kimmani back, the sword still buried in his gut having entered below his cuirass. A slow push removed Kimmani from the blade and he dropped to the ground.

The air stilled. Then a palpable build up of energy formed around the fallen Lord Castellant. It started beneath the ground, at first a hum, then growing into a rhythmic *thwum, thwum, thwum*. A bolt of blue-white light speared from the body but instead of lancing directly to Azyr, the citadel obstructed it. Kimmani hadn't noticed the rotating ring of crystalline inner towers. The bolt hit one of the prisms that moved outside the structure and the enormous store of energy in the bolt crackled out into the Winds of Change. Smaller forks of lightning set flying daemons alight as they crossed their path. With a resounding rumble of thunder that boomed in every direction, the fragmented bolt flashed and disappeared. None saw where.

The Dreadguard of the Aurora Citadel knelt beside the blackened ground by which Kimmani had fallen. He bowed his head and rested the tip on his sword on the ground.

'Worthy,' he said. 'Until next time, stormlord.'

Shock and disgust entered Ulgoloth's mind as he considered what he had done to himself. The Boon of Tzeentch took many forms and he had carried the talisman long. But now everything would change.

Geltz! he corrected, and staggered at the force of nausea that flooded him. *Lambent Protector Geltz!* *Lambent...*

He stood and etched an eight-pointed star into the blackened ground atop an Eye of Tzeentch and left to rejoin his forces. The act left no mark on his sword's edge.

Chapter 16

The Bitter Tang of Defeat

Split from the rest of the Strike Chamber and forced into a large, abbey-like structure, Ancanna and a handful of Liberators retreated along a corridor. Their shields raised against the bolts and winds of sorcery that assailed them, they formed a small, defensive circle. Many of other the Stormcasts fought in similar pockets, unable to link with their warrior brethren through either weight of enemies or the sting of magic. The Stormcasts were not just losing, they were being systematically picked apart.

Gouts of pink and blue fire blasted through the doors either side of Ancanna and gibbering voices of daemons followed.

‘Stand firm, Liberators!’ Ancanna called.

As the enemy pressed in on them, a beacon shone through a rend in the ceiling. An avenging angel descended, the light of Azyr blazing from his lantern, searing daemon flesh into charred chunks that flaked away in the wind of his arrival.

‘Sigmar burn you, daemonspawn!’ Knight Azyros Gallus shouted as he plunged his sword through the underbelly of a rearing ray-like daemon. The glowing sigmarite weapon burned through its flesh like a lightning bolt and carved the creature in two.

The other screamers retreated to find easier prey but battle still raged and the sounds of daemon screeches and cackling suggested that numbers were stacked against the Stormcast Eternals.

‘Gallus. Your arrival–’

‘Save your thanks, Prime,’ Gallus interrupted. ‘The Castellant has fallen and the Strike Chamber is surrounded and outnumbered. The situation is irretrievable.’

Ancanna slammed his hammer atop the freshly sprouted head of an amorphous blue and green daemon, spraying a mist of blood. ‘Numbers are never on our side, yet we have always prevailed.’

‘Too many, Ancanna.’ The Knight Azyros shook him and urgency spurred his tone. ‘We are outmanoeuvred and out-thought. They hold every strategic point. We must leave.’

‘The Prosecutors?’ Ancanna asked.

‘Scattered. Sorcerous wind cut us off from you and disrupted our flight. I ordered as many as possible to find a way through and link up with our earthbound brothers.’

Another wave of daemons surged into the corridor, spitting flames from their fingers. Warriors in defiled heavy armour accompanied them while a flight of furies strafed overhead and raked at the Stormcasts’ armour. Something else moved amidst the detritus but the press of attackers snatched Ancanna’s attention. He put his shoulder into his shield to bash a swiping daemon from the warrior to his left and parried a blow from an axe using his hammer. The Liberator to his right raised his shield to fill the gap and cover Ancanna.

Momentum from the enemy’s sudden burst pushed the isolated Stormcasts back. Their armour heated as daemonfire washed over it and constant impacts against their shields jarred their tired muscles.

These warriors of Chaos were not glutted from aeons of victory and domination, they were drilled and fierce. As a coordinated flurry of attacks opened one of the Liberators' guards, a blue-armoured warrior's axe already swung in a deadly arc and into the gap under the Liberator's helm. They even anticipated the lightning strike when Sigmar reclaimed his fighter and retreated a step to position their next attack.

While Ancanna focused on the attacks at his fore, the scrape of metal behind him drew his attention. He called for his Liberators to cover and shields snapped into place the instant he stepped back from the front line. Turning to check behind, the glint of metal from a raised axe caught his eye. Out of position, he could only twist his shield in front, not intercept or pre-empt the attack.

But the blow was not meant for him. The axe hacked into a daemonic form, a slinking creature that had sneaked behind and poised to strike the Knight Azyros. While the axe lifted for another swing, a knife tore a gash into the daemon's exposed flesh. With the reduced visibility of his helm, it took Ancanna a moment to discern the wielder. A nomad. Kell, the forager and the protector of children, rained blows on the creature. She lacked any technique, more suited to splitting wood than daemons, but her ferocity made the difference. The creature was long dead before she stopped her wild swinging and regarded Ancanna with crazed eyes.

'You're trapped, storm warrior,' she said. 'Follow me.'

'You know a way out?' Ancanna asked.

'Stop talking and move,' Gallus said.

He flitted between the hard-pressed Liberators, lending his sword to parry a blow or to land a cut where an opening appeared. The Knight Azyros kept low and Ancanna soon saw why. Swirling winds of immense power tossed Prosecutors around the air and battered them against the rotating inner ring of towers, their wings useless against the sorcery.

Ancanna and another Liberator covered Kell as she scurried from cover to cover along the corridor while the rest secured their retreat. Any hope of riposte was long forgotten and the Liberators and Knight Azyros focused only on block and parry.

The corridor ended in a great hole in the wall. They filed out into a crossroads where Kell halted with a horrified expression. While brave, she was no Stormcast Eternal, and the mass of flame-spouting daemons were enough to give even the Knights of the Aurora pause. Upon seeing new prey, the fiery daemons spewed gouts of flame from their many heads and arms, toying with them before swarming towards them in a tight group.

Beset on both sides, Kell hesitated and the Stormcasts formed up for a fighting stand around her. The first salvo came in a blistering inferno that slammed against sigmarite shields and licked around their edges while the Chaos warriors led another flurry of blows from the corridor against the rearguard. Another sound permeated the roar and crackle of fire and the pounding of metal on sigmarite. It was a prayer to Sigmar and the grunt of Stormcast Eternals wielding heavy weaponry.

Retributors slammed into the back of the flamers, their massive hammers smashing the daemons aside into crushed hulks, their bodies swinging into every blow. Peals of thunder accompanied each strike and crackles of lightning forked from the hammer heads. It opened a path and Kell quickly regained her senses. She darted around the corner from which the Retributors had come and into a room strewn with rubble and the dust of neglect.

‘Protect the woman,’ Gallus called to his allies and they joined formation with the Liberators. Their massive hammers gave the Stormcasts a chance to reduce the Chaos forces’ momentum by hitting back and pushing them into an occasional defensive. When the hammers struck, they sounded a thunderclap and crushed their target.

‘This way! Hurry!’ Kell’s echo reached the Stormcasts through a sliding door in the room that she had entered.

Gallus flashed between the two Retributors and his sword darted out into the helm of one of their armoured foes, staggering the warrior and denting the metal. He snapped an order to which the Retributors responded with sharp nods. The three of them planted their feet in front of their pursuers. The Knight Azyros’ wings spread wide, even behind the massive armoured bulk of the Retributors. Wide arcs of the hammers and Gallus’ darting sword obliterated the front lines of daemons and left one of the armoured warriors of Chaos a crushed and mangled heap of metal on the ground.

‘Gallus!’ Ancanna called back, struggling to keep up with the fleet human.

‘Get out and regroup, Liberator Prime,’ he replied. ‘No arguments or heroics. The Retributors will cover your retreat.’

‘And you?’

Gallus took to the air. Light swelled from his lantern, rattling its shutters, straining to burst out. Behind his helm, the Knight Azyros cracked a sardonic grin. ‘Me? Oh, I think I can take them.’

He gained loft and light pulsed from his wings, making himself the largest, brightest target for miles. Flying daemons wheeled and banked to face him, and every grounded enemy turned towards him, the mortals hefting their weapons and the daemons spitting their fire or their magic.

‘Sigmar, hear me!’ Gallus cried. ‘Give me not strength nor salvation, but the light of Azyr. Illuminate me, great Sigmar. Send them to me!’

The clouds overhead roiled grey and blue and black. Silence descended for an endless second like a deep breath before immense thunderbolts hammered down from the sky. Dozens of them exploded through the structures, vaporising enemies and blasting mighty chunks of masonry into the air and crashing into other buildings.

A single angelic figure shone through the plumes of dust. As the winds whipped, the image resolved into Gallus, the Knight Azyros, crackling with forks of energy and surrounded by a halo of divine light. Sword held by his side and lantern aloft, he continued to ascend, unphased by the swirling winds until the flying daemons closed.

Then he sprang into action. His movements were graceful, a masterclass of precision and agility as he cut and thrust his way through enemy after enemy.

‘For Sigmar and the Knights of the Aurora!’ he shouted.

Five more angels on wings of light soared through the break in the storm that Sigmar himself had punched. Two unleashed salvos of celestial hammers into screaming daemons while the other three impaled furies with their javelins, all summoning fresh weapons from the energy of the storm for their next strikes.

They joined the Knight Azyros, adding their skill to his own lightning assault, harassing the grounded forces of Chaos and duelling with the flyers above the mad, defiled structures. Though for every one they killed, another three soared in and swarmed around the massively outnumbered Angelos Conclave.

‘Retreat and regroup, Knights of the Aurora!’ Gallus’ voice boomed over the battlefield as though assisted by magical means. He turned towards a heavy concentration of flying daemons that sought to strike him from above. Manoeuvring into a V-formation with his Prosecutors, Knight Azyros Gallus streaked at their head, sword in front. His holy lantern erupted with a nova of divine light. ‘For Valescroft and the Third Moon Collective!’

Chapter 17

Battered but Never Broken

Ancanna buried his head in his hands. Perched atop a mossy stump under the forest canopy's dim emerald glow, he replayed the battle in his mind. Again. Three days of flight and skirmishes with their pursuers from the citadel took their toll on his battered armour, notched hammer and exhausted body. His pride was beaten raw. Such a catastrophic defeat. The first defeat for the Knights of the Aurora, but another loss stung more. Brothers, comrades, friends beyond counting had been reclaimed by Sigmar, each taken to be reforged. Each to lose another piece of themselves.

The scrape of armour drew his attention and he stepped to his feet, burying his grief and forcing his muscles to push through the fatigue. He straightened his back and strode to meet his returning warrior with the confidence and presence expected of a Liberator Prime.

Castus, one of the first Retributors that Ancanna had linked up with after escaping the battle, clashed his fist to his chest. 'Liberator Prime, the nomad has spied a scattered group of our brethren. They are hounded by the enemy.'

Kell again. With sight like hers, the woman would make an exceptional Prosecutor.

'Then we are called to battle. Show me.' Ancanna hefted his shield and followed the path of trampled grass from which the Retributor had come.

It disconcerted Ancanna to see this battering ram of a Retributor struggling to walk, and though he tried to hide it, the odd grunt escaped his jagged helm. One of his knee plates was crushed and though it looked hammered crudely back into function, the damage the blow had done to the knee would still remain. Beyond the lattice of scrapes over his armour, a number of punctures dotted the sigmarite. Ancanna did not need to ask the question; the Retributor would reject any suggestion that he was not battle ready, and even if he admitted it, no command from Ancanna would stop him from joining the fight regardless.

They reached an area of forest covered in the tracks of sigmarite boots when Kell hopped from the sturdy branches of a strangleshade tree. She gestured north where the vegetation thinned. 'Over there.'

Thinking twice about climbing the tree in his armour, Ancanna followed Kell to the tree line near the summit of what the nomad referred to as Shadowslip Hill. When a crescent of sun peeked through the still-roiling clouds, its rays glinted off silver armour in the distance. A small group of Stormcasts performed a fighting retreat against more numerous foes. Though already hard pressed enough, a second force pursued, flying daemons banking over cultists led by a handful of armoured warriors. And something else, a blur at this distance.

'Do we attack?' the Retributor asked. 'What are your orders, Prime?'

Ancanna considered his options. The sight of his warrior brethren retreating sat ill with him. A worse thought surfaced as he surveyed the strength of the enemy pursuing them—he could not save them. The thought was fleeting, brought on by grief, and dispelled by the glint of sun from his own sigmarite plates, battered though they were. The armour served as a reminder that he was also Stormcast, and Sigmar's greatest would not let their brothers die uncontested.

With tired body, Ancanna raised his hammer onto his shoulder and looped his arm through his shield's grip. 'We find a way. Round up our few, Castus--Stormcasts require our aid.'

At least the helm hid his doubt. So outnumbered and exhausted, he needed a plan worthy of Sonos Cloudburst. But the Lord Celestant wasn't there, Lord Castellant Kimmani had fallen, and Knight Azyros Gallus had doubtless met a similar end with the amount of enemies he drew to himself, so it fell to Ancanna.

When the Retributor left, he turned to Kell. 'I'm going to need your help.'

'Yes,' she said. It wasn't a question expecting more detail, but an understanding that the Stormcasts would have already died without her. 'You should have accepted it before. Why do you hesitate?'

Ancanna tried to read her expression but failed. 'In the ruins, you had children, yet you have been away for days and nights...'

'Yes.'

'Do you not need to return to them?'

She frowned at him. 'They are with the collective.'

'But do they not need their mother?'

'They are with the collective,' she repeated. 'The collective is their mother, their father and their guardian. They are looked after. You are not.' She looked up at the Stormcast in his thick armour, behind a shield of sigmarite, and wielding a hammer taller than her. 'I must look after you.'

In his beaten state, Ancanna conceded to himself that she may have a point. He gazed again at their intended enemy. The Stormcasts had turned the tide against their immediate foe. Liberators had funnelled them into a narrow passage between two hills, allowing a single Retributor to smash into their backs with his huge hammer while two Prosecutors strafed them from above. The second force should have been on them. Then Ancanna saw why they lingered.

The cultists were coaxing a large beast attached by ropes and chains held by a dozen of the tattooed, crazed men. More prodded it with barbed spears and other crude, hooked polearms while the great creature of mutated flesh reared and gurgled its rage. It snapped and lunged at any of the cultists who came too near, tearing the arm from one by wrapping it in a tentacle covered not in suckers but saw-like teeth. The body, it tossed into the air in front. When the body landed, the other cultists walked over it as though he had not been their ally moments before.

'At last some luck,' Ancanna said, remembering something that Kell had said about the nature of Ulglu. It sparked an idea.

Kell looked at him askance. 'Luck? That is not an omen I would consider lucky.'

'Lucky that it's headed our way. They seek to outflank our allies and descend on them from the hill.' He grabbed her arm and hurried after Castus. 'Come. Time is against us and we need a signal.'

'What kind of signal?'

Ancanna smiled behind his helm, his melancholy replaced by the task at hand, the plan of attack and chance of salvation. 'A lure.'

It did not take them long to round up Ancanna's band of survivors as there were only a handful to find.

'Stormcast Eternals,' Ancanna said to his few. 'Our brothers are beset beyond the borders of this forest. They are pursued and hunted by those who seek to toy with them and devour them, those who believe their greater numbers and mutated daemonspawn the ultimate strength. We will draw them to us and prove to them otherwise.'

One of his Liberators spoke. 'You seek to assault a warband with our handful? Prime, even joined with our brethren that force is beyond us.'

Though an eternity had passed since his life before reforging, Ancanna still remembered the end times and his role in them as though fresh. He clung to the memory like it defined him, as did many of the other warriors in his Stormhost. This conversation rang like many others in which his collection of craftsmen and refugees faced equally insurmountable foes. And each time they overcame them. All but that final time.

'We are Knights of the Aurora, Liberator. Each of us called Sigmar's name to effect the salvation of others. He bestowed us with the strength to do so, and now it is our turn to act. We must fulfill our part of the bargain.'

'Even so,' Castus said, stepping forwards but taking some of his weight on the huge hammer he wielded. 'A pitched battle with that force can have only one outcome. We'll give a good accounting for ourselves, and my hammer hungers for the chance to crush that daemon's flesh, but ultimately, weight of numbers will wear us down.'

'I have no intention of giving them a pitched battle, Castus.' At the Retributor's cocked head, Ancanna continued. 'Perhaps it's time we learnt something from our friend here.'

Kell shrank back from Ancanna's gesture and her expression tightened into a frown but she voiced no dissent.

'Our enemy punished our overconfidence by dividing and outmanoeuvring us. Now they are overconfident, drunk with victory and reckless, and we shall pay them the same honour.' Ancanna picked up again with a thought that he'd never manage to form before. The dire situation of the Knights of the Aurora, however, moulded the concept into something solid. 'Sigmar is more than just his Stormcasts. The Realmgate Wars, rallying the free people, are about more than just numbers. They're about free thinking and perspective. Stormcasts cannot win this alone. We need the free people to temper our thought, overcome our shortcomings, and remind us why we fight. Let the Celestial Vindicators fight for vengeance. We are the Knights of the Aurora and we fight for the salvation of others.'

The Liberator Prime levelled his hammer towards the borders of the forest. 'Beyond our confines of safety, our own warrior brothers need salvation. Let us fight for them. I will raise hammer and shield to their aid; who will guard my sides?'

'Until death!' his warriors called, raising weapons in imitation of his own.

Ancanna had no intention of leading his battered handful to their deaths, not if he knew his enemy. He simplified his task into priorities: to rescue the retreating Stormcasts and to destroy their foe. The first took precedence. For that, he needed to seize their attention and offer them a way out. Pursuit would come as it always did but he would be prepared.

Taking viewpoint from the edge of the trees, Ancanna guessed at the line of retreat the harried Stormcasts might take. Slowed by their heavy armour and weary from a long-fought defeat, they moved only as quickly as their most injured warrior. The Chaos hunting band would catch them before long, and observing the terrain, Ancanna sought to predict where. He would have given his right arm for a Prosecutor's aid but none had escaped with him, the battle in the skies of the Aurora Citadel having reaped a devastating toll.

In the many possible routes that Ancanna considered for his brethren's retreat, a momentary glint of sunlight caught his eye. He recognised the path from where the army of humans had marched to their deaths.

'What is that?' he asked under his breath.

'It's a flag,' Kell responded, perched on a branch over his shoulder.

'A flag?'

She gesticulated as she searched for the words, her balance in the tree unaffected. 'A symbol? No, a banner. I watched the men carrying them when they left the town.' She quietened and her expression became sorrowful. 'I don't think they helped.'

Ancanna thought on the possibilities. He only needed grab the enemy's attention for a short while. Soon, the seed of his earlier idea began to flourish. 'They could help us.'

In short order, Ancanna, Kell, and the meagre few remaining Stormcasts marched. Despite fatigue and injuries they covered the ground well, sticking under the cover of trees as much as possible, only moving across open ground when a dark cloud covered the sun long enough to reduce the chance of reflection from their armour. Later, he knew he would welcome as much reflection as possible, but that remained beyond his control.

As they marched, Ancanna desperately tried to think of a better plan. He considered what the Lord Celestant or Lord Castellant might have done in his position. The only conclusion he reached was that neither would have proposed his plan. Lacking further inspiration, he resolved to his course of action and picked a trio of banners from the rotting dead that had once ridden out from their homes to deliver their families from bandits. Ancanna saluted the fallen and whispered a prayer to Sigmar, lamenting that he could not have aided them and requesting the opportunity to deliver others from such a fate.

A ridge covered their foraging from enemy eyes. Kell positioned herself on the other side, closer to the enemy, both to watch how quickly they were catching the other Stormcasts and to give Ancanna a point of reference. When she saw the top of a banner bobbing above the ridge, she shouted out, then called again when the top half of another banner showed further along the ridge. At a response from Ancanna, she rejoined the Stormcasts.

'This is foolish,' Kell said.

Inwardly, Ancanna agreed. It was a story he had heard long before, though whether it worked or not was a detail he had forgotten. Regardless, he was committed. 'It only needs to work from a distance. If either force changes their path towards us, it will be enough.'

'Do you think they will give up their chase for another foe?' Castus asked.

‘It depends on how they perceive the foe,’ Ancanna said. ‘They are reckless and bloodthirsty, overconfident of their victory. Sigmar knows this place has deceived us aplenty; the whole realm is rife with it. It’s time we offered some deception of our own.’

‘And what about their winged daemons?’ Castus pressed. ‘From their high vantage, they will uncover us.’

Ancanna smiled and placed his hand on a Liberator’s shoulder. ‘Firus still has his bow from when he left the disbanded Judicator units and raised a shield. I hope his aim remains as steady.’

The Judicator-turned-Liberator gazed down at the shockbolt bow in his hands. ‘Steady as the Gates of Azyr, Liberator Prime,’ he said.

‘They’re closing,’ Kell said.

‘Positions,’ Ancanna commanded, hefting a banner that depicted a partially eclipsed sun over a waving field of corn. ‘Castus, Bortemin, pass along the marked line at thirty-second intervals. Keep your banners steady. I will make the first pass.’

He didn’t need to order Kell to keep her eyes sharp. Her attention was already everywhere.

‘I assume there’s a purpose to this, Prime,’ Bortemin said as Ancanna passed him after finishing his first walk along the line.

‘Illusion,’ Ancanna said. ‘We need to give the impression our numbers are greater than they are. If the enemy sees a series of banners, and only the banners, they’ll assume regiments are carrying them rather than individuals. Castus has almost finished his pass--you should move.’

Three Stormcasts marched with banners while the last watched the skies, fingers on his bow. They performed two passes each before Ancanna turned to Kell. ‘Anything?’

She shook her head. ‘No. They are close. Your friends are fighting the flying creatures. The others are not far behind.’

Ancanna growled to himself and cast around for options. His gaze rested upon a brass bugle in the cold, dead hands of a human fighter. Planting his banner in the ground, he scooped up the bloodstained instrument and filled his lungs. The note blasted and bounced off valley walls. Tall grassy mounds that dotted the valley like goosebumps echoed and amplified the sound as though a dozen other bugles answered the call.

‘Fortunate,’ Castus remarked, his voice heavy with disbelief.

‘Ulglu,’ Ancanna responded with a shrug.

Whether coincidence or good fortune, Ancanna wasn’t about to question it. Anything that helped his cause, that caught the Chaos warband’s attention and convinced them, even momentarily, of a greater threat, he welcomed.

He let out another three powerful notes and made another pass with his banner, angled away to obfuscate the banner’s details in case his enemy noticed the repetition. Just before his banner top dropped back below the ridge line, Castus’ peeked above and started his pass.

‘They’re coming!’ Kell called. She scrambled from her crouch. ‘They are coming!’

Chapter 18

The Duplicity of Ulglu

'Ready, Stormcasts,' Ancanna ordered and discarded his banner in favour of hammer and shield while the others planted their banners. He looked to Kell. 'All of them?'

'Only the flying ones.'

'Scouts,' Ancanna said. He turned his attention back to Castus and Bortemin. 'Keep marching. Draw them in.'

Firus needed no order to take sight along his bow. They would come quickly.

The first covered the ground even faster than expected. The bat-winged fury banked overhead, shrieking down at them before turning back the way it came.

Energy crackled along Firus' bow, building along the string and his arrow while he waited. He held, still, calm, focused. As the fury dipped below the horizon, Firus loosed.

Ancanna's heart sank. Both storm-infused arrow and daemon vanished from sight. He waited. It was all he could do. A second shriek sounded, pained and piercing. Firus loosed again. His arrow streaked blue and angry into the gloomy sky and ripped through the wing of a second fury the instant it crossed the horizon. The daemon flapped and flailed, its torn wing no longer able to give stable flight. Its plummet ended in a thud to the ground and roll down the hill not far from the Stormcasts who readied weapons.

The creature hissed and snarled as it scrambled to its clawed feet. Though it hobbled and its damaged wing twitched, it advanced like a rabid animal, intent on tearing the Stormcast Eternals apart with its claws. Ancanna took the first swipe on his shield while his allies closed on him. More swipes landed in a mad frenzy, scratching the thick sigmarite bulwark. Ancanna responded with a jab from the top of his hammer. It took the creature in the eyes, disorientating it long enough for Castus to bring down his massive hammer and pulverise it. Ancanna dipped his head behind his shield as daemonic viscera sprayed.

Ancanna let out another blast from the bugle while Kell crept atop the rise. She kept to a bank of loosened dirt beside the grass where her drab clothing kept her hidden.

'They've broken off the attack,' she hissed. Fear tinged her voice and she fidgeted, uneasy at holding her ground while danger approached. Having survived in lands under the stranglehold of Chaos through cunning, by running and hiding, her discomfort was clear.

'And the Stormcasts?' Ancanna asked.

'I can't see them.'

Still caught up in their bloodthirsty stupor, many daemons and cultists filed into the gorge where the pursued Stormcasts had looked to make their stand. The majority of the force, however, diverted their course towards Ancanna and his few. Orders barked from the armoured servants of Chaos brought some organisation to their hunting pack, as much as could ever be gained from zealous cultists and frenzied daemons. Furies circled overhead, though a few flew arrow-straight back towards the Aurora Citadel.

'I hope you have a plan for what to do now we've got their attention,' Castus said.

Ancanna just hoped they had done enough for the other Stormcasts to escape. He let forth a series of short blasts through his bugle, similar to those the Knight Heraldor used to signal a defensive command to the Stormcasts.

Even through Castus' expressionless face plate, Ancanna knew his unspoken question: *we're all here. Who are you signalling?*

'Plant your banners a little higher,' Ancanna said while scooping up and ramming his own banner pole into the soft ground.

At his direction, the Stormcasts placed the other banners in better view of the ridge, still keeping themselves hidden from their enemy's view. With all three planted, he led them them down the hill and into the twisting valley between the grassy mounds.

Castus nodded towards a wider mound ahead of them. 'An ideal ambush spot, Prime. If we wait behind there, the thinning valley will funnel them for us. We'd only have to fight two or three at a time.'

'True,' Ancanna said but he maintained his rapid pace through the mounds. 'But we're not ambushing. Not yet, at least.'

'Prime?' Firus asked. 'This is as good a place as we're going to find. Little else could stack the odds in our favour.'

Ancanna nodded yet continued. 'Again, all true, Firus. But we're not fighting if I can help it.'

They all missed a step, all but Kell whose shoulders loosened.

'It's our purpose,' Castus said.

'Our purpose is to free the mortal realms,' Ancanna countered. 'There are many ways we can do that, and we can do it better as a united Strike Chamber than in scattered groups, hunted down by more powerful foes. Today, our goal is to deliver our brother warriors from their battle and bring them back into our fold. Tomorrow, we'll hit back at the daemons and traitors, and reduce their fortress to rubble, but we'll hit harder when we have more hammers.'

Castus bowed his head. He grumbled but Ancanna could relate as the same shadow draped over him. Days ago, the Knights of the Aurora were the power in the region, despite it being under the stranglehold of Chaos. They had smashed every warband that opposed them and cut a bloody trail from the realm gate. To see them scattered and struggling, reduced to a pale reflection of their former strength and with wounded pride, wrenched Ancanna's heart. Humbleness was not something the Stormcast Eternals had experienced since their reforging.

'Any sight of those flyers, Kell?' Ancanna asked.

She looked back at him, troubled, but she scabbled up to higher ground for a better view of their pursuers. 'They're circling above the main force.'

'Still heading towards the banners?'

'Yes. Moving a lot faster than we are.'

'Main force?' Firus asked. He also scoured the skies.

Kell dipped her head and half slid, half ran back down the slope in front of the Stormcasts. ‘Some of them followed your friends, remember? Some went back to the...’

The sky darkened as two moons blocked the sun and clouds blackened. Though the Knights of the Aurora usually felt an affinity with storms, this made their skin crawl. It felt slick with the defilement of Chaos. A piercing shriek shot through the valley and a great ribbon of green and blue light snaked across the sky. They all knew its source.

‘Oh no,’ Kell breathed.

Not a nightly event then, Ancanna noted, but something called upon by their sorcerer.

‘They’re onto us,’ Castus said.

‘Time to pick up the pace.’ Ancanna surveyed their route but the contours of the grassy mounds through the winding valley soon obstructed his view.

Just as he hoped he had guessed his beleaguered comrades’ path of retreat correctly, the sounds of battle wound their way through the terrain. The boom of a lightning hammer blasting a daemon into smoking ruin caused a rumble through the ground and gave haste to Ancanna’s steps. The thrill of battle took hold and lent strength to his weary muscles and those of his handful of survivors. Diminutive in comparison to the armoured bulk around her, Kell manoeuvred herself to the back and let the Stormcast Eternals crash in first.

Rounding a wide mound, Ancanna sighted sigmarite armour and took in the dire position of his brothers. The ground smoldered from the attacks of fiery daemons and a wall of fire blocked their only retreat. Frenzied cultists jabbed and swung their kopeshes and sickles on the Stormcasts’ other side while more cultists, chanting and gesticulating, goaded blue and green daemons to attack the front. The Stormcasts were but an island of silver amidst overwhelming numbers. And this was just a fraction of the Chaos warband that hounded them.

‘We need to make this fast,’ Ancanna said to his charging few.

To stand any chance of uniting with the other Stormcasts and leaving before the rest of the warband caught them, it needed to get bloody. Fortunately, the Knights of the Aurora specialised in lightning war. The instant he rounded that mound, he had already chosen his first target: the clamour of cultists. He would drive them back into the daemons’ fires. After a quick command to Kell to remain behind his shield, he raised his hammer aloft. ‘For Sigmar! For the Knights of the Aurora!’

Bortemin brought his shield alongside Ancanna’s right while Firus, too exposed with a bow, locked his own shield to Ancanna’s left. The three barrelled into the nearest cultists, shattering bones with their shields and cracking skulls with their hammers. A peal of thunder, followed by a swathe of broken cultists falling into their allies signalled Castus’ entrance to the battle.

Their impact hit the cultists like cavalry and rolled over them into the first block of daemons that clamoured between themselves to reach their prey. At the sight of aid unlooked for, the defending Stormcasts let a second wind empower their limbs as adrenaline washed the fatigue from them.

‘Push them, Stormcasts!’ Ancanna cried as he slammed his hammer down through a fire-flinging horror and jabbed it into a cultist, making a scorched, bloody ruin of his face. ‘Push them!

Whatever the dark aurora above signified, it could not be good, so Ancanna wanted this done quickly. Strike and escape. At his order, the beset Liberators joined his shield wall. They switched from their usual defensive style to using their shields more like a second weapon, pushing and

jabbing. It was risky but they had momentum and needed to keep it. If they got bogged down in a protracted fight, the Chaos reinforcements would be on them and there would be no escape, so Ancanna accepted the risk. Even in the heat of battle, however, the hint of doubt lingered in his mind, for he had denounced Lord Castellant Kimmani's recklessness not long before. He assured himself that his circumstances were different, yet his doubt remained.

As Ancanna slammed the rim of his shield into a cultist's neck, he glimpsed dark specks emerging from the aurora, still distant but growing larger. The urge to push harder and further, to break from the Liberators and wreak his destruction, rose in him but he suppressed it. His place was in the shield wall, his effectiveness heightened by his fighting unit. But it did not mean he could not take his unit with him.

'Crush them!' the Liberator Prime yelled and the Stormcasts surged to his command, attacking as one.

Overwhelmed by the assault, the daemons and cultists buckled. The cultists attempted to rout but the Stormcasts gave no quarter. It may have been only a fraction of the main Chaos force, but every one met their end at the hands of the Stormcasts and their god-forged weapons.

When the last hammer fell, Ancanna breathed.

One of the Retributors approached him and clasped his arm. Each used the other for stability. 'I've never been so glad to see your shield, Liberator Prime.'

'We're not done here, knight,' Ancanna responded, relieved that so many had survived. Only one Stormcast had fallen since their forces reunited, a Liberator called Ashkanaius. Ancanna knew him well and would miss his shield.

'There's more,' the Retributor pressed, leaning closer. 'Something drew off the bulk of our pursuit. We only saw banners, but dozens upon dozens of them.'

Ancanna couldn't help but smile. 'I don't think you should worry about those.'

Whether the rumours of Ulglu itself rewarding deception were true, Ancanna didn't care. Their plan had worked enough to buy the time they needed. It also left them exposed. While the Chaos warband had been drawn away by the banners, they remained a worry as Ancanna's deception could not have deterred them long. Again, he felt the sting of having no Prosecutors to scout, a luxury which the Knights of the Aurora had come to rely on and what made them such an effective Stormhost. He needed an escape, but first, he needed to know where to escape to and from where the enemy approached.

He dropped his grip on the Retributor as he realised someone was missing.

'Kell!' he yelled, casting about the survivors, but saw only Stormcasts and corpses, usually a cause for celebration. Instead, fear and guilt welled in him. After their charge, he had been so focused on pushing to win the battle quickly. In the block, parry and hammerfall, his charge had slipped his mind.

He berated himself for taking his eyes from her. That was the problem with leadership--it split his focus, distracted him from his duty as a defender. Even, prior to his reforging, when leading refugees away from invaders, he had never sought command. First he saved a few people, simply because he was there and he could. But then more sought his protection. He never intended to lead so many, to organise their retreats, ambushes and defences. Even on the glittering steps of Azyr, when mighty Sigmar himself bestowed a position of command upon him, he refused and took up the shield of a

Liberator. It was the one thing he kept from the Knights of the Aurora, the one event that never entered his Remembering.

And this was why. Another needed his protection and he was too focused on the immediate picture to notice such an important detail.

‘Kell!’ he called again before forcing himself to check the corpse-strewn ground. ‘Kell?’

She called back to him from higher ground. His eyes had passed over her against the patch of heather in which she crouched.

‘Hush,’ she said and pointed beyond the hill. She skidded down the hill muddied by sigmarite boots and daemons’ blood to rejoin them. Blood also soaked into her clothes and her axe had gained a couple more notches. ‘Enemies have found us.’

Ancanna should have expected it. His diversion already gave him longer than expected, but the lightning strike of Sigmar reclaiming a warrior in the skirmish would have shone as a beacon to all eyes.

The chanting of cultists and screams of rage reached them. They were much closer, and the winged silhouettes against the aurora grew in size.

The other Stormcasts heard and began to dig in but Ancanna shook his head.

‘We can’t stay.’ He looked once more to Kell who looked as gaunt and exhausted as every Stormcast felt. And she did not have their enhanced constitution to help combat the fatigue. She was, however, their best chance to evade the warband and, though it wore further at his pride, Ancanna knew it. ‘Kell of the Third Moon Collective, I must impress upon you to find us another escape.’

‘You may find, warrior, that you need to escape less when you don’t go looking for fights.’

A corner of her mouth twitched. Whether she was attempting a joke or just an effect of the fatigue, Ancanna couldn’t tell. Though humour was not on his mind, he had to respect her endurance and the help she had given them already.

‘I fear that is not in our nature,’ Ancanna said.

‘That’s right, Prime,’ Argus, one of the Retributors they had linked up with, said as he shoved through the regrouping Stormcasts. He stopped between Ancanna and Kell, glancing down at the nomad before confronting the Liberator Prime. ‘Why then do you order our retreat?’

‘You were retreating before we found you, Retributor.’

‘And now we have regrouped. You would have the pride of Sigmar, the Knights of the Aurora, turn tail and hide like beaten dogs? I will not.’

‘The enemy comes,’ Kell began but the Retributor crowded her out.

‘Quiet! This is Stormcast business. I say let the enemy come. Let them see that we are not so easily beaten.’

Ancanna waited while he said his piece. The imperative to move gnawed at him but the warrior chamber was scattered and beaten enough already. He needed his few to be united. He needed them to be alive. He railed at the idea of avoiding combat, like all Stormcasts, but the Knights of the

Aurora had an uncomfortable truth to face. They could not win this fight, not now, not weakened and scattered.

‘We are beaten, Argus,’ Ancanna said. ‘We are scattered and weak, and so few, even Stormcast Eternals, cannot prevail against our hunters. Not openly.’

‘Defeatist talk. Lord Castellant Kimmani would not have spoken that way. He led with strength. Had you not intervened, the people of Valescroft would be behind us already.’

‘Lord Castellant Kimmani thought us invincible and led us to ruin. Do not make the same mistake.’ Ancanna looped his hammer into his belt and attached his shield to his back. He felt the worst kind of traitor for speaking that way about his commander but his repeated warnings had gone unheeded. ‘We have tarried far too long. Do not misunderstand me, Retributor. I mean to punish these daemon worshippers. We shall topple their seat of power and grind every one into the ground, but for that we need more than our paltry dozen. We find every Stormcast who escaped the battle and bring them back to us. Once we have the strength, we strike, but first we need to survive and following our ally here is our best chance of that.’

Ancanna gave the Retributor no chance to respond. Instead he turned back to Kell. ‘Can you get us out.’

She needed no further prompting before ducking under a Retributor’s lightning hammer and slipping between a couple of Liberators. ‘You are slow and you talk too much. We should have left long before. We should not be here at all. I will try to get you out but you will not like it.’ She glanced back to the Shadasmire and addressed Ancanna with a troubled look. ‘But don’t count on it being any safer than here.’

Chapter 19

Forged for War

Rough bark abraded her welts, splinters jabbed at her back, and though twenty feet above the ground, Kell had slept in worse positions. Sleep was, perhaps, a grand term for the snatches of rest she had managed since aiding these storm warriors, as sleep would mean death for all of them. The citadel masters still searched for them and the nearest group gave her the most concern. Something terrible moved with it, something loud and angry that turned her stomach.

Even the days-long, circuitous route through woodland and swamp, behind Valescroft and back into the trees, the enemy still pursued. She had done her best, but the flying creatures had sharp senses and she couldn't avoid them all. Never in her memory had so many left the citadel, so many creatures poured from the aurora. Never had she known so many auroras. Orinstar would know. He would have seen this before but she would not take the storm warriors to him.

Kell cracked an eye open and winced at the vulnerability of her charges, strong and armoured though they were. They had used every bolt holes that she dared in this portion of the Shadasmire and none looked well hidden to her eyes. The fallen leaves and branches that covered the one they called Firus looked too disturbed and unnatural, the digout housing a shield bearer was too bloated and the dirt covering it too loose, and the mangrove-like swamp that covered Ancanna kept rippling with his endless fidgeting. They were not meant for hiding and too weak to fight. Yet getting them to admit the latter and allow her to hide them while pursuit passed almost betrayed their position and brought the enemy upon them.

Turncoats, whispered the breeze. Reckless and arrogant and dangerous.

She glanced around but caught no source, no movement. The stray thoughts rang with some truth--she would survive more easily without them but that was not the way of the Third Moon Collective. Blaming the lack of sleep and ignoring another whisper, she focused on the sound of the warband hunting them. The crack of wood and rustle of leaves which now accompanied their chants and snarls alarmed her. Their search had become systematic as it neared. She brought herself to full alertness. Their hunters had breached Gloombound Thicket.

With slow, deliberate motions, ever watching her surroundings, Kell spidered down the helmsgrove tree. She approached Ancanna first as he would make the most disturbance rising from the water. Her series of triple-taps into the water with a twig signalled Ancanna that he should move. Covered in grime and silt, the storm warrior slipped out of the water and up the muddy bank. His bulk caused him to slide on the mud and split half a dozen roots which made Kell grimace but the process was started, and whether their hunters heard them or not, they had to rouse the others.

Argus emerged from his hiding place last. He tore the moss and creeper from his armour, worn dull with dirt. 'I cannot abide this, Prime.'

'I'm inclined to agree,' Ancanna responded. He surveyed the swamp and vegetation around them. 'It's time we did some hunting of our own.'

Kell had noticed him watching her during their flight, commenting on how she evaded pursuit, her ever-present guard and alertness as though she could have survived without them. Without constant vigilance she'd have died long ago in this Chaos-dominated place. While she thought that Ancanna had no intention to make a habit of hiding and evading battle, he could at least learn something from her. He, more than the others, seemed at least open to doing so.

‘What do you have in mind?’ Castus asked, eagerly wielding his hammer. While by no means fresh, his gait had improved as his body repaired in those few combat-free days.

He surveyed their hiding places, pacing as he formulated a plan. Amusement or eagerness then touched his voice. ‘Ambush.’

‘Hush!’ Kell hissed.

The Stormcast Eternals made so much noise. Their breathing and scrape of their armour already sufficed to make every animal flee this patch of woodland. The citadel’s inhabitants often followed a strong, disciplined leader and it took only his ears to find them.

Ancanna lowered his voice to a whisper but even that sounded booming through the echo of his helm. ‘What follows us? How many? What composition?’

Kell frowned at him. After their beatings, losing so many of their community, she scarcely believed they intended to fight again so soon. But then, perhaps they could not survive the way she did. Perhaps these silver warriors survived through their warlike nature. She didn’t like it. The thought unsettled her, but they felt better than the citadel’s inhabitants, and perhaps they did intend to help as they claimed. She reserved judgement.

Danger, spoke the wind. They will expose the collective. All will die.

She snapped her attention to the twisting muddle of roots to her right. None of the warriors made any sign of hearing but they were not as in tune with the woods as she. A whisper of movement caught her eye, nothing solid, just a flash in her periphery. She shook the thoughts away. The Shadasmire would do this to you, they often said in the community. It would draw you in, entrance you with wisps and smoke, before killing you.

‘Kell?’ Ancanna moved closer, touching her shoulder and looking toward the roots where she had been staring. ‘Are you well?’

She pulled her arm away and stared into the dark eyeholes in his helm. *What are you?* she wondered. They smelled of summer storms and were as warlike as any she had seen, even living in the shadow of the Aurora Citadel. A bestial roar followed by tearing and the cracking wail of a large tree falling returned her senses. Her guard was slipping and her community needed her.

‘I am not your scout, warrior of storms.’ She backed further away. ‘I will help you live only. I will not help you die. If we leave now, we can lose them.’

Ancanna shook his head. ‘I told you that was not in our nature.’

She regarded him warily, hesitating at another step back.

‘One day there will be nowhere to run,’ Ancanna started, softening his voice, but Firus interrupted him.

‘Cultists. Eight leading some kind of daemon. It’s large.’ An ear-splitting shriek rose nearby. ‘Very large.’

‘Leader?’ Ancanna asked.

Firus shrugged. ‘I caught a glimpse of some armour. One of the elites we fought at the citadel, perhaps.’ He took up his bow. ‘Are we fighting or moving?’

‘Fighting,’ Ancanna said. He didn’t need to think about it. Hiding did not agree with him and his hammer arm itched. ‘You once asked to fight with us, Kell, and we rejected you. Now we invite you. You are a skilled woodsman; have you a bow or sling?’

Kell shook her head. ‘I am a forager not a hunter.’

‘You’re more of a warrior than you think,’ Ancanna said. But I won’t force you to fight with us. Go to your community with our thanks, Kell of the Third Moon Collective. Sigmar has work for us here. We shall meet again.’

The Stormcast Eternal clashed his fist to his chest in an odd gesture. Kell just nodded in response before ghosting away into the swampy woodland. It felt liberating to move alone, quickly, and without diverting her route for heavy, armoured warriors to deal with.

They had let her go when she requested, she reflected as she sprang over knotted roots and around a pool of black marsh water. Perhaps they did mean better than the citadel’s masters. It was her duty to the Third Moon Collective to find out. She skirted around more water and scurried into a tree with thick foliage, careful to avoid a glassbeak’s empty nest, and watched the silver-armoured warriors set their trap.

Something tugged at her.

She owed them nothing. They had helped her and she had repaid it a dozen times. Still, looking back, these warriors were not made for hiding. She picked every one of them out in little more than a flash of a glance.

Untrustworthy, hushed the wind.

With a grimace, Kell pressed her middle finger to her thumb with her left hand in a nomadic gesture of safety while pressing her right palm against the trunk of her perch and willing the Stormcasts to remain hidden long enough.

Chapter 20

The Shadeshire

Mists coalesced on the water and around its banks.

Adrenaline raced through Ancanna's limbs as the hunting party neared. A chance to hit back presented itself, and he would punish them. It all rested on timing. Castus worried him the most. He argued against his position lying in the swamp water, using a hollow reed to breathe, but if he could contain his choler long enough, that simmering rage would hit the enemy like a thunderbolt.

His grip tightened when the first came into view, a cultist wrestling with a chain. Blood, both dry and slick, covered his hands and forearms where the rusted chain had torn his flesh though he appeared not to notice. His wild eyes showed no discomfort and his fell chanting in worship to his god only rang louder when he hauled back on the chain.

Then a chill ran through his armour. It started in his sabatons and crept up his legs. Not daring to move, Ancanna peered down at the mist, rising not from a particular source but forming just above the water line and expanding fast. The nature of these mists troubled him. Nothing good had ever come from them, its obfuscation ever robbing the Knights of the Aurora of their tactical strengths since entering the realm. Many of the Strike Chamber believed them a device of the enemy and Ancanna almost let the fear creep inside with the mist. He was too committed to abandon now. To move at this point, with the enemy so close that he felt the crawling sensation of nearby daemons across his flesh, meant death. His mind raced through his options: strike now and meet the enemy head on, or keep to the plan and wait. Nothing else occurred.

The timing was too convenient for it to be a natural phenomenon. The enemy were hunting them. They knew the Stormcasts were here.

Ancanna strengthened his grip around his hammer and tensed to attack. Only a glance across the swamp stayed his hand. Mist had swallowed the other Knights of the Aurora. Indecision gripped him. This was why he avoided leadership. The very souls of his brother warriors relied on him. He never wanted that responsibility.

Blinking away the thoughts and berating himself for letting the dread sneak through his mental defences, Ancanna returned his attention to the situation. He adjusted his grip on his hammer. It gave him strength. His hammer was control, his way to affect the world around him. Their pursuers crashed through more foliage, almost on top of them. Though he did not trust the mists, they lacked the distinctive feel of tainted magic, or any magic for that matter. His warriors remained. He trusted in his plan, into what he saw, not the stray fears of pre-battle anticipation. Wait.

A large warrior in heavy, blue-tinted plate stalked into the clearing first, pausing while he surveyed the creepers. Ancanna's heart stopped when the leader's gaze hesitated over him, and again when he edged towards ripples in the stinking, black swamp water. Ancanna needed them in further. The Chaos leader raised a spiked gauntlet and signalled halt but the frenzied cultists were slow to respond. Some hauled at their ropes and chains. The great beast, however, barrelled through the trees like some mighty juggernaut, splintering three at their trunks. Bortemin hid somewhere nearby and Ancanna hoped both that he escaped the falling timber and that he maintained his discipline and waited to strike.

He didn't get the choice. The Liberator was thrown from his hiding place and into the swamp. As his sigmarite plate sloshed a wave of fetid water, Firus loosed his bow from across the clearing.

Energy crackled around the projectile, reflecting blue over the swamp water before sizzling through the bare abdomen of a cultist. Firus loosed another as the first hit its mark and downed a second. It took all Ancanna's will to remain hidden and let their strategy play out, moreso when the armour-clad enemy ordered the attack on Firus' position. Castus would hold, Ancanna knew it, as for all his wrath and pride, the Stormcast had a Retributor's discipline.

Cultists hauled at chains and ropes to control the roaring creature, a thing terrible and deformed even by the standards of daemons. Further jabs from a spear-wielding cultist kept it moving forwards, and kept it angry.

#

Infugurge changed himself, stretching his body from the slug-like form he used to reach the higher branches into a snake, his body hues drab to meld into the bark and foliage. The human perched on a thicker branch below him, watching the invaders fight.

'They know only murder,' he whispered. 'The citadel masters, they know where you hide. They have always known, and they let you live. The storm warriors will bring you death.'

He remained still when the woman shot a searching look his way. When her attention wavered back to the fight, he slithered away.

#

As a third arrow yielded a third kill, a shaking, electrified servant of Chaos, the beast tore free from its chains. The first to die was the spear-wielder. A turn of the daemon's massive bulk sent a tusk-like protrusion through his flesh. The eight-pointed star at the tip of his spear splashed into the swamp and the water fizzed.

'Control it!' the Chaos warrior growled, pointing his blade at the few remaining cultists who clung to their chains while the creature flailed them around.

A scream carried through the clearing from a hooded man whose hands were cut bloody when a snap of his chain flung him neck-first into a tree. With a further growl, the Chaos warrior seized a loose chain in his gauntlet and dug his feet into the ground. He managed to pull the beast's head down.

Until Ancanna's hammer crushed his cuirass.

The leader had strayed close enough for the Liberator Prime to strike. With the remaining cultists fending off theemonic spawn's indiscriminate rampage, the other Knights of the Aurora sprang from their positions and set about the creature with hammer and bow. With disciplined timing, and so many others about the creature, the Stormcasts could weave between its attacks to land blows of their own.

The Chaos warrior staggered, wheezing and clutching at the dented metal.

'Worm!' he growled. 'Arrogant wretch! You fight--'

Ancanna's uppercut slammed into the warrior's chin where sigmarite hammerhead warped the metal and turned jaw bone to powder. 'I didn't ask your name.'

The fizzing in the swamp water intensified and became a stinking, boiling cauldron that tossed green water, rotten twigs and moss onto the ground and into the fight.

A rapid shield bash to the face and heavy overhand blow from Ancanna's hammer finished the Chaos warrior. With shield raised and peering over the rim, Ancanna quickly surveyed the clearing. A dozen arrows protruded from the daemonspawn and while its body morphed around some hammer strikes, others had connected with something solid and obliterated it. Yet the beast still thrashed and lashed out. Castus took a barbed tentacle across his chest which glanced off the sigmarite while another cultist fell to a spiked growth on one of the beast's many limbs.

As the Chaos warrior fell, the swamp erupted. The violent call of a braying stag, amplified many times over, followed the torrent of displaced water. Something grabbed Ancanna and tossed him aside. The Liberator Prime slammed into a helmshade tree and turned the thick, lower branches to splinters as he crashed through them. A great beast to rival the size of the daemonspawn emerged from the swamp in a braying cacophony of wild fury. Its hulking limbs covered in moss and creeper dripped long-stagnant water. Algae slapped across a cultist's face, blinding the fanatic. The creature, still difficult to identify in its dripping mass of weeds and creepers, seized the blinded human and crushed it between oversized hand and the knee of a much larger version of a stag's leg.

'An ally?' Firus asked, backing away from the creature to Ancanna's position.

Ancanna winced at the pain in his back. 'Doesn't feel very friendly. Focus on the daemon.' He winced again. 'And watch for any more surprises.'

The Judicator responded by letting fly a charged arrow that exploded in a crackle of sparks against the daemonspawn. Electricity shot along one of the chains that previously restrained it and caused a jagged burn along the creature's flank.

A pummelling fist from the swamp creature grabbed the daemonspawn's attention and earned it a lash from its barbed tentacles. Water splashed far into the air as the two giants fought and their cries of battle hammered at Ancanna's ears, those feral calls of nature's wrath and condensed evil. Tossed so far from the cultists, Ancanna's vantage gave him a view of the fight. The swamp dweller was a behemoth of muscle. It stood on stag's legs, its flesh the colour of rotting bark. Small creatures leapt from the tangle of creeper that covered it and bored into the hide of the daemonspawn. Its head looked like knotted wood, gnarled and old and angry, shifting its expression through layers upon layers of bark which gave it features that might resemble a face.

With so few cultists remaining, a handful of Liberators took the rest of the spawn's attention, displacing its wrath over their shields while Firus and the Reitibutors did the real damage.

Amidst the daemonic roars, the fury of the swampland, and the thunder of sigmarite weaponry, Ancanna discerned the sound of armoured boots approaching at haste. He turned to face the new threat.

And lowered his weapon.

Stormcast Eternals, Knights of the Aurora, hurried to the fight. Two Prosecutors with their wings furled headed their charge, hurling magical hammers at the daemonspawn before summoning more from the electrical energy around them. A few peeled off and set to lifting a fallen tree before dragging out Bortemin, dazed but angry.

Under such weight of attack, the Chaos spawn shrank into itself while hammers and arrows pummelled and bled it. Firus changed target to the creature from the swamp until Ancanna pushed his bow aside.

'Look,' Ancanna said, gesturing to the giant. It kept to its swamp. Territorial.

Castus had other ideas, however. He surged forwards, too late to hear Ancanna's warning, and the creature swatted him aside. The Retributor skidded back along the ground, dazed and with a fist-shaped dent that covered most of his breastplate. Upon seeing the Retributor slammed down, the Liberators locked shields and advanced on the beast while Retributors and Prosecutors made for its flanks.

'Fall back!' Ancanna yelled, tired of giving the order. But then, he berated himself, it was the only order he was used to giving. Castus was not going to like falling back, not after what that thing did to him. It would bruise the Retributor's pride. But bruised pride beat the death of more Stormcast Eternals in an already diminished Strike Chamber.

At the slow, tactical retreat of the Stormcasts, the beast in the swamp ceased its attacks but did not drop its guard. For the first time, Ancanna noticed the glow of its eyes, a deep green. He also noticed it from various trees around him. Castus scrabbled to his feet and either failing to hear Ancanna's order or ignoring it, made another strike for the beast. As quickly as he moved, the boughs of trees rattled to life. Creatures of wood and vines screamed out and fell upon Castus, bludgeoning him with branch-like limbs and making to impale him on other thorn-like ones.

Ancanna leapt from his position. The Liberators of his front line smashed the creatures apart. In showers of splinters, the glow left their eyes. A cry of rage bellowed from the swamp creature while Ancanna dragged his downed Retributor away.

'I ordered you to fall back,' he hissed.

Castus had no response beyond a slur of unintelligible syllables. He remained senseless for a few moments until he nodded to Ancanna and took control of his own actions.

When the Knights of the Aurora had retreated far enough, the swamp creature barked a warning at them. Ancanna needed no common language to know its meaning: return here and die. He had no intention of doing so and ordered his warriors deeper into the Shadasmire, away from the battleground.

With the battle won and a safe distance from the denizens of the woodland gained, Ancanna approached one of the newcomers. His shield and hammer marked him as a Liberator but not one under Ancanna's command. 'You missed the fight.'

The Liberator shook his head, a snort of mirth escaping his helm. 'We have seen fights enough these past days.' He glanced around. 'We are, what, two dozen? Hardly the force we were.'

Ancanna surveyed his reinforcements and shrugged. With the immediate danger vanquished and the strength of arms he could call upon greatly increased, a little of the pangs of defeat at the citadel abated. 'Yesterday we were four.'

Chapter 21

Catacombs

Dreadguard Ulgoloth stumbled through the gatehouse and courtyard, and into the shifting corridors of the citadel. He crashed against a wall, the scrape of his armour lacerating a mutated eye that was peering from the stone, bursting it in a gooey mess.

‘Geltz!’ he screamed, holding the sides of his head in his hands. *Protector! Lambent Protector!*

He rebounded off the wall and tripped over his feet.

The rage of the Dreadguard and stoic fortitude of the Lambent Protector waged a battle in his mind, a battle that tore into his psyche as artillery and the stomp of boots tears up a field of battle. It wasn’t the blood that took him, but the cutting of threads, the power of influence, of schemes and dreams interrupted by his hand. It made him the master of fate, not others.

‘No,’ he panted, arresting his fall and pushing up onto his hands and knees. His heart thundered like it would shake his ribcage apart and his vision misted through watering eyes. In his mind’s eye he saw only the adolescent he killed just to spite the daemon spirit of the citadel. ‘Seven houses...of noble birth...’ he forced. ‘Three cities.’

The mantra was so ingrained, it gave him a rock to latch on to. Panic surged through him at the thought of just how far down the mental abyss he had fallen. It scared him. No. It *terrified* him.

But he was not beyond climbing out. He couldn’t be. His generations-long duty demanded it of him. He drew on the strength of the man he had been. The man he still was, he told himself.

‘Twelve towns,’ he continued, slowing his breathing.

The rage, the foggy mind, and the malice receded and control shifted back to his own mind.

They are both your own mind, a voice whispered in his head, a cruel, barbed voice, dripping with malicious glee. *Dreadguard*.

He shook it away.

‘...is...a persona. A mask,’ he forced through gritted teeth and a throat that tried to shut the words off. The sheer weight of belief he threw behind them crumbled in the stark admission of the lie it was.

My name is Geltz! Lambent Protector Geltz Valewarden!

And the world snapped into focus.

A means to an end. Any means necessary. That was the truth of the Dreadguard, or, at least, the original intention. But those warriors of silver, Stormcast Eternals, the sorcerer had called them, they were something else. In a life of defending a kingdom, of crushing daemon and blackguard alike, followed by many lifetimes reaping a mortal harvest, none had equalled the prowess of the Stormcast Eternals. Severing their threads flooded him with such a feeling of power that it smashed his resolve and swept him in its torrent. And the halberd-wielder stood out even among those.

As his sensibilities returned, so did a well of shame open inside his gut. The Dreadguard won the combat but the Lambent Protector knew who won the fight. It was not the warrior now standing in the hallway of the Aurora Citadel. And the cost hit him on many levels.

He felt the Boon writhing inside him, a wrongness like acid slowly eating him from the inside out. For now it worked only to heal his wounds and keep him alive. Once that was done, Geltz could only guess what it might do to him.

But perhaps it was worth it. He considered the ritual, the blazing aurora and the Winds of Change. The sorcerer had promised answers. Perhaps, given Geltz's threat and gaining the upper hand, just perhaps this time Axanthral had provided.

While force of will regained control for Geltz, a reminder of his duty, his lifebound purpose, brought him back to himself. It sharpened his focus and empowered his limbs. Though it felt vile, the Boon ensured his wound did not slow him, and he made to the catacombs, reciting his mantra in his mind again from the start.

Seven houses of noble birth...

He remained one step ahead where the floors moved and flagstones changed to swirling mist in the ever-changing structure, scowling through his helm at the growths in the wall where eyes followed his passage and mouths whispered vile tortures. Where flagstones did not disappear, they bubbled, their colours swirled, or their consistency became sludgy at random. An idle mind might be drawn in to search for patterns in their changing, but the Aurora Citadel would soon devour such a mind.

Fully restored and under his own control once more, the mind of Geltz was far from idle, however, as he recited under his breath. His duty, his reminder, and his folly. Befouled tapestries along the stone walls depicted a great castle standing sentinel over a lush valley. They showed a timeline of prosperity until they changed before his eyes. Clouds became darker. The wheat depicted in the fields was warped and deformed though it grew as high and abundantly as ever. Trudging further down the corridor, the decor depicted battles, dozens of armies thrown back from the castle's high walls, finished by cavalry charges from armoured knights flying colourful banners from their lances, the same warrior always leading the charge.

The Lambent Protector paused before a portrait, its frame's gilt chipped and cracked. He stared into the maroon eyes of the knight shown there, and bowed his head upon reading the brass plate beneath the picture. *Sword of the Citadel, Lambent Protector, Geltz Valewarden.* The eyes stared back, full of sorcery and betrayal. They blinked into crude eight-pointed stars crying tears of blood in thin streaks down the painted face. Another blink and they stared back into him, bereft of tears but full of accusation.

Under that gaze, his finger worked around his wound. It had taken a strange shape, that of the eye at the hilt of the dirk he had plunged into himself. He hadn't realised he was touching it. The hateful relic goaded him to let go, unleash its power, cherish its rewards. It spoke not in whispers of words, but directly to his feelings and urges.

Sneering at the portrait he slammed the thoughts away and concentrated on the faces depicted on the portraits. One by one, he scratched their eyes out.

'Closer, sorcerer,' he said before leaving the tapestries and descending a staircase. 'But some secrets elude even your many eyes.'

The staircase began as stone but soon changed into a morass of pink and blue living tissue, sticky and pulsating. He scraped his bladed vambraces against the wall, sneering at the flesh as it recoiled. The spiral went on, darker and deeper until the fleshy substance receded and the way plunged into blackness, only cold, dark stone. But he knew the route well. He didn't need light for these well-trodden steps, and went into a series of sudden direction changes, large strides and small steps.

Navigating a series of false walls and finishing with a stamp of his feet, the grate of moving stone sounded in the darkness.

Beyond the eyes of the sorcerer, he steeled his resolve.

He never knew what this room might contain. Some days it resembled a dungeon with walls covered in manacles and aged blood stained on its cold, stoke walls. Others were more dizzying as though he strode underwater, images of giant eels snaking past the edges of his vision while he walked a road of coral. This time, the chamber revealed a haze followed by darkness. He had not seen this one before, yet knew his way regardless. Glowing sigils marked his path though beneath them, and all around him shone the night sky. Constellations beyond counting surrounded him, above and below, and all around. The sigils led him to a crystal in the centre of the chamber and forked around it. Something moved inside it, a body, armoured in silver, before it dissipated in a rainbow flash of refracted light.

Ignoring the tricks of the Aurora Citadel took a presence of will, even down here where the sorcerer's influence lessened. Geltz held onto the shame that surfaced within him though.

The constellations changed. They swirled into images of armoured warriors with angel wings and grand hammers. Others displayed giant maws poised to devour them. Others still became obscured by expanding nebulae of blues, greens and pinks.

'Seven houses of noble birth,' he said, striding across his path of arcane light.

'Three cities.' He sidestepped. Invisible from the sides, the thin outline of a door coalesced in front of him, white light against the darkness. Dozens of keys, each one numbered, waited in cylindrical recesses.

'Twelve towns,' he said, turning the twelfth key.

The door vanished. Beyond lay cold stone flags. Old magic guarded the catacombs. None of the citadel's tricks ever affected beyond the previous chamber, thus the ochre tiles remained untouched. Their patterns of inlaid white tiles did not shift and a torch waited in a bracket on the wall where Geltz had left it. He lit it with a tinderbox and descended through the low-ceilinged passage.

'Two hundred and fourteen miles of wall,' he continued, tracing his hands over the tiles, counting, focused.

The final tile depressed. Others pushed out in a chain reaction. Soon, the mechanism finished, leaving an altar sticking out from the wall. Made of unadorned granite, the empty alter awaited.

Geltz knelt and placed a carved wooden figurine of a knight atop. 'One betrayal to bring ruin to all.'

He stared at it and drank from his well of shame once more.

'One promise never forgotten.' He stood and crashed his mace through the figure. Before him, the altar parted, scraping aside, to reveal a final stone staircase.

'By whatever means,' Geltz said to himself as he descended.

It spiralled down and down. The air became thick and musty at the bottom of the stairs where a small corridor led to a much larger chamber. Something moved within.

He breathed, trying to prepare himself for what he might see, and entered. At the vision before him, he dropped to his knees. 'By the gods...'

Chapter 22

Campaign's End

Two dozen Stormcast Eternals soon tripled in number and kept growing.

Aided by the enhanced scouting abilities provided by the reunited Prosecutors and more disparate mists, the Stormcasts embarked upon a campaign of ambushes and skirmishes, all the while rounding up their errant kin. They bled the enemy at every opportunity. As their numbers grew, Ancanna created numerous smaller strike forces, each working together. A decoy force might lead an enemy warband into the waiting hammers of Retributors, or a flight of Prosecutors smashed their hunters so suddenly and so hard that they buckled and fell to the fury of a ground assault.

When tracking the movements of a warband led them near the Shadessmire, Ancanna relied on his Prosecutors once more. Lighter mists still caused some problems for the Angelos Conclave and so, by necessity, they honed their skills at low-level flying. On many occasions, they used their speed and agility to lure hosts of daemons and Chaos sworn fighters into the dangers of the swampy woodland, right through the territory of the Sylvaneth who defended their land with wrath and fury. Skill only went so far, and the Sylvaneth had prowess of their own, such that a few Prosecutors fell to the woodland protectors, brought down and entangled by shooting vines or crashing into branches that should not have been there. Yet no Knight of the Aurora shied from the task and the Prosecutors' flights through the trees, changing direction as quickly as winged insects, leaving only a streak of light and fallen enemies in their wake, earned them much renown in the Strike Chamber.

Though Sigmar reclaimed many warriors, this fragment of a Strike Chamber grew in strength until they could no longer escape the notice of the citadel's many eyes. The Stormcast Eternals themselves grew bolder and sought more open conflict. And therein lay another problem.

'We still do not have the strength for another strike on the citadel, Castus,' Ancanna said while dozens of other Stormcasts set about clearing the cobbles of the dead and maintaining their armaments as best they could without the aid of the Six Smiths.

The latest battle took them to an overgrown area of Art Eruditia where grass clumped between cobbles and greenery made great inroads in reclaiming the land from stone construction. The Stormcasts had drawn a hunting pack into the main force that waited in the buildings, alleys and drainage channels. The cover provided them some much needed respite.

'We have wounded and our armour is battered,' Ancanna finished.

Since passing through the realm gate into Ulglu, the Realm of Shadows, the Knights of the Aurora had waded through a tide of cultists and daemons. Each Stormcast Eternal had wreaked a bloody toll, accounting for themselves many times over but Ancanna now faced a difficult truth. Their momentum had stalled. The Stormhost known as the Swift had become bogged down, unable to bring their advantages to bear. They fought a different kind of war here in Ulglu, not one they were used to, nor one that played to their strengths of speed and scouting and the lightning assault. It was not one they could make a heroic push through to decapitate a leader. This had turned into attrition. A long, slow campaign.

'Your talk is defeatist.' After his beating by the wild Synvaneth of the Shadessmire, Castus' armour looked the worst of all. Dents, scratches and scrapes covered its surface. Joints widened where the thorns of his attackers had pierced and warped them. But for all that, the Retributor kept his zeal to take the fight to the enemy.

Ancanna let his shield fall and looped his hammer at his waist. He opened his arms. 'Strike me overhand with your hammer.'

Though the Retributor eyed Ancanna warily at first, he hefted his massive lightning hammer.

'Sigmar would not look kindly on you returning to his forges in such a way,' Castus warned.

Ancanna found himself inclined to agree but stepped forward anyway, arms still spread. 'Humour me. I don't doubt the thought has crossed your mind.'

'Can't deny that,' he said. The hulking Retributor raised his arms and shifted his weight for the strike, yet the joints of his armour refused the movement.

Ancanna didn't even flinch under the huge weapon, poised to crush him. 'You see? Not one of us can move freely.'

'Then what's it to be, Prime?' Castus asked fully recovered and full of fury. 'Do we linger and get picked off by warbands or wait for the citadel lords to march on us?' He swept his arm out in a gesture that took in the displaced Stormcasts that they had brought together. 'This is all of us. In over a week we have failed to find any more. The rest are in Sigmar's forges.'

He was right but that didn't stop the Strike Chamber being too few.

'You speak truth, Retributor, though I would not return the rest of us to Sigmar's forges unduly.' Ancanna lamented that the decision had fallen to him. He was the shield, not the sword, and certainly not the commander.

Only, once again, he *was* the commander.

'Then what? Do we turn our hammers to sickles and plough blades?' Irritation grew in Castus' voice. He had the temperament of an Astral Templar, or perhaps a Celestial Vindicator, but his heart still lay in protection and that's what drew him to the Knights of the Aurora. That and his ability to smash an opening through an enemy line in the blink of an eye.

'Peace, Castus,' Ancanna said, raising his palms.

'Peace does not suit us, Prime. We are wrath and fury, remember that.'

No, Ancanna thought, we are peace and protection, liberators and defenders. He kept the sentiment internal for there was no sense antagonising the Retributor further. Their guerilla campaign had felt like progress. It felt good to start winning again, returned some of the confidence that the devastating defeat against the citadel had stolen from them, but in reality they were small victories and Stormcast Eternals were not forged for small victories. If the citadel was beyond them, what else for this diminished Strike Chamber? Did they leave to search out their Lord Celestant and rejoin the larger army? He gazed towards the distant fortress. Could they legitimately leave it, even if they intended to return with greater force?

The answer was easy. If they did not topple the citadel, there were none who could. If the Lord Castellant was right, and if the citadel had the makings of a Silver Tower, the sooner it fell, the better. The change would make a siege impossible and their task exponentially more difficult. Retreat was therefore not an option. It couldn't be. He thought back to the failed attacks from both the Knights of the Aurora and the people of Valescroft, then to the survival of the nomadic community and the victories of the guerilla campaign.

Perhaps another approach. He could not swell their numbers with more Stormcast Eternals--only the God-king could decide whether to reinforce him with another Strike Chamber and no great storm broiled above to indicate it likely--but he could address other issues.

#

'They come too close,' Marin said, holding one of the collective's children close to her drab shirt. She gently rocked the child, soothing it as she vented her disapproval towards the gathering. She was a young woman but the exhaustion showing in her expression aged her another twenty years. Dark circles surrounded her eyes, just like everyone around her. 'Their presence draws out the citadel's hunting parties out in greater numbers than ever.'

Dim lamplight flickered and cast dancing shadows through the catacombs of the Sigmarabulum Temple. Dank and musty with age, and deep enough within Art Eruditia, it housed the entirety of the Third Moon Collective with wet, lime-slick room to spare. Kell sat on her haunches in the shadow of a circular column, picking at a stem of sour-tasting fungus, watching and listening. It was not one of her favoured bolt holes; the musty smell masked odours of intruders and strange acoustics made distant scratchings and scuffing seem to come from many directions at once. In addition to the speakers in front of her, she also watched the many ways into the chamber.

One of the community's rangers, a skinny, middle-aged man, shook his head and scowled at Marin. 'And these storm warriors have fought each one down. We cannot leave. The warbands beyond the hills are too numerous. Here, we have the luxury of two dozen places at least that can hide us all.'

A nagging doubt struck Kell, a memory and a whisper on the wind. Just how hidden were they? Did the citadel lords know of them? The catacombs always felt cold and draughty, but particularly so this evening. She glanced to the Aelf who had remained quiet through the discussion. He had survived for generations in the shadow of the citadel's power. He would guide them as he ever did.

'How long can we remain hidden?' Marin pressed. 'We have never had to move so often. Three of our bolt holes were uncovered and desecrated in as many days with them searching for these storm warriors.'

'The collective has weathered worse.' The ranger waved her concerns away. In truth, his face wore exhaustion just as much as Marin. His pale eyes lost much of their vibrancy, surrounded by tired, sagging skin.

'Bury your head then, Jomun, for all the good it will do,' Marin spat, shaking her head. It upset the child, causing a splutter and gurgle of tears which she hushed away. 'I can see the fear in your eyes. Your voice shakes. You're petrified. Whatever happens, it's going to get worse before it improves.'

A second woman stood, Geristalanni, who had been nominated to stand as chair over the meeting should it descend to disagreements and sniping. As it had twice already. She raised her palms towards Marin. 'This is not the time for insults, Marin. Jomun has every right to be afraid. Beyond the hills, the warbands would hunt us down within days.'

Marin dipped her head, overwhelmed with shame, and rightly so, Kell thought. There was no shame in avoiding danger. That very tenet kept every one of them alive every day. The problem, however, lay in what to do when danger surrounded them, cut off every bolt hole and snapped at their heels. The wisdom of the collective would let them endure, Kell told herself.

'Accept my apologies, Jomun, I misspoke.' Marin licked her lips, much of the fire extinguished from her voice. 'I merely suggest we do *something*. We know these storm warriors are the problem. They

have roused the evil of the citadel and we are caught between them. If we cannot leave, let us do something about the storm warriors. They brought it the evil here; they can take it with them.'

The comment aroused murmurs and a susurrus of conversation as some questioned her motives and others guessed what she might mean. A few suggested that the evil had shrouded the valleys long before the storm warriors arrived. Theories ranged from asking the storm warriors to leave through manipulating them towards a different path, to the incredulity of suggesting physical confrontation.

'Lead them away,' one of the men suggested, another forager like Kell.

He had good ears, that one. Verrel. His early warnings of rustling in the trees had saved her life more than once and always shared what he knew about where to find berries and truffles or where the mushrooms were likely to grow. He couldn't make a fire if the whole collective's lives depended on it though.

'If they are looking for trouble,' Verrel continued, 'they can go beyond the hills and fight the warbands there.'

Many murmured their assent and suggested other options like losing them in the swampy woodland and letting the creatures that dwelt there deal with them. The enraged calls of the wild Sylvaneth spoke of what might happen to the storm warriors were they caught unprepared in the Shadesshire. Marin suggested guiding them towards the town of Valescroft but the thought of transferring their danger to other folk sat ill with some.

'Is this not an opportunity?' Marin countered. 'If they truly oppose our enemies, why not assist them? Show them how to enter the citadel.' She shrugged. 'At worst, they all die and we are no longer caught in the citadel lords' hunt for them.'

'Is that how we do things now?'

The chamber silenced.

The Aelf had spoken. He had remained silent through the debate, showing no expression at the range of arguments, yet his melancholic, musical tones cut through the rising voices.

Kell leaned forwards, a mirror of the rest of the community who hung on his words.

'Tell me, Marin, what did I teach you of the horrors of the citadel?'

Cowed once more, Marin's voice wavered and dropped to a whisper, but that was plenty for the acute hearing of the Aelf and for Kell. 'That they prey on emotions.' She stammered and panicked under his cerulean gaze and her torrent of words jumbled on her tongue. 'That fear is the killer--it's what they want. They feed on the emotions--the good and the bad--the extremes.'

'Community,' prompted the Aelf, his tone still calm.

He sat upon a great pipe, long rusted and held together by thick rivets corroded with verdigris. Human-built, but the hallmarks of Duardin design showed through. Art Eruditia must have housed a wonderful community, Kell often thought. A place where cultures and races mixed and shared the wealth of knowledge and thought from across the realms.

'Community, yes, strength in togetherness.' Marin waved her hands while searching for the words.

Orinstar often had this effect. Since he spoke little, the collective paid attention, and he had personally saved the life of every one of them so commanded immeasurable respect. They owed

their daily survival to him and the structures and life to which he had brought them. His abilities with magic, though small and insignificant compared to the heroes that had ridden from Valescroft and died at the hands of the citadel lords, hid them at times of greatest need. It had taken him, and the little skill he had taught Kell, to mask their retreat into the catacombs. Neither held up well as a Mistweaver, not compared to the tales of old which Orinstar entertained them with, but their little could save a life when applied properly.

'They delight in loners and deceivers,' Marin blurted, then glazed over as if speaking from memory. 'One person is made to feel alone, isolated. Two people are toyed with, tormented until their fear intensifies, each one imagining things the other did not, until they work one another up into terror.'

'And a community?' the Aelf asked. His conversations often turned into lessons and the most cocksure of members of the collective found themselves like chastised children.

Marin recited. She found her flow of words after her initial jitters under Orinstar's attention. 'Community is life. Responsibility gives you the will to protect and courage beyond yourself.'

Indeed every person in the collective had responsibility for others' lives, and others were responsible for theirs, whether by providing food or warmth or protection or shelter, the Third Moon Collective was intertwined by responsibility for one another. They all knew it, and, Kell guessed, that was why Orinstar asked her to watch the storm warriors. She had not understood it after their dismissiveness of the community's help but the stark reminder of these simple principles brought clarity for her.

Was the Aelf thinking to bring the warriors into the community, she wondered. It worried her. They could not move as stealthily as even the community's infants, nor could they hide from anything but the most arrogant, careless hunters. And they displayed a warlike arrogance of their own that horrified Kell, with only a few showing signs of humility. Perhaps Orinstar's morals overran his common sense in this. Community came first and these storm warriors were not community. Embracing them could destroy the collective in a host of different ways.

You could end it, whispered the wind. Without the storm warriors, you can go back to your life on the move. Collect your food and firewood. Watch your children grow. Trap them. Send them to fight the citadel. You know a route. Through the Eruditian Labyrinth. They will follow you.

While the discussion continued, Kell slipped away through a drainage channel.

Chapter 23

The Cutting of Threads

‘So, she will bring the sons of Sigmar to us,’ Axanthral said to his familiar whose ever-changing form writhed with glee. Incensed by the positivity, Axanthral’s daemonic disc snapped at the familiar whose nearest appendage formed an obscene gesture as it fluttered behind one of the rotating arms in the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes.

It opened up a host of possibilities, new interlocked webs of intrigue and plot. The Stormcasts’ pride was already battered. A little more pressure would strip the rest from them and show them the futility of their little invasion. Then the daemons could feed on Sigmar’s finest. That would appease the fortress’ daemon spirit and make up for their failed harvest. Granting him the Aurora Conduit for the extended period of hunting the Stormcast Eternals had its price and Axanthral felt the loss with every movement. He felt as though he had been cored like an apple, but at the edges of that emptiness, something writhed. It put him in mind of tentacles or crawling insects, ever moving, ever changing.

A few commands whispered on the winds of magic send out a flock of bat-like creatures from their perches in the outermost belfry to summon allies from beyond the complex of valleys. They would round up every warband, cult and brigand from the Claws of Dracothion to the Darkenmoor. He needed more mortals to die for him, and he would not risk another defeat from the Stormcast Eternals.

Of course, not every possibility led to appeasing the daemon spirit. Axanthral’s alliance with the creature served, for the moment, while Stormcast Eternals assailed him. Should both daemon spirit and Stormcast Eternals sufficiently weaken one another in their conflict, however, that provided opportunity to tip the balance of power.

‘Continue *advising* our unwitting ally, Infergurgle.’ The sorcerer considered a few more options. The girls was useful, after all. ‘And, should the opportunity arise, see if she can be persuaded to bring her talents to bear for our cause.’

Axanthral adjusted his position, cross-legged surrounded by swirling motes of light and magic. A smoky image above him showed Ulgoloth disappearing into a chamber beyond the Starlight Chamber. The sorcerer writhed and chuckled, overcome with glee. The schemes around him, of mortals and Stormcast and immortal, caused arcane power to swell within him.

The warriors of Azyr stumbled, scattered and broken beyond threat, and yet their schemes bloomed before him like the birth of worlds magnified in the aether. The growth at his left shoulder itched and burned as it crawled and grew. A reminder. He had lost. Oh, he had been punished by the daemon spirit of his citadel, his Silver Tower to be. But he had gained.

And he had gained so much more.

Never had he summoned aurora rifts of such magnitude and frequency, nor had he maintained them for so long. Never had daemons of such power and in such numbers come to his call.

And Axanthral the Cultivator was much more than a mere summoner of daemons. Ambition alone did not elevate one so highly under the Change God’s gaze. Bile stirred in the pit of evil that he considered his stomach. And the Dreadguard would deeply regret the day he laid hands on Axanthral. Having pulled the strings of the fallen hero for lifetimes, entangling him further into his schemes, failed to satisfy him. That Ulgoloth no longer knew his cause or why he served, was only a

passing amusement, although Axanthral had achieved all that without embedding a daemonic influence within the fallen hero. All the malice and anger had come from within, surfaced at the sorcerer's command. Ulgoloth would be punished. And he would continue to serve against his will and against his knowledge.

Sat atop his daemonic platform, he watched Ulgoloth drop to his knees. The cry of anguish torn from the Dreadguard as he saw what moved within the catacombs split Axanthral's face in a wide, sharp-toothed smile and summoned a shrieking, grating squeal of a laugh from within. Such weight of grief powered the scream that the daemon spirit of the citadel even stirred, drinking in the sweet negativity of the emotion.

Such was the power surge that Axanthral plunged into the smoky image, allowing it to envelop him and play out all around him, drinking every ounce of magic he could from it. One by one, dozens of images around him dissipated. The coloured smoke forming them wisped away and joined the larger image of the Dreadguard. And one by one, eyes of a hundred different types, protruding from fleshy growths all through the vales, on the walls of his fortress, in the town of Valescroft and throughout the ruins of Art Eruditia, all blinked shut.

Two images remained in the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes, the smaller of them diminishing and twisting to become part of the larger. Its depiction of the furthest reaches of the valley became smudged as the eye gazing from the outermost arch beyond the settlement of Valescroft glazed over. Amidst rising mists, helms of silver crested the horizon under an Azyrite banner led by a tall warrior of gleaming plate bearing a spear, and trailed by a cloak as turquoise as an ocean cove.

So enthralled by the Dreadguard's dismay, Axanthral saw none of this.

Instead, he watched the deformed things scuttle about the catacombs in front of the man sworn to protect and restore them. Ruined wrecks of humanity hobbled, some with oversized musculature on single limbs while the rest of their bodies withered, little more than skin and bone. Others remained out of sight, encased in sarcophagi, at rest while the change overcame them. Axanthral sat mesmerised in magical overcharge and cruel excitement as the Dreadguard cast about in a panic, applying tinctures which were little more than coloured and scented water, and reading aloud arcane-sounding words from scrolls given to him by Axanthral over generations that would only hasten the change of his subjects.

Of course, that was far from enough punishment for Ulgoloth. Laying hands on Axanthral required direct consequences. Contact begets contact.

#

He did not know how long he had been there.

Rage fogged Geltz's vision. Grief-loaded, heart-wrenching rage. He felt the Dreadguard rising within him, empowered by such feral anger, and he slammed the intruder down. Instead of sweeping him away, the anger focused him. Innocents had not only died in his latest endeavour to cleanse the change from his charges, they had been tortured. He, Geltz Valewarden, had damned them to an eternity of torment as the playthings of cruel daemons. The lucky ones were simply devoured by the same daemons in sacrifice to their insatiable hunger.

Geltz wept, kneeling at the base of a sarcophagus though death had not claimed the inhabitant, nothing so gracious. His fingers gripped its lip, stone crumbling under the force exerted from gauntlets that amplified his strength. They crushed part of the inscription that read, *Valaru Alablenz, King in the Vale*. A hand rested on his shoulder, grossly bloated and mutated, coloured blue like

harvest skies, though it lacked the joy of harvest time. The proper harvest of his people, not the vile, bloody things that Axanthral had forced upon him. Discoloured talons grew where once there were fingernails, trimmed and painted to perfection. Slender fingers became overgrown and deformed.

At the thought of the sorcerer's name, the Dreadguard made another surge within him, drawing upon his rage and directing it to a point of blame. Geltz batted it away again as he might swat an insect. One thing burned brighter within him than the urge for vengeance, and that was his sworn duty. Everything he had done, every atrocity he visited on the people he once protected, had been in following that singular duty. Though his actions had worsened the condition of his charges, life still flowed within them, and he still drew breath. That meant he could change it.

He grasped the hand on his shoulder. 'Allietta, my love,' he whispered. 'I have led you astray.'

The creature only gurgled in response. Dozens of others shuffled around the chamber, confused, many stumbling into walls or tripping on one another. Many were pale, others showed skin the colour of bruised flesh through ragged tunics that once boasted the wealth of the Kingdom Vale.

Footsteps echoed behind him and Geltz went for his sword and mace. Rage and anguish did nothing to diminish his warrior's instincts. The hand on his shoulder squeezed lightly, imperceptible under his armoured pauldron, but he felt the intention. It wasn't his mind that picked up on it but the writhing *thing* that covered his wound. Emotions and intentions around him became magnified and he could read them like facial expressions without the need to even see them. The squeezing gesture signified comfort. Behind him, the man stood there emanated a stoic resolve. Stark disapproval also radiated from the newcomer, but his intentions remained that of an ally. Only one man could have stood with him after his enormous folly.

'Ven,' he said. He kept his voice from cracking in his constricted throat. Despite his actions earning him another title, he was still the Lambent Protector and he would show strength. Even with generations of vile endeavour that sullied his spirit and soul now exposed for the ruse it was.

'You don't need to say it,' Ven said.

Geltz nodded. Ven had been right all these long, distasteful years. A few of the creatures in the chamber sparked recognition at the warrior who entered. He even bowed to some of them. Those who still had their minds.

'Are you ready to try a new path?' Ven continued.

The Lambent Protector peered into the sarcophagus once more as he rose to his feet. He still gripped his sword but released the mace. His king looked gaunt but remained the most human in appearance of all the nobles hidden away in the catacombs.

'I should have listened to you a long time ago.'

Ven shook his head. 'I said you didn't need to say it. What about the sorcerer?'

Geltz moved like a viper. His dagger flashed across the chamber, past Ven's ear, and pierced the tiny cat's eye disguised in the wall. 'The sorcerer sees only what I want him to. His harvest will be rife with rot, his fields laid fallow.'

With Ven at his side, and the Court of the Vale around him, regardless of their state, Geltz's resolve returned in full force. He stood tall in his silver plate which glowed in the starlight spilling from the adjoining chamber. This was the Lambent Protector he was supposed to be.

The Boon and the Dreadguard within lay dormant, but waiting.

‘And the warriors of Sigmar?’ Ven asked.

Geltz saw to his armour, tightening, adjusting. The deformed monstrosity he had called Allietta assisted with care and attention that belied her lumbering form. She stepped away and Geltz drew his weapons in a flourish.

‘Arms raised against the Kingdom of Vale,’ Geltz began.

‘Be met with shield and sword and unyielding vengeance. By whatever means,’ Ven finished once more. ‘So be it.’

The churning of his gut troubled him. The Boon of Tzeentch showed little of its effects or what it was going to do to him. Likely what it was already doing to him from the inside out. For the moment, it kept him alive. That was enough. In time, he could find a way to remove its influence altogether.

At the thought, his wound blazed in agony as though salt and burning oil had been poured on it. But Geltz refused to bend knee to the pain. He was done as a supplicant of the Change God.

‘Lambent Protector?’ Ven asked.

It felt good to hear that again from his lieutenant. Geltz gritted his teeth through the pain. ‘Muster the Valesguard. They are no longer to be known as the Eclipse. Have them unfurl the Golden Banner and prepare the court for travel.’

Ven raised his arm in salute. ‘Be prepared, Lambent Protector, for some many not wish to shed the armour of the Eclipse so easily. I fear they are too far gone, having drank too deeply of the powers in which we dabbled.’

The same issue concerned Geltz about himself. ‘Do you know who?’

‘Quin, Ferion and Charion for certain. Given that Erik has started calling himself the Gorecleaver, I’ll say that’s a strong indication of his allegiance.’ Ven thought on it. ‘Possibly the brothers, Andros and Koss. Their allegiance is probably to one another first and foremost.’

‘Then it seems our share of grisly work is not over.’

Chapter 24

Hope is Forged

Ancanna had deliberated enough. Too much for a leader of Stormcast Eternals. His guerilla war was over no matter how much he wanted to cling to it. He knew how to fight--to lead--in a guerilla war. Unfortunately, with the command structure obliterated, the Strike Chamber, such as it was, still looked to his leadership.

Sense told him not to fight a battle he could not win. His sigmarite cladding told him he was a coward for considering other options. His gauntlet-covered hands had never felt so powerless. He needed help. If nothing else, he needed to do what he could to improve the state of the warriors around him, and by his reckoning, such facilities were more likely to exist in Valescroft than anywhere else in the valleys.

The Strike Chamber remained quiet as they reached the outlying homesteads of Valescroft. Their first battle against the citadel lords had wreaked a path of ruin through many of the buildings, leaving them little more than charred husks or piles of rubble. Every in-tact house had its shutters closed though smoke wisped from a few chimneys. Hardly a welcome for liberating heroes, Ancanna thought grimly, thinking back to Kimmani's victory speech.

'Gone to ground,' a returning Prosecutor said as he returned from the closed doors and lifeless streets.

'You found noone?' Ancanna asked.

'Not quite. We entered a few of the houses. Most are deserted or collapsed. In one of the larger ones, we found maybe twenty or so people huddled in the cellar. Likely there are more in the other buildings and there are signs that someone has been moving around outside.'

Ancanna perked up and closed on the Prosecutor. 'Would they speak to you? How are they faring?'

The Prosecutor shrugged. 'Terrified, mostly. Some looked vacant as though they cared no more for life. We couldn't get any sense out of them. They either cowered from us or barely noticed us. With how you spoke to the Lord Castellant, we assumed you'd rather we didn't turf them out.'

It did nothing for Ancanna's guilt over how the Knights of the Aurora had treated them after first driving back the Chaos force. 'Rightly so. Leave them be for the moment. We have our own situation to deal with.'

A glance to the skies revealed another of the Prosecutor scouts who soon swooped back down to the ground. Despite their recent victories, they had won little more than a skirmish and thought it best to avoid notice as much as possible. While exceptional scouts, wings of light in such a dark, gloomy realm made Prosecutors a beacon visible for miles. And so, at the head of a solemn, battered host, Ancanna led the Knights of the Aurora into Valescroft once more.

'Uriel,' Ancanna called when they reached an area of debris strewn with broken tools. He didn't know whether to be elated or disappointed by the state of it. As he took it in, a Retributor filed through the column of Stormcasts to join him. 'This is the best we have. Can you use it?'

The Retributor looked over two piles of masonry that once stood as walls, and across the mess of burnt beams and shattered stone under a precarious external canopy. He clambered through and

hauled a wooden joist from atop a circular stone forge. Another three similar forges lay buried nearby.

‘It’s a lot of forges for a farming town,’ Uriel rumbled. ‘How did you know they’d have so much?’

‘Those men who rode out from here were armoured.’ Ancanna shrugged. ‘Someone had to make it.’

Uriel extracted a rough smith’s hammer from under a pile of rocks. He glanced over the work areas again. ‘They’re close enough for repairs but I’m going to need help clearing this lot, a few to work the bellows and I’m damned if I’m doing it all on my own so a couple more who can use a hammer for more than killing.’

Ancanna smiled for the first time in days. ‘We’re the Knights of the Aurora, remember? Builders, blacksmiths, carpenters and tanners turned soldiers. Take your pick.’

A nod set Liberators and Retributors into action, clearing the other forges and collecting as many tools as they could find. At Uriel’s direction, others searched the wreckage for coals while he lit the first of the forges. The rest tended to the wounded, cleaning and redressing where required. Hours later, with Ancanna deep in the task of reorganising the remnants of the warrior chamber, Uriel approached.

‘I’m sorry, Prime,’ he said. Standing helmeless, sweat matted Uriel’s brow and streaked down his face. His dark eyes looked down. ‘The sigmarite will not yield. We cannot repair and rearm here.’

Stifling a sigh and pushing the despair down as it welled in him again, he gave Uriel his attention. ‘Are the forges damaged?’

‘No. The problem is that we’re trying to work god-forged metal with mortal equipment. The forges are intact but insufficient.’

Ancanna knew Uriel better than to question his technique or suggest a change to his approach for Uriel was a determined man and a master smith. He would not have given up without exploring every alternative. In the midst of the knews, Ancanna’s pragmatic mind set to changing their plans. In their current state, the Strike Chamber could not attack. The option to retreat back to the realm gate and return to either the Lord Celestant or even Azyr in failure and disgrace surfaced again.

That thought was obliterated by a voice he did not recognise.

‘There’s nothing wrong with the forges.’

Both Ancanna and Uriel snapped to face the newcomer, a middle-aged human, heavy set and nervous. By his stance and the horror in his eyes, he looked like he might flee at the blink of an eye. Ancanna released the grip on his hammer and calmed Uriel’s retort with an open palm before it started.

‘What do you know of the forges?’ Ancanna asked.

The man breathed as if steeling himself. ‘I know that I built them and worked them for twenty years. I outfitted every man in our lord Philean Demnis’ army including the blue rider himself, for what good it did. I know that you can’t make the forges hot enough for that metal you’re using.’

‘And I suppose you also know how to make them hot enough?’ Uriel asked, sharply enough for the man to flinch and step back.

‘Easy, Uriel.’ Ancanna turned back to the man. ‘Do you?’

‘Yes. I do.’

‘And you are willing to help us, even after...’ Ancanna paused to sweep a gesture across the wreckage around him. ‘Even after this?’

A spark of respect fired in the Liberator Prime, that, though nervous and at potentially great risk, the man defied his fear and stood among these mighty warriors. Warriors that spoke the words of tyrants when first they met after the battle in Valescroft.

‘The forges are my life. I built them, I toiled at them, and I would see them lit.’ He glanced at the activity around him. ‘And you’ve not killed me yet. Something tells me the...things...that attacked us wouldn’t have much interest in rebuilding. I suppose that makes you better than them.’

He led them to a storage facility across the chipped cobble street from the forges and directed a couple of Stormcasts to clear the rubble from within. They obeyed at Ancanna’s curious behest. Whether the man could help with a Stormcast master smith failed remained to be seen but Ancanna, in his stressed and harassed disposition, welcomed whatever help came his way. When they broke through the fallen beams and stones, they uncovered a pile of bricks wrapped in leather and carefully stacked against a thick, stone wall. Though no larger than a hand each, Uriel strained to lift just one and carry it back to the forge. The blacksmith used a poker to shift the hot coals aside and made a conical space in the centre of the forge, into which Uriel placed the brick and covered it with glowing coals.

‘Bellows!’ the blacksmith shouted and, after a brief moment of surprise at the tone, Uriel took to them with fervour.

For a moment, nothing happened. As Uriel paused, ready to question the blacksmith, the forge *whooshed* with expelled air and the coals burned almost white with heat.

‘By Sigmar,’ Uriel breathed. ‘Where did you come by this fuel? Forging steel requires nothing so powerful.’

‘But it enhances the steel,’ the smith said, ‘makes it stronger. I never found out why exactly but it’s not the extra heat. It’s made from sediment collected in the stream that runs through the valley. The nomads dry it out and use it as fire lighters but, as you can see, we refine and pack it together into these bricks for use in the forge. Living under constant bandit attack and with monsters harrying us, we found it prudent to be well armed.’ A haunted look passed his face and he looked solemnly to the ground. ‘Even if it wasn’t enough for Juthian the Blue and his Hundred Blades. They say he changed... I didn’t know. We thought him blessed, blessed by the hammer god the wanderers talked about.’

Ancanna saw the smith teetering back over his pit of despair. This Juthien must have been the hero they saw leading against the Chaos force, and perhaps the wanderers were another of the mad bands of flagellants that roamed the realms, as much a danger to themselves and the forces of Sigmar as their enemy. Certainly the ones that the Knights of the Aurora thought they had saved from warbands of cultists had been far from reasonable. He tucked the thoughts away and focused back on the smith. This was tangible help, and the first positive interaction with the people they had supposedly liberated, and Ancanna was not about to lose him. The forges had drawn him out so perhaps the forges would keep him there.

‘Hot enough?’ Ancanna asked the Stormcast beside him.

Uriel already had the first cuirass in the forge. 'Keep the weapons and armour coming and you'll have your repairs. We're hardly the Six Smiths here so there are limits to what we can do but we'll all move more freely with the joints repaired and we can patch up some minor rents. I need half a dozen of our brothers to work under order from this man. If anyone even thinks to speak down to him, they'll still be wearing their armour when it goes in the forge.'

Soon, the sounds of clanging sigmarite rang through the streets. Forge fires cast a warm glow over the pale stone of the buildings and embers fluttered on the wind. But even with repairs underway, the Knights of the Aurora had problems. Too many stripped their armour, not just to prepare it for the attention of the smiths but to dress wounds. Without supply, they resorted to tearing strips from the sashes at their waists. Washed in the waters of irrigation channels that ran on the outskirts of the town and wrung dry, they redressed wounds with fabric that bore prayers to Sigmar.

It was not like the Knights of the Aurora to stand idle, and they did not. Those not tending to their injured brothers or assisting at the forges formed work parties. Without need of command, they cleared rubble and dug out a grave for the dead that still decomposed in the streets after the citadel had unleashed its attack. Maggots crawled in their open wounds and the stink of gases leaving their bodies hung over them like the mists so prevalent in this realm.

As any of the Knights of the Aurora had once turned their tools of trade into weapons of war, so too did they turn their weapons of war into tools of craft. Knives and hand axes made for effective implements in shaping wood.

Ancanna joined the nearest work party. They cleared down the frame of a collapsed building, one that could have been anything as the extent of detritus made its function indistinguishable. Three Liberators held the beam upright while others measured and compared it to the other materials they had remaining. They lay it down as Firus joined them and set to chopping one end so they could refit it. Another smoothed the other end with his knife. Ancanna scooped up a piece of wood and whittled it into a dowel for the beam.

Something resembling peace trickled into him at the simple act of shaping wood, of using his hands for something other than killing. The piece was ideal, strong yet easy to work. He didn't recognise it, though its dark colouring implied a genus native to Ulglu. The sounds of axes on wood and smells of sawdust reminded him of his workshop in ages past. He passed the completed dowel to Firus who then hammered it in. It slid into place perfectly and Ancanna smiled at having retained the skill of his profession. The *clonk* of hammers on dowel sounded infinitely more calming than the crack of warhammer on skull.

Engrossed in his work, Ancanna reached out for the material to shape another dowel. He found it waiting in the outstretched hands of a human woman, filthy, hair bedraggled and shaking in fear. The Liberator Prime smiled at her. He bowed his head and took the wood. She flinched at his touch.

Dried blood caked her hands, her own judging by the raw tips of her fingers. Her dark eyes revealed the full depth of her horror and suffering but that tiniest glimmer of hope still remained, shown in the simple act of passing material to Ancanna. His respect, and affinity for, the people of Valescroft multiplied. They had suffered. And yet they displayed the tenacity to return from the brink. Not even Ancanna's own decision to fight came from such hardship. When the warbands had come for his home, and nobody remained to protect them, he and his fellows took up arms. They had not the lifetime of conditioned suffering that had plagued the folk of Valescroft.

Curtains twitched in the windows of buildings fortunate enough to still have windows. Hesitant at first, a few more terrified men and women braved the streets.

Ancanna realised at once why Sigmar had chosen the Knights of the Aurora for this mission. He had believed it down to their speed, their aerial and scouting supremacy and their ability to react with lightning speed to calls for aid. Perhaps they played a part in the God-king's decision but another explanation struck the Liberator Prime. At their core, the Knights of the Aurora were people. Not kings, not warlords, not career soldiers. Each one relinquished the tools of their craft and took up arms against an enemy of unfathomable power. They were builders and craftsmen. At the sight of a conquering hero, the people of Valescroft went to ground. The sight of warrior craftsmen rebuilding a place that belonged to another inspired the courage of a blacksmith, drawing him out of hiding. The courage of the blacksmith then cascaded to many.

The Knights of the Aurora could learn something from their example, Ancanna thought, especially himself. Just as he forced Castus to relinquish his pride in the face of the Sylvaneth, so too did Ancanna need to bring his leadership to bear and make the difficult decisions that Kimmani had told him of. Whether it sat comfortable with him or not, the Strike Chamber looked to his leadership and followed his command. Sigmar had given them a mission. All looked to him.

He would lead them because he had to.

Chapter 25

Reinforced

They had the will, but how to use it; that question plagued Ancanna. Soon, his few would reach fighting strength again, but he commanded far fewer than Kimmani had during their first assault upon the Aurora Citadel. Reports still reached him of warbands moving about the complex of valleys, and of a larger force mustering nearer the citadel. The Stormcast Eternals could not tarry too long. A static army was a dead army, another tenet of the Knights of the Aurora. He set his gaze to the heavens, to golden Azyr and the throne of the God-king, to beseech Sigmar for wisdom.

His answer came not from above, but from the wreckage of a home destroyed in the battle for Valescroft, while the heavenly realm remained silent to his pleas. A shadow moved in the courtyard. From behind the masonry, Kell approached.

Placing his tools down with the care of a craftsman, the Liberator Prime stood to greet her. He stumbled as the left knee joint in his armour caught and it took some manoeuvring to get the bent sigmarite moving freely.

‘You would move better out of all that metal, storm warrior,’ Kell said.

She looked troubled and tired though her paces remained measured and her ever-searching eyes spoke of her unceasing vigilance. The price of staying alive in a life like hers. Casting him a sidelong glance, she paused a few paces from Ancanna. Plenty of distance to bolt should she need to.

‘The people?’ she asked, voice unsteady.

‘Unharmed,’ Ancanna said, catching on to her wariness. So involved with his plans for the Strike Chamber, it took him a moment to appreciate the scene of warriors making for war. He edged closer and gestured to a few of the inhabitants who assisted in the repairs. He kept his voice soft. ‘And helping willingly. I told you we are not here for conquest. Some of the good people of Valescroft have put their trust in us.’

Kell’s words caught in her throat. ‘What are you here for, Ancanna of the Aurora?’

Stalling, he wanted to say. Given their defeat, the rhetoric of liberation and driving out the Chaos taint felt hollow. He had to remember that Kell had seen the might with which they attacked the Aurora Citadel and the beating they took. It didn’t take much to compare the numbers of Stormcast Eternals before that fight and how many spread through Valescroft in their damaged state. He had also seen other hunting packs from the citadel, ones beyond his capability to ambush, seen them chasing other prey which he could only assume was Kell’s nomadic community.

‘Surviving,’ Ancanna settled on.

He thought for a moment on how he might further prove his allegiance to this woman. It mattered to him. She was not just one woman, she was the only nomad willing to talk to them. Thereby, she signified exactly what Sigmar had sent them into Ulglu to find. A thought struck Ancanna--none of the sentries had reported Kell’s approach. His experiences in the Realm of Shadow ensured a healthy dose of suspicion was always in the back of his mind, even for those who had repeatedly saved his life.

‘You move well through the ways of Valescroft, such as it is. My scouts told me that your people avoid it.’

Kell gave him an appraising look. She wore the same clothes from when Ancanna had first met her in the ruins of Art Eruditia, yet her drab garb had been cleaned of much of the grime. Some of the stains, the blood particularly, would only ever fade, their memory permanent. ‘They are both my people,’ she said at last.

She joined Ancanna at his workspace and sat on the rubble by his side. ‘I was young. I’d sneaked off into the woodland, playing *hide and find* with my brother. He was older. Two cycles. He could never find me in the trees and swamps, especially when the mists were up.’ She gestured to a pile of smouldering debris on the far outskirts of town nearest the Shadesshire, too damaged for the Knights of the Aurora to consider repairing. ‘I lived there.’

‘What happened?’ Ancanna asked, picking up his knife and whittling another dowel. It was thoughtless work for him, enough to keep his hands busy and make himself useful while he paid attention to Kell and let the noise of hammers, saws and clang of the forges fade into the background.

She shuffled in her seat and her frown expressed her discomfort. ‘I’d never seen the aurora before. It was beautiful.’ She gulped and released a heavy breath. ‘Then it was terrible. I was alone. The sky went so dark. I couldn’t see where I was going and the woods seemed to close in all around me. I got lost. I screamed but that was worse. Something screamed back.’

The nomad didn’t stay seated for long. Clutching the hems of her long sleeves, she paced. She became skittish and anxious again, watching all around her. Even surrounded by the protection of Sigmar’s finest warriors, her face paled and her wide eyes betrayed her terror.

‘There were two or three of them, I think,’ she continued with wavering voice. ‘They chased me. Not people. *Things*. Things I couldn’t describe. They laughed at me, whispered horrible things but wouldn’t show themselves, not until I was cornered and crying.’

Ancanna kept quiet. Still on edge with suspicion, he kept a close watch on her body language and the look in her eyes. Always the eyes. They told you truth and lie.

‘The rest was quick. It’s still hazy. All I remember is crying, and then arms around me. I was on someone’s shoulder, bounding through the woods. We must have gone through the swamps because water splashed my face. There was still the screaming and chattering of the things, the daemons. Then it went black. I woke up in a drainage channel under Art Eruditia. Haunted, my brother said those ruins were, but when I opened my eyes, I saw an Aelf.’

‘Orinstar,’ Ancanna said and she nodded.

‘He doesn’t save many. It’s too dangerous. And if the community grows too large, they’ll find us. It’s harder to hide more people so we keep moving and keep small.’

‘And you’ve never returned?’

Kell shook her head. ‘Wouldn’t work.’ She hesitated and bit her lip and screwed her eyes shut before continuing. ‘All my family died that night looking for me. I gave myself to the community. They fed and clothed me and told me about the auroras and the citadel. They taught me never to come back here. If they knew about us, they’d come to find us, and then the citadel lords would do the same.’

‘Liberator Prime!’ a Prosecutor called from above. Swept along by the soft, heartfelt words of Kell, the rumbling thunder of the Prosecutor’s voice came as a shock.

No, not a Prosecutor. The enlarged crest atop his battle helm, the hawk motif on his shoulder plate and the lantern at his waist gave him away as he landed in a spread of outstretched wings.

‘Gallus!’ Ancanna cried. Elation flooded him. The nomad fled from his thoughts as he crossed the cobbles in two bounds and clasped the Knight Azyros’s forearm. He stepped back and looked him over. ‘Reforged so soon?’

‘You do me too little credit,’ Gallus said.

Ancanna’s jaw dropped as he replayed the moment of Gallus’ departure: the slaughter of brother warriors, the air tangy with Sigmar’s reclamation piercing the sky in thunderbolt after thunderbolt, the magic vortex and swarms of daemons. Nothing the Knights of the Aurora had faced compared to it. ‘Impossible. You drew them all to you. Countless flying daemons...’

‘I told you I could take them,’ Gallus said with a laugh. ‘The difficult part was disposing of the corpses.’

Ancanna shook his head and snorted his mirth. It was good to have Gallus back. Not only did he lighten the decision making burden from Ancanna--which alone brought immeasurable relief--but the knowledge that his closest friend and brother warrior had evaded another reforging warmed him. It also amazed him that the Knight Azyros escaped such pursuit but he knew Gallus would never let on. A dozen different stories of his survival would spread through the Strike Chamber before the suns set.

The Knight Azyros nodded toward Kell. ‘Are we taking in strays?’

‘This is Kell of the Third Moon Collective,’ Ancanna said, motioning her forwards. She remained skittish and wary of the Knight Azyros. Even as she approached, she would not allow the Stormcast Eternals either side of her to block potential escape. ‘She’s one of the nomads we sighted. All of our brothers that you see around you, we could not have rallied so many without her help.’ He made eye contact with Kell. ‘Every one of us owes her our life.’

It was hard to tell whether she appreciated or even understood the sentiment. A lifetime of being hunted by Chaos, living in the shadows of its stranglehold over Ulglu, affected her perspective in ways Ancanna could not even conceive.

‘Then you have my thanks also, Kell.’ Gallus gave an extravagant bow before turning his attention back to Ancanna, urgency creeping into his tone. ‘Listen. I’m not alone. I came to find you first, to warn you.’

Ancanna straightened and glanced to the forges while his gauntlet hovered over the hammer looped around his waist. ‘A warband?’

‘Many, but that is not my warning. Reinforcements are on the way, Prime. I caught up to the Cloudbursts over the Nightbluffs. They’ve seen much the same of this hellish realm as we have--a sea of enemies and little to rally beyond whispers and rumour--but they are in much better shape and have even gained the employ of a couple of Mistweavers. Aelfs. The Lord Celestant has agreed to abandon his campaign strike at the Aurora Citadel with us.’

‘Praise to Sigmar!’ Ancanna crowed. Reinforcements from the Cloudbursts would make them a mighty Strike Chamber again, one capable of defeating the citadel. ‘When can we expect them?’

‘Days, at least. The land is treacherous through the Grasp of the Death Lord and I spotted Arcanites amidst its stone spires as we passed through. He’s going to be fighting every step of the way, but

he's coming. And we're going to need him, Prime. Warbands are converging on the valley: marauders, cultists, barbarians, tribal war parties. We even sighted a small band of dragon ogors heading this way.' He gestured to six Prosecutors circling over the Shadsmire. 'I see the Angelos Conclave is scouting. They must have reported similar.'

True enough, most patrols by Ancanna's scouts over the last few days had resulted in a skirmish. By the hammers and javelins of the Prosecutors, splinter forces of the more eager warbands had routed.

Ancanna paced to release his surge of energy. His mind raced through strategies, for reinforcements opened a host of new possibilities. A dozen attack vectors crowded his thoughts, half he discarded immediately, the others he considered based on their previous assault. Now they knew what to expect. Keep the Prosecutors low. Strike a path through that hellish city. He shook all the thoughts away. First he needed the Lord Celestant.

And the arrival of his superior meant relinquishing command. He welcomed it. With open arms and whole heart, he longed to become an advisor once more and focus on his shield and hammer. Until then he had to keep his guerrilla band together. Defence of Valescroft fell to him, and so did treating with the nomads.

They couldn't move from Valescroft, not in their state of disrepair, which meant that with the number of warbands roving the valley, battle would come to them. That meant digging in. And that was a job perfectly suited to both Ancanna the warrior and Ancanna the builder. His sense of worth intensified a hundredfold. This was the war he knew. He wanted to avoid remaining static but for a few days he might be able to hold the town.

'Nothing to say, Prime?' Gallus asked.

Ancanna smiled to himself. He called to a duo of Liberators carrying a long beam between them. 'Liberators, stand to arms! Prepare defences. We're fortifying this town. Give me palisades, pikes and choke points.' He gestured to a street where buildings remained mostly intact on both sides. 'Clear the rubble from those habitations and have Firus gather any former Judicators who still have their bow.'

The Stormcasts voiced their assent. They delivered their beam to the others repairing a creaking, unstable structure near the forges and set to reassigning labour to defences. The Knights of the Aurora knew their business and set to work. Some maintained their work on the residential and commercial buildings but only those which might collapse without intervention. The remaining resources, people and Stormcast Eternals, masonry and wood, became repurposed for the building of defences. It would never rival the fortifications of the Gates of Azyr, but they needed hold only until the Lord Celestant returned.

Having no intention of becoming trapped in Valescroft, another flurry of orders from the Liberator Prime secured them two possible routes of retreat into the ruins of Art Eruditia. When complete, each would contain a number of surprises to slow, confuse and bleed any pursuers.

As though the concept of pursuit had summoned them, the screech of winged furies pierced the sounds of building in Valescroft. The humans, still jittery from their trauma, as they would be for some time to come, panicked and fled but the Knights of the Aurora kept their resolve. Drawn to the fear, the furies swooped in, talons extended and shrieking their ululations. When they neared, the Knights of the Aurora sentries sprang to life. Ten Prosecutors took flight on wings of light. Most of them surrounded the furies, causing them to bank and rear, while the remainder strafed them from

above. Celestial hammers and stormcall javelins bludgeoned and skewered the daemons, felling them as each impact bursts in heavenly light.

One fury dipped below the Angelos Chamber and streaked towards Kell. Ancanna reacted faster. He sidestepped in its path and scooped his shield from the ground in the same move. He read the creatures intended last-second change of direction and leapt aside, drawing the hammer from his waist and uppercutted the daemon in the same fluid motion. The hammer hit like a thunderbolt and crushed the beast's chest.

Ancanna addressed the nervous people of Valescroft, raising his voice to a declarative clarion. 'The Knights of the Aurora, Stormhost of the Stormcast Eternals, stand sentinel over you. While we stand, no harm shall befall you. Any who wish to leave may do so, or you may rebuild your lives under our guard.'

The speech failed to achieve an instant rally, though Ancanna held no illusions that it would. A glimmer of hope or comfort flashed in some of their expressions. That was enough for now. Slowly, and with the coaxing of Stormcast Eternals, the people of Valescroft returned to their work, assisting and guiding the reconstruction and fortification. None who had braved the streets went back into hiding.

'Response enough?' Ancanna said to the Knight Azyros.

'It seemed to work better than our Lord Castellant's effort,' Gallus said then lowered his voice. 'There's something else I haven't told you yet. Lord Castellant Kimmani is following with the Lord Relictor.'

Joy, confusion and concern all mixed within Ancanna. The return of his brother Knights of the Aurora made his heart soar, and yet the Lord Castellant fell. The Lord Relictor had been missing since the failed attack on the citadel. None of them should have returned from Azyr in so short a time. Unable to guess the gaps, Ancanna cocked his head and the Knight Azyros continued.

'Him, I saw fall with my own eyes. How is this possible?

'The Lord Relictor escaped the battle with a few others. For twelve days they held a fighting retreat before they regrouped with the Cloudbursts. Kimmani, however... We found him at the realm gate. Alone.'

'Alone?'

Gallus paced. Using the tip of his sword, he drew a circle in a pile of ash to signify a realm gate and traced a number of mounds around it. 'As far as we can tell, he was sent through the realm gate alone. When we reached him he was wandering confused. Bodies lay piled around him, Prime.' He shook his head. 'None of us believed it. Seeing a warrior like Kimmani fall was one thing, but such a rapid reforging, and to be sent back alone... It's unprecedented.'

'What's his disposition?'

'Unpredictable. He spoke as though he commanded the Strike Chamber at times, always pushing for speed, changing formations and directions. With all the contradictory orders being passed through the units, the Lord Celestant had to censure him. After that, he kept much to himself, brooding and muttering. For a while, at least. Soon enough, his ire rose again, and he was like an animal unleashed on the battlefield in all the wrong ways. He left holes in our formations, leapt in too quickly and struck out at anything that got near, even Stormcast. He punished the enemy like nothing I've ever seen but you couldn't fight alongside him. It's a matter of time before numbers bring him down.'

That's why only the three of us are here, Kimmani, the Lord Relictor and I. Lord Celestant Sonos sent us on ahead. We're to host a Remembering.'

Ancanna let out a long sigh.

Gallus grabbed Ancanna's arm and leaned in. 'Keep your wits around the Lord Castellant. He's not the same.' His eyes flicked to Kell. 'You're not needed, but perhaps...'

'Perhaps what?' Kell asked.

Ancanna took his time before resolving to follow through with Gallus' hint. 'I have something to show you.'

Chapter 26

The Remembering

In a plaza cleared of rubble, the Stormcasts silenced as a tall, foreboding warrior strode in their midst. He carried a staff of gleaming sigmarite and relics hung from ornate chains around his belt. An avian skull-helm covered his head, angular and beaked like a giant bird of prey animated from death. Where Stormcast Eternals inspired awe from ordinary humans, this figure inspired awe from the Stormcast Eternals. He radiated a depth of power and menace like a dark, monolithic shape moving beneath water, unknown yet instinctively dangerous. Many bowed their heads at his passing while others saluted with fist to chest.

‘Shades of Ulglu!’ Kell hissed, edging back and casting around for an escape, her tenuous trust in the Stormcasts shaken. ‘What daemon is that?’

Ancanna clasped her hand and drew her closer to the cover of a fallen stone statue depicting a robe-clad man wielding sword and staff that had been toppled in their defence of Valescroft.

‘Peace, Kell,’ Ancanna said. ‘He is Varuhen, Lord Relictor of the Knights of the Aurora.’

‘He looks like death.’

‘He is the guardian of our immortal souls, our defence against the enemy and against ourselves,’ Ancanna said, watching the smoking censers sway from the Lord Relictor’s hips. Embers from the forges that still rang through dusk flickered around him and glowed red and orange.

Kell looked at him quizzically. ‘Why are you showing me this?’

‘You need to see us. What we are. Where we came from. Watch.’

As Lord Relictor Varuhel walked between the assembled Stormcasts, he gestured to some, a simple nod of his head or tilt of his staff. The chosen few joined him and formed a circle around a fire pit at the centre of the plaza beside which he jammed his staff into the ground. Six warriors were chosen, the remainder bowed their heads and left.

Ancanna pressed a finger to his lips. ‘This is our most sacred rite. The Lord Relictor is performing a Remembering.’

On reflex, he made to leave, to honour the privacy of the ritual, but catching the interest on Kell’s face stayed him. He considered her perspective. Perhaps she did need to see it. To her, the Stormcasts were armoured giants, abstract and unknowable behind their helms. They had arrived in force, no different from the slaves of Chaos who had hunted her since birth. In the Realm of Shadows, the nomad would no doubt have brushed against illusion and misdirection. She had to see that the Knights of the Aurora were more than soulless fighters, that they fought for her, for her community, and for every other free inhabitant of the Mortal Realms.

They huddled closer to the fallen statue and watched.

The six Stormcast Eternals sat in silence until the Lord Relictor joined them. All but the Relictor removed their helmets revealing a range of features from princely stature to that of a weathered fisherman. Four males and two females comprised the group but only one was chosen by the Lord Relictor: the Lord Castellant himself.

‘Impossible,’ Kell choked. She recoiled and made to flee. ‘He died. I saw him fall, his body shoot up in a thunderbolt. This is devilry! ’

Ancanna grabbed her arm. ‘We are chosen of Sigmar, Kell, and recurring life is our gift, or our curse. Watch, and you will get your answers.’

Kell settled somewhat, perhaps more by curiosity than comfort, though remained coiled as if to bolt at any second. ‘You can’t die?’

Ancanna considered the question and attempted to form an answer that someone who was not Stormcast could appreciate. In truth, none but a Stormcast could appreciate it, not without experiencing the reforging, the loss of self, and the quest to piece together who they were and who they are.

‘Not under normal circumstances. Had your knife found its mark on the night we met, I would be going through the same. Sigmar claims us, remakes us, and sends us out to fight once more. Each time we are changed.’

Her expression remained mistrustful and anxious, displaying no change at Ancanna’s personal example. ‘Changed how?’

‘Watch,’ Ancanna said.

At the direction of the Lord Relictor, Kimmani stood astride the fire pit, head bowed and hands open. One by one, the others stood and removed the sigmarite plates of his armour. The Lord Relictor whispered a word of command which caused a cross section to grow from his staff. Without speaking, the five Stormcasts placed the Lord Castellant’s armour upon the staff, dressing it until the warrior’s shell was complete. Kimmani and the armour stared at one another.

‘They’re separating the man from the Stormcast,’ Ancanna whispered, ‘acknowledging the existence of both.’

The scent of sawdust rose from the fire pit, one that Ancanna recognised instantly. It smelled fresh and untouched by the flames. Varnish and oil scents joined the sawdust, and white smoke crept from the fire and curled around the circle of Stormcasts. It coalesced into figures working in a sawmill, treating wood, cutting and stacking. Outside, a man walked into view holding a lamplighter’s pole. The Lord Castellant remained in the centre but reached as though lighting the lamp outside the workshop.

One of the female Stormcasts spoke, describing the scene in the sawmill, Kimmani and the smoky figures matching her words with their actions. Her voice rose and the figures scattered in panic. The smoke darkened and the smell became that of wood and oil fires, not that of homely, open fires, but of destruction. Echoes of screams and shouting drifted on the wind and Kimmani looked up from his invisible work.

The female Stormcast continued weaving her tale of Kimmani dashing across a burning village towards a house surrounded by men with torches. His house. Amidst the dark smoke, a new set of figures formed in a lighter shade. They showed a woman shielding a young boy, trapped in the house. Though pain and determination showed on Kimmani’s face, the female Stormcast told of another burning building. There, the smoke changed into enemies, cruel men with spiked clubs and swords. Kimmani made wild swings at the air, still looking as though he ran forwards towards the house. A dozen smoky enemies fell before him before the storyteller described a man emerging from his own burning house with two charred, lifeless husks and Kimmani’s face turned ashen as he wept.

Another Stormcast took up the story of a man driven from his home who joined a group of bandits. Kimmani's expression turned shameful until the new storyteller evoked images of a coup inside the organisation. Kimmani roared and swung his arms around while the smoky head of a bandit leader parted from its body.

Each Stormcast took a turn to recount stories from Kimmani's past while the smoke and the Lord Castellant himself acted them out above the fire pit. The Lord Relictor provided a low, chanting undertone as he paced around the circle. With each story, the dull armour set upon the Relictor's staff regained some of its gleam. Further stories depicted a path of vengeance and unravelling the powers behind those who destroyed his home. They told of beasts and evil men slain by a man commanding a few, and then a whole host of warriors; a man that rallied others to his cause and struck at their enemies with precision.

Glories heaped upon the vengeful Kimmani until a sombre tale told of his demise hunting down a powerful warlord. Chasing rumour and illusion, Kimmani's force became spread through his homeland, some strung out in a long marching column, other smaller warbands split off to follow vague leads of the warlord's whereabouts. The warlord, however, made himself known at the head of one of two great hosts. They crushed Kimmani's thinly spread army between them.

One of the Stormcasts then stood. He walked to the Lord Castellant's armour, removed the boots, and then placed Kimmani's feet inside. His story told of Kimmani's reforging as a Stormcast and his training in Azyr. The stories that followed, all focused on Kimmani's deeds as a Stormcast, from fighting against the plague god in the Realm of Life, to taking the realm gate and falling at the Aurora Citadel in the Realm of Shadows. Each dressed him in another piece of his armour as their stories ended.

When the last Stormcast finished his tale, he placed Kimmani's helmet on the Lord Castellant's head and took his place, sitting in the circle in silence.

Lord Castellant Kimmani knelt before his chosen storytellers. 'I am Kimmastus of Winterdale Hamlet and Kimmani, Lord Castellant of the Knights of the Aurora. I am man and I am Stormcast. May Sigmar light my path and strengthen my blade.'

All present bowed to Kimmani, welcoming both man and Stormcast back to the Strike Chamber. The Lord Relictor then led the Stormcasts away and Ancanna followed suit, guiding Kell with him. They left the Lord Castellant to his meditation. This was his time to reflect and piece together the fragments of his memory and personality. Nobody would know the extent of his change until he returned.

'I don't understand,' Kell said as they left the fallen statue behind which they had hidden.

Still, she did not know what to make of them. They looked like the citadel lords in their heavy armour and with the avian designs on their armour. They lived for violence and cheated the grave as though they had struck a pact with the dark gods. Yet they had not killed her despite countless opportunities.

Tricksters, whispered the wind. Traitors and daemons. Kell ignored it.

Ancanna nodded. 'When the God-King reforges us, we are changed, lessened. We return to the fight but lose part of ourselves along the way. Some forget their past or their characters change. The most passionate warrior can become a soulless automaton, or the most ferocious may become feral. By our Rememberings, we ensure that every Stormcast knows who they were, knows their history and in what they believed. With the assistance of the Lord Relictor, the chosen few live that past with the

subject and recall it as clearly as if they had lived it themselves. When so many know the same history, it becomes less warped with each retelling, allowing the reforged to retain as much of themselves as possible.'

The wind rustled through Valescroft and scattered a few stones while Kell thought in silence. After a few moments, she nodded her understanding. 'Community is life.'

Her community kept its members alive physically. The Rememberings performed by the Knights of the Aurora kept its warriors alive mentally and spiritually.

'Community is life,' Ancanna agreed, gazing across the deceptive terrain of the valley, its seemingly innocent farmland and woodland fraught with dangers and all under the shadow of Chaos.

By the time he withdrew from his reverie Kell had melted away.

Chapter 27

Knight Errant

Ancanna approached the Lord Castellant who stood gazing out atop the balcony from which he had first addressed the people of Valescroft. The Knights of the Aurora had commandeered this building though none of the residents were in it when they entered. Kimmani leaned on his halberd, burnished silver armour framed by the deepest night of Ulglu. A dim orange glow tinged his left pauldron from the forges that rang unceasingly through the streets. Following his gaze, Ancanna realised that the Lord Castellant was not watching the other Stormcasts as they cleared rubble and fortified the town with a palisade fence and created choke points for attackers. Others set to restoring foundations and load-bearing structures of buildings damaged in the battle. Instead, he gazed towards the Aurora Citadel, shrouded in mist though it was that morning. The craftsmen of their former lives never left the Knights of the Aurora. Except, perhaps, one.

‘I saw your Remembering.’

At first, Kimmani gave no indication of hearing. When he replied, he kept his back to Ancanna. ‘I wanted you to watch. The human too.’

Human? Ancanna thought. Despite his sigmarite armour, his enhanced strength and resilience, Ancanna still considered himself both human and Stormcast. Or perhaps one as a progression of the other. Still wary from Gallus’ assessment of the Lord Castellant, Ancanna stepped closer. He harboured no fear of Kimmani, their defeat at the Aurora Citadel had given him a new appreciation of a guarded demeanour.

‘Now I understand why we pushed so hard out of the realm gate.’ Ancanna held his tongue before mentioning that such haste had caused the death of the Judicators, but something about the Lord Castellant’s downcast face told him he already carried the weight of those deaths. In truth, Ancanna had assumed their haste some kind of contest or rivalry with the Lord Celestant or leaders of the other Stormhosts. Reckless as many of his commands had been, Ancanna now appreciated the reasons for them, even if those reasons were undesirable in a strategy.

Kimmani nodded, still staring out. ‘A minute, maybe even seconds, that’s all I needed. Then I wouldn’t have had to watch my family burn alive.’ He gripped his fists around his halberd. ‘I vowed that I would never be too slow again.’ He stopped and released a long sigh. ‘And doing so has bloodied my hands further. Stay where you are, Liberator Prime, I do not require your comfort or your pity.’

The dangerous tone gave Ancanna pause. Comfort had not been on his mind. As Stormcast Eternals, they had to make the brutal decisions and fight through them. They existed to be thrown against the spiked bulwark of Chaos again and again, travelling through death and diminishing self until either the Realm of Chaos fell or reforging shattered their souls. They had to endure this because if those with every gift and advantage of Sigmar’s blessing could not, who could?

‘How about my allegiance?’ Ancanna asked with outstretched hand.

Kimmani turned and regarded him for a moment before clasping his arm as a brother. The Lord Castellant may have lost something in his reforging, the extent of which would become apparent only in time. It did not, however, stop him learning from a string of mistakes. Part of a Stormcast may diminish in reforging but, Ancanna realised, they could also grow. Death was the harshest

lesson of all, even for a Stormcast. Perhaps more so for a Stormcast who carried the agony of it through each reforging.

That thought alone gave Ancanna the hope that he could indeed follow Kimmani's command again, that the Lord Castellant had learned to temper his reckless haste. As a warrior, not even the Lord Celestant had bested him in the Pugilus Eyrie, the heart of the Knights of the Aurora's training complex in Azyr. Ancanna kept his reservations to himself--he owed Kimmani his bond as a brother warrior, at least, and would trust him to lead again.

'And now?' Ancanna asked. 'Do we fight with the mortals?'

Kimmani took his time. He gazed at the town around him and his gaze rested on an unfinished tapestry that stirred in the breeze. The stitching depicted generations of innocents that had been grown, tortured to the peaks and troughs of emotion, and harvested for it.

'We do,' he answered eventually, and paused again. 'We do. Sigmar, he...' Kimmani twitched and grasped his head in one hand. He used the other to steady himself against a wall, his grasping fingers crumbling the weathered stone of the ancient stadium. Light spilled from his helm's visor and glowed blue against the dusty ground. Crackles of energy sparked on the sigmarite.

'Lord Castellant?' Ancanna asked, steadyng the larger warrior.

'It is nothing. They can help us.' He repeated the words under his breath as though convincing himself. Or remembering something. 'I am entrusting the mortals' command to Knight Azyros Gallus. I understand you have spent considerable time in the mortals' company, therefore I entrust you with finding out what they know about this fortress and how we break it.'

'As you wish, sir. And yourself?'

'I am chastised and rebuked, Liberator Prime. I brought ruin upon my Strike Chamber. Our Lord Celestant was forced to abandon his campaign and not to only finish the task that I started, but to rescue my scattered warriors. The shame is too great.'

'Lord Castellant, what happened to you at the Aurora Citadel? I saw Sigmar attempt to reclaim you but then the storm seemed to disperse you. It--'

'Sigmar smite you for a mewling coward!' Kimmani roared. He threw Ancanna's arm from him, sending the Liberator Prime cartwheeling over the balcony.

Ancanna crashed to the ground from one floor up with a clatter of armour, the wind knocked out of him. He rolled with the impact, trying to use the momentum to bring him back to his feet but Kimmani leapt over the balcony behind him. Firelight glinted from a halberd's blade as it flashed down and paused by Ancanna's throat. Drawn by the commotion, Stormcasts rushed around, shouting for the Lord Castellant to stand down but none dared approach in case Kimmani lashed out at Ancanna.

'We are but the tip of the spear,' Kimmani continued in a growl, not noticing the crowd, 'merely a dagger without its shaft, and useless without the arm that wields it. The mortals, they support us and extend our reach. No. You were right, Liberator Prime. We are not here to deliver the realms to the free people, we are here to lead them. But I,' the halberd's edge scraped the skin between Ancanna's high gorget and the base of his helm, 'I am disgraced. I am unworthy to be that leader.'

The axe blade shifted and, despite himself, despite his courage and extensive training, Ancanna closed his eyes.

When he opened them, the blade had gone. From the ground, he watched the Lord Castellant stalk away, pushing through the circle of Stormcasts. Dizzied by the unexpected violence, Ancanna berated himself for failing to counter when Kimmani's grip shifted from companionable to offensive. He never expected his commander to lay hands on him in violence but a Stormcast had to be able to counter threats from both within and without. The God King Sigmar drilled this into them in Azyr for it was treachery and deceit that split his ancient alliance and opened the way for Chaos.

He shook away the afterimage of the blade at his throat and suppressed his anger. It had not been an argument or loss of temper that led to the attack but a sudden outburst. They had no disagreement, which concerned Ancanna most. Their Rememberings, and the ceremony around them, wrought the Knights of the Aurora together. Every Stormcast in the Strike Chamber had lived through the history of many of his brethren, shared in their triumphs and disasters. Because of this bond, Ancanna thought not of further conflict with the Lord Castellant, but greatly increased his worries over his commander's condition.

While considering whether to pursue Kimmani or allow him time for his choler to lower, an outstretched hand appeared before Ancanna. Not the heavy, silver gauntlet of a Stormcast Eternal, but slender, pale flesh. The Liberator Prime looked up to the lithe, if bedraggled, form of an Aelf.

His first thought was to snub the offer; he was Stormcast, strong and proud. He needed no help to pick himself up. But the Aelfs, they put great stock in symbolism. The Knights of the Aurora had rejected the help of this community once before and they had courted obliteration for it.

Ancanna accepted the hand but took his own weight as he stood, leaving their hands clasped as a gesture--he was a friend and accepted help, but could stand on his own. The thick fingers of his sigmarite gauntlet made the Aelf's look like twigs.

'Do you not speak now that your leader has returned?' the Aelf asked.

Ancanna realised that the Aelf had been speaking to him but his attention had been consumed by the Lord Castellant's departure. But that was a Stormcast issue, he reminded himself, and Ancanna's task was set. He composed himself and met the Aelf's gaze. Depths of sorrow and knowledge dwelt in those light, almond-shaped eyes. Every attempt Ancanna had made ended in disappointment and rejection.

'Orinstar,' Ancanna said and dipped his head.

It sounded more like a title than his name, but he responded nevertheless. Whether the Aelf appreciated the greeting emulated from those in the community, his face remained passive though it turned sharply to a glare when Gallus shoved past him.

'Prime! Are you hurt?'

'Just my pride, Gallus,' he replied, calming the Knight Azyros with open palms. 'You did warn me.'

Ancanna then recognised his commander's direction--he was walking away from the Strike Chamber. Ancanna made to go after him but the Aelf barred his path.

'Leave him.'

Ancanna's eyes narrowed to slits and a surge of anger and energy flooded him. 'Remove yourself from my path, Aelf, or I shall remove you.'

The Aelf stood his ground. 'Your leaders treat you little different from how the slaves of the dark gods treat their servants,' he said.

Ancanna took his hand back and stiffened. He locked the Aelf with a hard stare. Despite the behaviour of the Lord Castellant, Ancanna remained proud of the Knights of the Aurora. 'And what do you know of my enemy's methods?'

By his side, Gallus stood, hand on the hilt of his sword.

'More than most,' the Aelf replied, unperturbed by the two looming Stormcasts.

'Out of my way,' Ancanna growled. 'I shall not ask a third time.'

'He is leaving and you should let him. He left you orders to make another strike on the citadel, did he not? You are to learn from me and your friend here is to command in his absence. Unless you intend to lead your warriors into another massacre, you should heed him this time.'

The cold logic stopped Ancanna even if the Aelf's transparent insults set his blood aflame. He wanted to strike out. All his frustration and rage bubbled to the surface. His commander, and the greatest fighter in their Strike Chamber, had fallen to a pit of despair and volatility brought about by his own hand, by the very quality that made him such a passionate defender. Strife within a much-humbled Knights of the Aurora, their bodies and pride both beaten, was a far cry from the proud force that smashed through the realm gate and carved a bloody swathe through the warbands of Ulglu. Anger at his failure to counter the Lord Castellant's throw still tore at him. Worst of all, the Strike Chamber was in the same position they were weeks before, only with a much diminished army.

But striking the Aelf would only worsen their situation. He did not let go of his anger. Instead, Ancanna buried it and stoked his thirst for vengeance. He stored it all for a more worthy target. A glance in the direction of the Aurora Citadel was all he needed to focus the rage and let it simmer again beneath the surface. The citadel lords were due a reckoning.

The Aelf gave him a knowing nod, his expression gave nothing away though his eyes displayed an understanding. He turned deftly and made for the cleared street out of Valescroft and back towards the ruins. 'Come, storm warrior.'

Ancanna stumbled as he made to follow. While unhurt from the fall, the impact had further twisted one of the damaged knee joints of his armour. Sigmarite squealed as he dragged his foot in to regain balance.

'You'll not get far like that,' Gallus said. 'I will go in your stead.'

The Aelf shook his head. 'Ancanna alone was invited. He will have to leave the armour behind.'

Much as he did not trust the Aelf, Ancanna conceded that his armour would be more hindrance than protection if he found trouble considering how it hamstrung his dexterity. He motioned Gallus closer. 'We lack the time to wait for repairs. I will accompany him unarmoured.'

Gallus helped remove Ancanna's armour, plate by plate, leaning in to whisper his dislike of the decision while the Aelf watched with great interest.

'You know I'm going to advise you against this?' Gallus said.

‘And you know I’m going to ignore you.’

‘As long as we understand one another.’

When the stifling, heavy plates were removed, the Aelf appraised Ancanna in his padded tunic and breeches. ‘So you are human under all that.’

‘Once,’ Ancanna replied, his enhanced stature towering over the Aelf in both height and width. Dried sweat had clumped his cropped, black hair and stubble darkened his sturdy jawline. A triangular scar topped his right cheek near his eye. The Aelf inspected it.

‘Sword or dagger?’ he asked.

‘Nail,’ Ancanna replied. At the Aelf’s momentarily puzzled expression, he elaborated. ‘I was a builder prior to reforging. This,’ he gestured to the scar, ‘is a souvenir I carried through reforging.’

When removed from his armour, Ancanna rolled his shoulders and handed over his hammer to Gallus. ‘Look after these, my friend. They’re worth more than my life.’

‘I shall guard them with mine,’ the Knight Azyros responded. He looked the Aelf up and down then glanced toward the Aurora Citadel. ‘Make sure you guard your own.’

While Gallus left for the forges with Ancanna’s hammer and armour, the Liberator prime secured a knife at his waist. ‘Lead on, Orinstar.’

Chapter 28

The Temple Orina

Ancanna caught up to the Aelf and matched step along the overgrown path, occasionally scuffing his feet when the ancient cobbles broke through the grass and packed earth. Bereft of his armour, his stride was longer and his movements more fluid, and the wind flowed through his white tunic as they covered the ground to Art Eruditia. A couple of Prosecutors caught his eye where they took wing, watching his position. Perhaps with the Lord Celestant and the rest of the Strike Chamber on its way they could afford to be bolder. As they were, they might prevail in the odd skirmish but another assault on the citadel remained a daunting prospect.

‘Where are we going?’ Ancanna asked.

‘To the Temple Orina,’ the Aelf replied when they reached the sparse buildings at the outskirts of the ruined city.

‘A temple?’

‘Your leader tasked you to learn how to attack the citadel, did he not?’

‘He did. Yet I do not think he had divine intervention in mind.’

Ancanna’s gaze roamed the buildings, the alleys and streets, and their shadows. He had not forgotten the eyes of the enemy, those fleshy growths marring the ruined walls, nor the creature that had dragged one of his brother Stormcasts into the stone itself. Lacking armour made him feel exposed but also heightened his senses. Unrestricted by a visor, his field of vision expanded and every crumble of masonry or clatter of stones sounded clearer.

‘That is your way, is it not, soldier of storms? I see the twin-tailed comet fashioned on the hilt of your knife and heard your battle cries to your thunder god. There are, however, no gods in this place. No benign ones, at least.’

‘Then what do we seek in a temple?’

The column-lined avenue indicated religion, or what remained of one. Though most had fallen into disrepair, some retained arcane symbols etched into the stone. A chipped orb depicting the celestial school of magic crested one such column, while the keys of the bright wizard school stood crossed atop another on a backdrop of carved flame. Each was subtly changed as though the meanings had changed through the ages.

The Aelf looked at him derisively. Your eyes would see more if your mouth was closed, Stormcast. Be silent and observe.’

‘Very well,’ Ancanna said, biting his tongue at the Aelf’s tone. This place, though long ruined, was after all, more home to Orinstar than to him.

They approached a large structure of broken columns and partial floors where the street opened out and formed a rectangle around this central ruin. Other streets joined at the four main compass points, each leading to what once formed an entrance.

By the height of some of the stacked columns, the temple must have been immense, at least seventy feet tall, over numerous floors. Great statues, now faceless and pitted, stood in alcoves. Some

depicted warriors or hunters while others displayed scholars writing on slate or parchment. All were Aelfs.

‘Look down,’ the Aelf said.

The floor housed a colourful mosaic in near-pristine condition apart from near the western wall where it faded to grey stone.

‘The rest is sheltered from wind and rain by the partial ceiling,’ Orinstar explained, following Ancanna’s gaze. ‘What do you see?’

Ancanna studied the floor and the ochre and lapis lazuli patterns that framed it. His gaze swept over another hero story depicted as a masterpiece of monsters and magic and great deeds, all glistening as though made of stained glass. It resembled much that he had already seen and studied in Art Eruditia but he assumed that the Aelf expected something more than an answer citing a hero’s journey or comment on decoration so he looked closer.

‘I’ve seen this story before, throughout these ruins,’ Ancanna said, almost to himself as he became engrossed in the patterns and craftsmanship. ‘And before, at Valescroft, people were making a similar tapestry depicting a man that had just ridden out to fight bandits.’ He paused, thinking of the man’s despair when after expecting bandits, he had found daemons.

One thing stood out beyond all the other art. He strained his eyes as he studied the face of the hero rendered in crystalline images on the floor, though he scarcely believed what he saw.

‘This one looks like you.’

The Aelf nodded. ‘My uncle.’

‘This was an Aelf settlement?’ Ancanna asked.

‘It was a settlement for whomsoever wished to settle here,’ Orinstar corrected. He walked about the mosaic floor. ‘But as you can see, that was long ago.’

Under other circumstances, Ancanna may have appreciated the architecture and the history. In his life before being reforged as Stormcast, he would have marvelled at the construction and finish, wondering how it looked at its peak. But he had lost too many brother warriors since passing through the realm gate into Ulglu, and the Lord Castellant’s behaviour had soured his mood and eroded his patience.

‘Is there a weapon here?’ Ancanna asked. ‘An access route to use in a surprise attack, perhaps? How does this place help us take the citadel?’

‘Weapon.’ The Aelf muttered and shook his head. He raised his voice again. ‘You have tried your weapons, Knight of the Aurora, your weapons and armour of gleaming metal. Now, perhaps, you may consider the advantage of knowledge. That is what your leader commanded you obtain before he threw you to the ground, yes?’

Ancanna bristled. He ground his teeth to control his own temperament. The Lord Castellant would no doubt have already dashed the insolent Aelf’s head against the stone column, but Ancanna held the patience of a craftsman, a perfectionist. Even that had its limits.

‘Make your point, Aelf. I lack the time for your family history.’

The Aelf made no indication of noticing Ancanna's irritation. 'The reason you have seen this story depicted many times is because it has happened many times. It is still happening.'

It struck enough of a chord with Ancanna that the pieces of the puzzle he had seen throughout the valley began slotting together, patterns that had caught his attention but he had dismissed them as coincidence. 'The man that our Prosecutors saw riding out from Valescroft, he is one of these heroes?'

He nodded. 'A hero doomed to fail and bring about the tortured deaths of anyone he ever knew, though his intentions were as pure as any. Yes, the man you saw from--did you say they call it Valescroft now?--he is of the latest crop.'

'How--'

'I have lived through it, that's how I can know this.' Orinstar paced over the mosaic floor, his soft footwraps alighting gently over its surface. He moved in such a way that ensured Ancanna took in the room, its columns, carvings and artwork. 'I have watched generations rise and fall, always the same way. But now you have interrupted the cycle. I was one of the few who escaped when this city fell.' He swept his arm across the horizon where one of the walls was missing. 'All of what you see here was a farm. Valescroft is a farm. What grows in the fields merely sustains the real crop: the people.'

'The people,' Ancanna repeated flatly. He made to leave.

'Hope and despair,' the Aelf said as though it answered everything. It, at least, gave Ancanna pause. 'The enemy does not wish to eradicate the people here. If it destroys everyone, it consumes itself. It knows this. These ruins were once the feeding ground for the daemons of the citadel, just as Valescroft is now, just as a dozen more settlements scattered around these valleys are.'

Ancanna surveyed the ruins of a city long absent of life. 'This does not appear to be the work of an enemy that does not wish to eradicate its prey.'

The Aelf shrugged. Still no emotion crossed his delicate features. 'Daemons are difficult to control, even for one as strong as the lord of the citadel. They will glut themselves given the opportunity. For nine nights, the aurora will light the sky and daemons will come from the citadel, hunting and tormenting. This city fell on the fourth night, three harvests ago. The summoner lost control of his daemons and they feasted until everything was gone.'

'Except you, I note.'

The Aelf hesitated. 'I was...absent.'

'Absent when your city fell.'

'Not all of us are forged for war, Stormcast. Some are not so lucky in their armourers, others have talents beside courage. Myself, I was what you might call a squire. My uncle was the hero.' He gazed at the mosaic featuring the heroic Aelf and his voice became wistful. 'He was magnificent. His magical talents showed slowly at first and then accelerated at an extraordinary rate, far beyond what even Aelfs consider potent. It was he that slew the manticore that had preyed on our people for months before, and he who led hunting parties to cleanse the wilds of the beasts that made our roads impossible. When the aurora came and the enemy revealed itself, he sought to challenge the lord of the citadel itself.'

'We followed him, the greatest warriors of the city and their aides. That's when we saw our folly. We were so enthralled by his powers we never thought to question their origins or their incredible development. He was our salvation, our hero. We missed the mutations, and thought the headaches, twitches and conversations under his breath brought on by the stress of responsibility.'

'What happened to him?' Ancanna asked, already suspecting the answer.

The Aelf shook his bowed head. 'Horrors. After that thing tore itself from him... I fled before I could see the full extent. Do not look down on me; I told you I am not a warrior. Since then I saved who I could from these fell farms, moving about the wilds, hiding from the daemons and servants of the citadel.'

'You didn't leave?'

'And go where?' The Aelf spread his arms. 'Beyond these valleys, the roving warbands would have caught and slaughtered us within days. Here, at least, we can avoid the garrison, and the aurora warns us of the greater danger. We survive.'

Ancanna mulled over the words, his irritations lessened as he related to a life beset and hunted by enemies, doing what he could to keep as many alive as he could. 'You brought me here to reveal how we counter the threat.'

'I have told you everything you need, storm warrior. But keep your plans to yourself, for the enemy watches.' He gestured to one of the statues as an eye, that had not previously been there, twitched.

Dread crept through Ancanna's spine and into his limbs. Wishing he still wore his armour and had the haft of his hammer to grasp, he shot the Aelf a glare. Instead of his hammer, he grasped his knife. 'What treachery?'

'Lower your weapon, warrior, the enemy's eyes are everywhere. They see every move, hear every word.'

Except this.

The voice spoke into Ancanna's mind though it was not the Aelf's.

We said we could get you into the citadel and that we can.

How? Ancanna thought, not knowing whether the interloper could understand. One thing that Ancanna knew was that if they attempted to take the citadel through the same means, they would be taken apart in the surrounding city before they got near.

Deception plays to the very nature of this realm. It encourages it, rewards it. Did you not wonder why a band of the town around the citadel remained intact amidst the ruined outskirts and blasted fortress? There is another track. When the fortress fell, long ago, it fell from the inside. It can do so again.

Underground?

Out of sight. Somebody let them in. The Orinstar knows the way, though ask him not to fight. He is a saver of lives, not an ender. He always was.

Ancanna opened his mouth to question but the Aelf responded with a finger to his lips.

'There are some things that even the eyes of the enemy are blind to.'

And there are some things to which I am not, Ancanna thought as he watched the near-imperceptible shift of colours on the nearest statue. Turning as though to walk away, he suddenly shifted his stance and lunged at the statue. His bare hand grasped not stone but flesh. Had he been wearing his armour, he could never have moved quickly enough. Hauling back, he pulled the creature, extracting it from within the stone.

It was a thing of hard, sharp ridges with insect-like eyes and chamaeleonic in its colour shifts. With surprising strength, it thrashed and swung wildly. Its barbed tongue lashed Ancanna's face, tearing a line of hot, bloody pain.

'This is for Eurellus, daemon,' Ancanna growled as the carapace over its neck cracked and collapsed under his iron grip.

He kept up the pressure until the thrashing stopped and then he threw the creature to the ground. Casting about for the Aelf, Ancanna saw nothing but the ruins of a long deserted temple.

Chapter 29

Attack Vectors

'Reinforcements are coming,' Ancanna said, pacing the now-cleared central plaza of Valescroft.

By the time he returned, alone, from Art Eruditia, his hammer and armour awaited. Their absence had been liberating for a while but their familiar weight brought a feeling of strength and power. The gleaming sigmarite felt right around him.

After Kell had approached him with a proposition, Gallus and Castus had joined them in the plaza. They gathered around the remains of a fallen statue, now little more than a shattered plinth.

To the untrained eye, the streets resembled those of a farming community, discounting the many buildings that still lay in ruins from battle. Ancanna, however, saw choke points, murder holes and ambushes, all carefully planned and laid out. Further out, fences, rows of sharpened stakes and rubble fields waited to string out the enemy and slow their advance. The Knights of the Aurora lamented the lack of involvement from their Lord Castellant who would have offered a dozen more traps, all more devious and destructive than Ancanna could imagine. But Kimmani's humours did not stretch to construction or defence during his short return to the Strike Chamber.

'I am loathe to leave Valescroft with so small a garrison while such a sizeable enemy warband marches upon us,' Ancanna continued. 'The Lord Celestant and rest of the Cloudbursts shall reach us within a day. We can hit them at full strength.'

Kell shook her head. 'The way is open for a short time only and has room for only a few. If you wait for your friends, the path closes and you will be slaughtered in the outer defences again.'

'What kind of path is open for only a short time?' Gallus asked, his voice rife with skepticism.

'The path of the enemy,' Castus said, growling his irritation and mistrust. 'A path of daemons and deception.'

'Yes,' Kell replied. 'Daemons and deception, traps and danger. There is only room for a handful. If you want to get in, you need to be stealthy. And I have seen your efforts at stealth.'

Castus loomed over her. 'And you can guide us through, can you? How do you know its ways? Have you been there? Through this path of the enemy? Why? What business have you on a path of daemons?'

'No,' she said quietly, shying from the massive Stormcast. 'I saw the entrance, once, when I got too close. One night, I was caught out when the aurora burst the sky and...creatures came flying out.' She winced and shuddered before clearing her throat and searching for Ancanna's gaze. 'The Orinstar will guide us.'

'Orinstar?' Castus spat then turned to Ancanna. 'The Aelf that tricked you out of weapons and armour, Prime? He led you into an ambush! I'd sooner trust the Lord of Shyish to watch over my immortal soul.' He hefted his enormous hammer. 'Cast this trickster out and trust in the hammers that Great Sigmar gave us instead of wandering lost in some labyrinth.'

They had tried trusting only in Sigmar's hammers, Ancanna thought, and returned a much depleted Strike Chamber for it. Sigmar had sent them here to raise allies and that was what they would do.

‘We don’t know it was an ambush,’ Ancanna said, though he did not fully believe it. He reminded himself how many times Kell had saved them, and that if trust was to be found in the mortal realms, this bedraggled nomad was the place to start. By extension, that included the Aelf. In a realm where shadow and deception formed its very nature, how much could he trust anyone?

‘We go with the nomads,’ Ancanna concluded.

He had deliberated much on his return from Art Eruditia. With his options limited to a frontal assault doomed to fail, to wait and eventually be overrun or to leave in disgrace, whatever they did would be a risk. After Kell had sought him out once more, her option of an alternative route gave him the most tempting option. Moreso, it rang true to what Sigmar had intended for them on their quest into Ulglu--to raise arms with the free people they found there.

‘Then this time I’ll be watching your back,’ Castus said.

Ancanna smiled. ‘This time I’ll be wearing my armour but your guard is always welcome.’ He turned to the Knight Azyros. ‘Gallus?’

‘My orders are to return to the Lord Celestant. I will guide the Cloudbursts around our defences in Valescroft. Sonos already knows of the warbands stalking the valley and has given me command of the Angelos Conclave to harry them should they make too quickly for Valescroft. Go ahead with the nomads. Strike from the inside and we will make our attack from without. The Relictor will accompany you. In the meantime, trust your garrison to hold Valescroft and trust our Lord Celestant to bring you the support you require.’

Ancanna gazed across the building work still underway. The Stormcast Eternals worked much as he expected from the warriors of Azyr, but more mortals joined them. They lacked the strength and endurance of Stormcasts, and yet they plumbbed a depth of willpower and tenacity that belied their suffering. Mentally, they would never recover from the horrors visited upon them by the Aurora Citadel but even now, these few, reforaged themselves into something new. It was a concept that every Stormcast Eternal could relate to.

‘One more condition,’ Ancanna said.

#

‘I hope your bravery lasts, storm warrior,’ the Aelf said to Ancanna as they peered across a dark lake a few miles from the Aurora Citadel. Mist covered its surface and curled around the shins of the gathered Stormcast Eternals and nomads. The pre-dawn offered minimal light, too dim to glint from the heavy sigmarite armour. ‘But strength and bravery won’t defeat the citadel lords, not without intelligence. You were punished for arrogance when you first attacked the fortress. Through this route, you will have to do as I say. Can you do that?’

‘We are not the same force who rejected your folk in the ruins,’ Ancanna said. He took no offence at the snipe, for he had argued the case of the nomads. Shame welled in him that he could not offer a strong enough argument to sway the Lord Castellant but the grace of Sigmar had provided him a second chance. This time he trusted in trust.

‘For all of us, I hope so.’

‘The people of Valescroft,’ Ancanna said. ‘Did you do as we asked? Unless they have found safety, my shield and hammer remain between them and the enemy.’

Orinstar eyed him. Whatever he thought of the act did not show on his face. 'They are safe. We led those who wished it deep into the foundations of Art Eruditia.'

'And the rest.'

'Others wished to stay.' Orinstar paused, staring into Ancanna's war helm. For the first time, his expression changed, became stern, serious. 'Understand the sacrifice we make here, storm warrior. With so many joined to our community, our hope of secrecy is lost. The citadel lords will find us.'

The Aelf led them. He waded into the lake, sending black ripples across its surface while the Stormcasts stood back, scouring the sky and the twisted buildings surrounding the distant citadel. Those streets held memories of horror for each Stormcast present. Ancanna focused on the sails of a windmill that started rotating. A turquoise, fleshy substance formed half the sails which rippled and writhed before stilling again. There was always something changing in the ruins but little other than the wisps of green and blue mist that quested through empty windows like worms peering from tilled earth. With no immediate threat or sign of alarm, the Liberator Prime brought his attention back to the Aelf.

His advance did not slow. Even as his cheeks dropped below the waterline, he walked on unabated. That was when Ancanna noticed - he walked as though out of water, no slowing or change of gait. Even when submerged, no bubbles rose in the water.

Ancanna gripped his hammer and Castus turned to him.

'Think you can swing that underwater?'

'Under *that* water?' Ancanna shrugged. He thought back to his trick with banners that had deceived a Chaos warband and helped rescue some of the scattered Knights of the Aurora, and what the Aelf had said about their route. 'Not all the illusions of Ulglu are the doing of the Change God.'

He turned to the Stormcast Eternals behind him and raised his voice enough for them to hear. 'Fear no illusion, for the strength of Sigmar flows through you. Into the unknown, Knights of the Aurora.'

At the head of a handful of Stormcast Eternals, chosen from his much-diminished Strike Chamber, Ancanna and Castus strode into the black water in search of their guide. Instead of feeling water resistance in his strides, Ancanna ground his teeth at the tingle of magic. When his head submerged, the illusion broke to his eyes and the Liberator Prime surveyed a craggy landscape of dark purple rock forming gorges and rifts through which the nomads navigated ahead.

Beside the Liberator Prime, Castus looked up and drew attention to the mists forming above them, closing around them. Both Orinstar and Kell muttered under their breath, each failing to hide their arcane hand gestures in their sleeves.

'What trickery is this?' Castus said. He readied a wide stance to strike with his lightning hammer.

'Do not distract them, storm warrior,' another of the nomads said. 'They are concealing us.'

'Mistweavers,' Ancanna whispered. Thinking back to their campaign in the Shadessmire, he suspected this was not the first time that Kell had assisted them in such a manner.

'Stay close,' the Aelf hissed, though his usually melodic voice cracked, strained from the effort. 'The water is the first of many illusions on this path. Focus in front and only in front. Even secret paths are guarded.'

‘In front?’ Ancanna shook his head and ordered a few Liberators to act as rearguard. ‘We’ve been stung by ambush more than once in this realm, Orinstar. That has a way of making one cautious. If it’s all the same, we’ll be keeping eyes on our rear and flanks.’

‘It is not the same,’ he snapped. ‘Do as you will but I too have reason to keep your warriors alive.’

High rocky sides closed around them, enveloping the Knights of the Aurora into labyrinthine ways. Their advance, though it took a twisting route, lasted far longer than the time it should have taken to cover the distance to the citadel as though they had marched many times the miles. They pushed through rockfalls and ever-changing footing, sometimes solid ground, other times they waded up to their knees in what felt like thick soup. Chitinous creatures with spiked limbs assaulted them in these changes of terrain though the hammers of the Stormcasts smashed them aside. Occasionally the movement in the rocks resolved into more nomads, armed for fighting, who joined the Aelf in front. Kell, who walked apart from both the Stormcasts and the Aelf, remained quiet and brooding, often pausing and listening.

Long into their trek, a cry rose from the rearguard. One of the Liberators dropped to his knees, clawing at his bleeding visor and clutching the sides of his helm as blood flowed between the fingers of his gauntlets from his ears. Before the column stopped, a second Liberator coughed blood before collapsing, a thin, blue tentacle flailing from his mouth. The rest of the Stormcasts prepared for attack but nothing came. Weird lights played across the sky and things moved on the edge of sight but no enemies presented themselves.

‘I told them to look ahead only,’ the Aelf said, urging Ancanna for haste. ‘We’re getting closer. The land is in the grip of change.’

Ancanna frowned back, unsure of his strange words, but when he surveyed the path ahead, he made a second take. The craggy landscape evened out, resembling more like the bottom of a dried-out swamp, all silt and dead branches. As they pressed on, leaves sprayed in front of them like a geyser erupting. They returned to the ground not as plant matter but as sand. Other geysers fired in sequence until the swampy ground changed to desert. Quicksand claimed another Stormcast. It hadn’t fully dragged him down before sprouting green shoots and solidifying around him. The lightning strike of Sigmar’s reclamation shimmered, distorted against the mist rising from dewy shoots.

‘Does your courage waver, storm warrior?’ Kell asked. Her demeanour had changed. She was resolved to something and despite her surroundings, less wary than she had ever been around Ancanna, less concerned about danger.

Ancanna glared back at her. ‘We are up to the task, forager. Our courage is solid and we are conditioned to the terrors of Chaos, as much as one can be. Though I confess we are more adept at fighting enemies that we can hit.’

He didn’t voice it but another concern played on his mind. How could they defeat an enemy that thrived from emotion? For people to rise against the foe, something had to drive them, be it hope of victory or a change in circumstances, or a grim determination to fight for what they have. Either way, emotion underpinned their action. Even the Knights of the Aurora’s will to defend drew daemons like magnets. At least the Stormcasts could meet them with hammer in hand and smash them back to the Realm of Chaos. Could the other races, so long under the boot of Chaos, say the same? He glanced at Kell. They had courage, he gave them that. With organisation and the support of Sigmar’s warriors, perhaps they could fight, but he had not seen it yet.

He thought about the Knights of the Aurora that they had lost. Though some returned from reforging little different than before, and others displayed personality shifts, there were those who disappeared within themselves. None he knew had gone so far yet, but was it possible for a Stormcast to become little more than a battle automaton? Soulless. The idea chilled him. That such empty warriors might provide their most effective weapon against the dark gods troubled him further.

‘You will need more strength than that in your arms,’ Kell said. At a signal from the Aelf, she took the axe from her belt and etched a symbol into the ground followed by a wide circle. A helical staircase of crystal unscrewed from the ground and disappeared into the gloom overhead. ‘Our way in. Last chance to turn back.’

‘There is no turning back,’ Ancanna said, steeling himself for battle.

Even without their defences and ambushes, the citadels lords had proved themselves formidable. Considering Kell’s change of attitude, he expected immediate resistance. If her intentions had become nefarious, the Stormcast Eternals would be prepared. A wave of his hammer beckoned the Strike Chamber closer as Kell moved towards the back.

‘Form on me, Knights of the Aurora! Liberators to the fore; join your shields with mine. Whatever awaits us atop this staircase, we face with the strength of Azyr. The citadel lords seek to crush Lord Celestant Sonos Cloudburst just as they bloodied us. Remember your swollen pride, brothers, remember the sky lit with Sigmar reclaiming our fallen. Remember that we strike down the tyrant for neither ego nor vengeance, but for the people of the mortal realms.’

A chorus of clashing sigmarite replied and the Knights of the Aurora scaled the staircase.

Chapter 30

Battle for Valescroft

The army numbered beyond anything the Dreadguard Ulgoloth had led. Warbands had flocked to Axanthral's call to arms, each lured with a promise never to be fulfilled. Arcanites from the floodplains of the Isai Cataracts marched alongside Versigoths who dwelt in the caves at the farthest end of the valley complex. Other minor warbands joined the cause, some wearing only loincloths but with azure tattoos covering their bodies, while other carved symbols of their allegiance into their flesh.

They trampled the crops planted by Valescroft's people under metal boots and taloned feet, just as they would trample the meagre resistance of Valescroft. Banners of azure and violet depicted Silver Towers and the horn of Axanthral the Cultivator. Another banner flew over the armoured might leading the cultists and daemons, that of the Eclipse. The nightmare banner showed a black sun made of screaming, tortured faces atop the crossed sword and mace of the Dreadguard. Thoughts of another banner, one of light, nagged at him but the potential of his ability to influence at the head of such a host swept Ulgoloth along. Kept the Dreadguard in charge.

Though the daemonic elements of his force railed at a daylight march, they had a Harvest to complete. A depleted force of Azyrite defenders could not hope to resist the earthshaking might at the command of the Aurora Citadel. Over the footfalls of his army, thunder rumbled from another source. Clouds gathered from the west, dark and foreboding, enough to block out the twin suns of Ulglu. Ulgoloth welcomed them. He welcomed the impact they would have on the psyches of his prey, stealing the light from the world and raging about them as they stand impotent against its wrath. More fear for his daemons to feast on.

Atop the second ridge that they climbed since marching from the citadel, Ulgoloth gazed upon the distant town, allowing his army to flow around him. Defences. It seemed that some glimmer of spirit remained in the crop. After watching their hero fall and their hopes crushed, they should have wallowed in the depths of despair, and yet they resisted enough to raise a defence. It irked the Dreadguard. Of course, the pikes and palisade would splinter before the scale of his army. Mist obscured the far horizon but his focus remained on the end of Valescroft. Except a few, of course. He needed to leave a few, living in abject horror, tormented by their memories, to form the root of Axanthral's next crop.

Putting aside his confidence in victory, Ulgoloth paused to at least consider the defences. Warriors from Azyr took him by surprise during his previous venture and he would not fail this time. For a leader who had not long stepped out of a citadel surrounded by fortress walls and a city of magic and daemonic horrors, the improvised fortifications struck him as pitiful. Yet still he refused to let overconfidence sway his actions despite his thirst to join battle.

'Gorecleaver,' he rumbled. Something sparked in his mind at that name, perhaps he had another task in mind for the warrior, but the truth eluded him. He ignored it.

But Erik Gorecleaver failed to acknowledge his lord's summons. Instead, he called for Andros.

A rune-clad warrior in heavy armour broke ranks and bowed head before the Dreadguard. A horn mimicking that of Axanthral's own adorned his midnight blue helm amidst etched and painted symbols. The enlarged eye of a leopard stared out from his breastplate, flicking its gaze around.

'Your command, Dreadguard.'

Ulgoloth pointed to an area near Valescroft, and another between the ruins of Art Eruditia and Valescroft. 'I want you and Koss to take a battalion each and attack from the woods. One battalion in each; I don't care which.'

The warrior grunted. 'Excessive caution. We need not--'

Ulgoloth backhanded the warrior so hard that he spun around before hitting the ground. 'I neither asked for nor wanted your opinion. Press the attack and then withdraw to the citadel and rejoin the Eclipse there.'

Six pairs of taloned feet stepped on the downed warrior before he rolled to his feet and decapitated the last daemon to do so. 'By your command, Dreadguard.'

Andros loped off, barging his way through daemons and cultists, sparing none that crossed his path a dig from the haft of his axe. He took his rage out on Koss and the two exchanged oaths of vengeance before leading their chosen fighters away to the separate woods.

Defences, thought Ulgoloth, but no sign of defenders yet.

#

Knight Azyros Gallus Swiftwing waited out of sight. Everything in place, they watched the vanguard approach. Untrained, overeager mortals ranged ahead of the army, their religious fervour, screaming barely intelligible praises to the Changer of Ways, causing them to break ranks and surge forward as a disorganised rabble. They paid little attention to their surroundings, and many fell as they reached the first rubble field. Piles of uneven rocks made for uneven footing, the shifted under the weight of the cultists, trapping and breaking ankles. Whether the cultists behind saw the others fall or didn't care, they kept going, trampling the fallen.

The rabble had no plan once they reached the palisade, resorting to hammering against the fence with their bare hands, ignoring the pain and ineffectiveness as blood slicked their wrists and down their forearms. The scattered rabble compressed like a concertina, crushing some bodies.

Momentum killed many others. The tide of cultists pushed those at the front on. Unable to change direction in the press of bodies, they ran headlong into sharpened stakes. The wooden defences bowed under the weight of up to three cultists skewered by the same stake.

Firus' shockbolt bow fired a hail of arrows into the head on attack. With so many targets, he couldn't miss. Lightning crackled on impact, scorching those nearby as it killed its target. Only a couple more bows joined Firus' as they felt the loss of their Judicators keenly. For all the damage they caused, against the scale of attackers, they merely blew against the wind.

They could last only so long against such a force. At least the defences slowed them for the time being, though the palisade shuddered. Being a structure of wood, raised in haste, it had already lasted longer than expected. The ranks of enemy waded through their dead to get near which slowed the frontal attack a little. Gallus glanced to the flanks and the woodland both sides. He saw what entered there. Once they emerged from the trees, Valescroft would be overrun.

With the second wave of cultists crashing into the back of the first came the first of the magic. Groups of cultists formed circles and joined together in fell chants, arms raised to beseech their gods. At the chants' crescendos, a cultist charged to the centre of each circle where another opened them up from neck to navel with a sacrificial knife. Magic exploded from them. One sent a hail of magical energy which bombarded the palisade, killing half a dozen cultists as it passed. Daemonfire consumed another. From the blaze, a gibbering mass of pink flesh leapt. Fire crackled at its fingertips

and a maw that covered most of its torso jabbered in a daemonic tongue. The thing capered and jumped atop the shoulders of cultists, leapt from head to head while unleashing its fires towards Valescroft. Lightning from Firus' shockbolt bow blasted that one apart though he had only one bow and the enemy threw many circles of cultists forwards.

A creak and crash signalled the first palisade wall falling. Cheers ripped through the enemy. As the celebrating cultists and daemons charged forwards, thunder met them. Smoke clouded along a line and solid shot tore the front line apart. A small group of men and women from Valescroft shouldered rifles and blunderbusses, and gripped their flintlock pistols before falling back to the next palisade at the direction of a unit of Liberators who immediately formed a shield wall between their allies and their enemies. Six Retributors hit the enemy in a tempest of lightning hammers, each blow releasing a peal of thunder and bludgeoning a handful of enemies. As quickly as they struck, the Retributors fell back with the Liberators and mortals, having cleared the wave of foes.

Soon, multiple breaches occurred at once. Where momentum at first punished the army of Chaos, now it drove them through defences too quickly for the defenders to organise. Gallus leapt from his position, his wings of light bursting to life, his sword darting to intercept blows meant for Stormcasts and mortals falling back to their next line of defence. Three quick thrusts took as many cultists down, followed by a wing-assisted jump to remove him from harm's way before he swooped atop a blue, fiery daemon and sent it screaming to the Realm of Chaos with a single plunge of his blade. Slings pelted his armour while he dodged magical discharge and gouts of daemonfire.

With the outer defences gone, they reached the buildings. The Valescroft militia and former Judicators stationed themselves within buildings while Liberators and Retributors performed snap ambushes. It amazed Gallus just how skilled Ancanna's guerilla force had become at those. They waited like a saurian beast with its jaws agape before snapping on the enemy and melting away.

On the streets of Valescroft, they bled the armies of the citadel lords for the second time though the defence was not without its casualties. The lightning of Sigmar's reclamation speared down while an enormous storm brewed overhead.

Time of day lost all relevance under that sky. The tang of ozone hung thick, full of potential. Gallus would have given his wings for the Lord Relictor to fight alongside him and release the power of that storm. Instead, he used his wings to cover defence and exploit openings in the enemy's surge.

They were running out of traps. Cultists overran their outer defences and packs of daemons charged through the streets in whirlwinds of destruction and fire. Gallus put away thought of how long they might hold out and focused on the flow of battle, striking where his instincts told him.

#

The Dreadguard watched from atop the ridge. The pitiful defence failed even to hold back his sacrificial vanguard. His blade thirsted. His mace urged him to join the fray and embed it into the skulls of his enemies. His armour longed to bathe in the viscera thrown back by both weapons. Scents of sweat and magic and the sulphurous tang of daemonfire drew him into the feel of battle. More potent still, the writhing mass from the Boon of Tzeentch demanded his personal involvement, severing the threads of the enemy leaders. Only his commander's will kept him atop that ridge directing his forces.

A regiment of marauders from some wretched warband circled around the back of Valescroft to the most likely escape route into the ruins. They would ensure none survived should the mortals and

Stormcasts break cover. Given how his army swarmed the streets, they would either break soon or every one of them would die.

Movement in the woodland to his right caught his eye. At least one of his flanking forces made reasonable time. They had the place surrounded in rows upon rows of Chaos sworn warbands and daemons. With a grunt of satisfaction in his victory, Ulgoloth, Dreadguard of the Aurora Citadel, pushed through his host towards the streets of Valescroft. He would ensure the resistance suffered in their last moments.

As he took his first step, a fog rose on the old road into the valley. It formed too quickly for mist. Perhaps low-lying cloud pushed by a strong wind. It moved fast and headed for Valescroft.

Angels burst from the cloud. Great, silver-clad warrior angels that flew like lightning left streamers of coloured light behind them. They emerged in two columns and unleashed divine wrath atop his army. They plucked hammers and spears from the air itself as though new bolts of lightning coalesced in their hands every time they hurled them into his ranks. The two columns dissected the Dreadguard's army, cutting it into three. When the front of each column reached the rear of Ulgoloth's force, they circled around for another pass, raining death as they did.

Before his cultists and daemons plugged the furrows rent by the angels, a cacophony of roars rumbled over the din of battle. The cloud erupted with scaled creatures, the kin of Dracothion itself, bearing riders of silver with long spears. Lightning burst from the beasts, forming a spider's web of supercharged energy that set ranks of his force ablaze. Then the riders levelled their spears and charged.

Behind them, organised ranks of shields followed. More warriors wielding great weapons: hammers, glaives and axes. A volley of lightning charged arrows soared over their heads and hailed onto his army where a block of armoured archers emerged from the cloud.

‘Eclipse!’ Ulgoloth called and his warrior elite rallied to him. ‘Draw blades with me. Something worthy of our attention has arrived.

The dread unit pushed their way through a sea of cultists and daemons to meet the newcomers head on. This battle was far from over. They outnumbered this warriors of Sigmar many times over, the town's defences lay in ruins, and the Eclipse had yet to enter the fray.

Chapter 31

Chambers of Madness

Atop the helical staircases, their entrance into the Aurora Citadel opened up into a hell they did not expect.

Disorientation knocked Ancanna backwards. He crashed into the other Stormcasts feeling the same effects. His vision distorted in a swirl of colours. Clarity soon returned to his eyes, but he preferred not knowing. His ears, however, became overwhelmed with buzzing.

Though they entered the chamber through two staircases, the Knights of the Aurora and nomads emerged from at least six. Ancanna's stomach churned as, according to his eyes, he stood upright on the wall. He creased a tapestry showing a magical storm under his feet. It overloaded his senses and set his head spinning. His brother Stormcast Eternals and the nomads spread across the walls, floor and ceiling, equally disorientated.

'What manner of sorcery have you brought us to?' Castus asked, shaking his head at the dizziness. He held himself steady against a chandelier that, by rights, should have been another wall from Ancanna's perspective, and by logic should have been on the ceiling.

'The kind we are forged to cast down, Retributor,' Ancanna chided.

A mote of magic zipped through the chamber, between the legs of Stormcasts and around Kell's head before shooting out the way it came.

'Searching magic,' the Lord Relictor said. His voice maintained its depth of wisdom, like it was pulled from a time long past, showing no discomfort at their surroundings. 'Someone knows we're here.' He paused, chin lifted as though sniffing the air. 'And...something rises to defend this place.'

An eruption of emerald fire engulfed Ancanna. He barely lifted his shield in time. When the flames died, the silver atop his battle helm emerged blackened with soot.

'Relictor,' he called. 'What sense do you make of it?'

The Liberator Prime tried moving but his limbs rebelled at the idea of walking along the wall. The buzzing then resolved into a swarm of tiny insects. They flew through the Stormcast' visors and clouded around the nomads' bare heads, biting and crawling into their noses, ears and mouths.

'Illusion,' the Aelf said, choking on insects as his mouth opened. He grabbed Kell's hand. 'Use me as your anchor.'

A searing hot helm felt like no illusion to Ancanna and perspiration dripped down his face and neck. The insects fed on him, irritating his skin, making him itch and flinch at every bite. Orinstar and Kell, though one appeared on the ceiling and the other on the floor, moved together. The impossibility of it dizzied Ancanna further. He staggered and reached out for Kell's shoulder for balance. It turned his perspective, along with his stomach, but his vision righted itself and he stepped along the floor.

'Take her hand,' Ancanna commanded, spitting out insects, when Kell reached out for the Stormcast Eternal behind her.

The Retributor, Castus, grunted. His head rocked between his high gorget and the halo of sigmarite behind, and he steadied himself with his enormous hammer. 'I am...Stormcast. I will not take...hand of a mortal.' The big warrior dropped to one knee.

Another blast of flame heated the room. It washed over Castus. One of the fighting nomads escaped only by the reactions of Ancanna hauling him behind his shield. Even then, his garb smouldered and he smothered fires as they caught. The scent of burning hair filled the room as thousands of insects turned into smoke. With the insects gone, the sensation only increased as their venom took effect, not deadly but fiery and painful.

‘You *are* Stormcast,’ Ancanna snapped. ‘And you will do as commanded, Retributor. We eschewed the help of these people once and we bled for it. Let us not repeat our mistake.’

Grudgingly, Castus took the woman’s offered hand. It looked tiny in his armoured gauntlet but it righted the swaying Retributor. Ridiculous as it looked for such mighty warriors to be led out by the hand of a mortal woman, the others followed suit, at once knowing the citadel would damage more than their pride as they fought through its traps.

As the Aelf left the room, a sea blue fist slammed into his gut and forced him back inside. He coughed and dribbled blood over his clothes. Another gout of flame burst inside the chamber.

Ancanna swung Kell and Orinstar behind him and surged for the exit, shield raised. ‘Get the others down,’ he said to the nomads, then raised his voice for his brother Stormcast Eternals. ‘Master yourselves, Knights of the Aurora! We topple this citadel from the inside.’

He ploughed into the adjoining chamber alone. The instant he passed through the doorway, the venomous itching and burning ceased. The sudden absence of sensation hit him as much as it had distracted and irritated him before. With an enemy nearby, the dizziness and nausea also left him and his senses grew more acute. Too acute. Sounds and smells assaulted him, bells and sirens and sulphur and lavender and ammonia. Lights flashed all around him and smoke filled his mouth and nose bringing a score of flavours and scents that clung to his throat. All of it too fast, too intense to identify individual sensations. With so much movement in the chamber, Ancanna failed to identify his enemy. A blow glanced off his shield. His return hammer strike made the familiar clang of sigmarite on sigmarite.

‘Keep back!’ he shouted, consigning his allies to a chamber which erupted in flames at random.

The Liberator Prime pushed further into the chamber. Keeping his shield up, he searched for the wall with his weapon hand. A second blow smashed against his helm and set his ears ringing along with the countless other noises that hammered his senses. The third blow came soon after. Ancanna took it on his shield, twisting to trap what felt like an arm and cudgel against the wall. It was not just the Angelos Conclave that earned the Swift their name. He couldn’t miss with his hammer. As his enemy fell, the sights, sounds and smells receded to reveal a bare chamber of wooden floorboards and claret wall coverings around a cold, open hearth. With furniture, it might have suited a merchant’s house in the world before Chaos dominion.

Nomads and Stormcast Eternals followed. They stepped over the pale corpse of some warped form of man and daemon, all muscle and mutation, but none saw an exit to the chamber. And the floorboards began to disappear. It wasn’t rot, they just ceased to exist, leaving a starless void below. Kell tested it as an illusion but her foot indeed went straight through where the boards had disappeared from.

They needed no order. Everyone searched for an exit either by vision or through what little talent for magic they had or through the mysterious craft of the Lord Relictor.

This time the disappearing floor was real and the fireplace the illusion. At Kell’s searching hands, the hearth opened like a door and they all piled through. They made through a dozen more rooms, each

bending their perceptions of reality, laden with traps. One robbed them of all senses except touch, and even that lied to them, forcing them to stumble their way through traps and stabbing enemies. Others curved and misdirected them with paths that defied geometry and physics.

Castus growled his displeasure while hefting his lightning hammer. 'Sorcerer's tricks! Give us something we can hit!'

He got his wish. A complex of corridors flooded with daemons. Their routes split, rounded, doubled back, repeated patterns on their flagstones and even changed behind them, all meant to disorient them. He was the first to wade in, crushing the creatures three and four at a time with thunder and lightning from his hammer. Castus cleared the first wave of daemons before the rest of them had caught up. Subsequent chambers required a more tactical approach, Liberators defending, nomads, Retributors and the Lord Relictor attacking.

The nomads, despite their meagre armaments and diminutive stature compared to Stormcast Eternals, gave a solid accounting for themselves. Though Ancanna and the Knights of the Aurora took the brunt of the danger, the nomads made their presence known. They made quick progress through the daemon infested corridors and after ceaseless attack, chattering daemons and the stink of burned flesh, a chamber of sand-coloured stone and silence took them aback. Their entrance sealed behind them but it mattered little as Ancanna's band held no interest in going back. They either broke the citadel or were broken within its confines.

Whispers began sounding in Ancanna's ears. The twitches and mutters coming from the others shows they experienced much the same. Castus dropped to his knees before a statue, muttering to himself and shaking his head in dismay.

'Keep your wits, Stormcasts,' Ancanna said while trying to block out whispers of failure, of weakness, that he would wander these halls forever, or never find his way out of this chamber. He reminded himself that, before Chaos had taken it over, before the daemon spirit had raised its defences, this was a working structure, lived in. The chamber would have an exit.

Unless it was a defence system for those people too, a draught whispered.

He cast around for the source of illusion, triggers, traps or levers, and noticed that not everyone had entered the chamber with him. Kell and Orinstar were missing, along with a couple of Stormcasts. He called out but heard no response. The walls were too thick, he told himself, despite the whispering chamber telling him otherwise.

A flicker of movement came from one of the carvings, a winged warrior holding sword and lantern, fending off insurmountable numbers of men and daemons which surrounded him from above and below..

'Impossible,' Ancanna said.

The other Stormcasts, and single remaining nomad, joined him to inspect the bas relief when Ancanna caught a reflection on the silver plate of the Lord Relictor. The wall behind them stretched. A great avian head formed on its surface. As quick as a thunderbolt, its beak snapped over the Liberator beside Ancanna and severed the warrior in two. Ancanna and Castus swiped with their hammers, the nomad threw his hand axe, and the Lord Relictor unleashed a web of lightning from his reliquary. All but the lightning missed their target, and that merely danced across the surface of the head as it disappeared back into the wall.

Their numbers diminishing, their search became ever more difficult and dangerous.

#

Axanthral's many eyes focused on the battle at Valescroft.

He watched every angle in the smoke-filled Chamber of a Thousand Eyes. Through the apparatus that spun around him, he exerted his influence over shoals of screamers and masses of horrors, guiding their attacks and seeking weakness in his enemy's force. He drank in the severing of every thread, revelled in dozens of plans created, abandoned, succeeded and foiled on the battlefield. The surge of energy dizzied him if he let it but he kept his wits. In doing so, he picked up on the stirring of a titanic entity. There was only one possibility.

The daemon spirit was agitated. Axanthral opened his mind to the daemon. No. Not agitated. Furious. Another emotion fed through Axanthral's link with the creature. He concentrated on it. The daemon spirit evoked defensiveness, a sense of violation and territorial anger. Intruders walked the citadel.

The daemon spirit was under attack.

Axanthral slammed his sacrificial dirk down into his daemonic platform and twisted the blade. Though the daemon bucked, Axanthral forced it steady by power of will, a dominance long since established over the creature. They could not have even *reached* the citadel. The battle was far from them and the defences strewn through the city surrounding the citadel failed to trigger a single warning. Then he noticed the second force of Stormcast Eternals emerge from the smoke and smash into his army.

'Ulgoloth!' the sorcerer shrieked. His outrage set his arms shaking. Where was his garrison? He led the combined warbands at Axanthral's order but the Dreadguard was supposed to have left a garrison.

'Gone for glory, have you? Swine!'

Motes of magic bloomed around Axanthral and surrounded him in a purple aura. His outburst emanated a magic charge that sped up the turnings of the machinery in the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes and sent sparks crackling along its surface.

He reached out with his mind, through his links with the lesser daemons across the battlefield and through the thousand eyes that littered the valley. The Boon made Ulgoloth easy to find. Already returning to the citadel. Good. Axanthral still cursed the name of the Dreadguard, but took confidence in his return.

A surge of magic spurred his daemonic mount forwards. With the daemon spirit distracted by the intruders, none of Axanthral's eyes within its walls offered him and insight. He would rouse the garrison himself. A range of spells entered his mind, each a different way to wreak his displeasure upon the garrison, have them wail in agony, and then force them to defend.

Tendrils of magic quested from his fingertips and shot through the citadel. They snaked out of windows and spiralled down towers, shot across walkways and slid under cracks in doorways. Dozens of rooms took time to explore so he send more and more tendrils out. One came back. It revealed a concentration of psyches he recognised as the Eclipse. Below him. Deep below him.

'Catacombs,' he hissed. 'There is nothing for you there. Your former charges are now my slaves.'

Axanthral began the long descent from his sorcerous chamber to the catacombs in which the Dreadguard believed the former rulers of his measly kingdom hidden away. Another tendril of magic

shot back to him. His path neared that of the intruders. Powerful as Axanthral was, he always preferred another to die for him and that would be the garrison, so changed his route to avoid the interlopers.

With the daemon spirit under threat, its defences fired throughout the entire complex of towers and chambers that constituted the fortress and its crowning citadel. Axanthral unleashed a storm of magic on his route through the mad hell unleashed upon him. The illusions, he ignored, but the traps and minor daemons posed as much threat to him as to the intruders. Their allegiance lay with the daemon spirit and no power of Axanthral's could wrest them from it. And so he destroyed them in gouts of magic. Most, he banished to the Realm of Chaos, but some, those that dared to hurt him, he obliterated from existence.

He needed no ritual or combination to enter the catacombs. The constellations in the chamber prior to it bowed to his will and opened the way for him. Spells of the utmost agony prepared to unleash upon the garrison, Axanthral entered the catacombs.

Before his disc fully passed the doorway, Axanthral's eyes widened in horror. Stinging tentacles seized him. As they wrapped around him, clamping his arms to his sides, barbs dug into him, tearing his parchment-like flesh and wiping every prepared spell from his mind.

The Quietus Apparatus had him. Half a dozen of the garrison, those that his Dreadguard named the Eclipse, hanged from its daemonic nooses all under the banner of the Lambent Protector. He was next.

Chapter 32

Allegiances Revealed

The silence was overwhelming.

Kell eyed every shadow, corner and idol in a chamber that had the hallmarks of a place of worship. Effigies of old, dead gods lay broken or defaced and replaced with images in many different forms, though all displayed the same symbol of an eye and talon.

Only two of the storm warriors remained with them after the door before them had disappeared before their eyes. No illusion, no way through, it just vanished, replaced with stone. None had seen her do it. Their eyes were slow and she had lived a life where her daily survival relied on evading notice. And, of course, Ulglu rewarded deception.

Orinstar sidled closer to her. His presence gave her comfort and warmth but also a feeling of foreboding. He said it would come to this, for the two of them to make a decision. The Aelf who assumed ultimate responsibility for the Third Moon Collective, and Kell who had spent the most time with these storm warriors.

She observed them, saw how they watched for danger and how they kept herself and Orinstar behind their shields wherever they moved. An exit to the chamber, a trap door set in the ceiling, quickly became apparent to her and Orinstar's eyes also flicked to it. He also knew but would not let on to the storm warriors.

This was the decision they had talked about.

Leave them, whispered the wind.

#

The fight was glorious.

Enough to make him forget himself. It wasn't the blood or the death that swept him along, but the challenge and tactical nuances, those subtle changes in formation and approach as orders filtered through. Above all, it was the sheer *chaos* in which it all happened. Islands of order in the warp of chaos. The *thing* in his chest writhed and pulsated, thriving on the passion and vehemence of the combatants on either side. And it consumed all thoughts of Geltz Valewarden, leaving the Dreadguard Ulgoloth in his stead.

It exceeded even the battle at the foot of the Aurora Citadel, for this time they had a more even match with the warriors of Sigmar instead of a slaughter of magic. Clashing weapons with a glaive-wielding behemoth of a warrior in the streets of Valescroft, daemons and angels clashing above him and the smell of daemonfire consuming buildings, all invigorated the Dreadguard. The Stormcast Eternal had skill and kept Ulgoloth at distance with his longer weapon. It took a flash of daemonfire from an exploding horror to distract the warrior enough for Ulgoloth to work his way inside the guard. From there, his daemonic blade found its mark between the joints of his foe's heavy armour. He smashed the warrior aside with his mace after the killing blow landed.

His own distraction cost him. A spear punched his breastplate, and though the metal held, it spun him around. As he turned, the claws of some draconic beast raked his helm, the force of the strike batting him to his knees.

'See your end, slave to darkness,' a haughty voice called. 'You face the wrath of Sigmar.'

His new foe presented himself. A turquoise crest on the warrior's helm flowed in the swirling winds and his ornate armour gleamed despite scuffs and scorch marks born of the greater battle. Two warriors of the Eclipse closed ranks around him and blocked any chance of a third blow against their leader.

Ulgoloth barked a booming laugh while he regained his footing and readied his weapons. 'Come then, wrath of Sigmar. Show me the extent of your god's power.'

The Eclipse knew better than to interfere even though their leader faced a mounted foe. Instead they faced off against the heavily armoured elites that served as an honour guard. Two lords of battle clashed in the central plaza of Valescroft. Daemon weapons fought god-forged sigmarite with each strike of metal ringing out in a resounding bass note. Neither gained advantage, for while the Eclipse avoided interfering in the challenge, they positioned themselves close enough to restrict the movement and advantages of the enemy commander's mount.

Their battle reverberated through the unstable structures of the town. Not all buildings showed the signs of hasty repairs, and the largest structure in the plaza creaked as daemonfire consumed its wooden frame. The draconian beast opened its maw and Ulgoloth dodged aside to evade the blast of lightning that shot from within. Instead of incinerating the Dreadguard, it destroyed a load-bearing support in the burning structure causing it to collapse in a plume of rubble and smoke.

It separated the Eclipse from the Stormcast elites, both abandoning their combat to strike other parts of their opposing forces which filled the gap. Ulgoloth waded through Stormcast Eternals with the Eclipse at his side. They fought hard, these warriors of Azyr, every one that fell did so with the fight of a hero.

He took a moment of reprieve to ascend the partial staircase of a fallen building. Holes in his force needed plugging and daemons ran amok, attacking almost at random. He cursed Axanthal who was supposed to be guiding the daemons. He sent a flurry of commands through his army using some of the more lucid cultists to deliver them, along with two of the Eclipse where he needed someone trustworthy to ensure his will was done. The Stormcast reinforcements had hit them hard. The suddenness and speed of their attack dealt them a huge blow. The sight of one of his own secondary forces emerging from the woodland to the west gave him a mote of satisfaction though he caught no sign of the flanking force he sent into the swampy woods on the opposite side of Valescroft.

Focusing on the woods, he caught one noise above all others. A primal braying burst from the trees and carried over the battlefield, something that sent a shudder through the writhing Boon inside the Dreadguard. As the pinpoint focus of single combat left him and he took a calmer, strategic view, another figure drew his attention, one of wings and light. It stirred something within him like a memory long buried.

He watched the flying warrior streak from combat to combat, intercepting blows that would have killed, striking to interrupt others before they began, each saving one or many lives around him. With each leap into the air, powered by wings of light, he read the battlefield in an instant. Then he reacted, striking where his sword mattered most. Countless fighters owed their lives to him. A halo of heavenly light surrounded him and swelled in the lantern the he wielded in his off-hand. His entire form blazed radiance. A phrase came to mind, something burned into his very being.

Lambent Protector.

His first thought was to bring him down but he recognised it as the work of something else, something that writhed within him where a halberd had put him to the ground. Already, he felt the

wound mutate around where he had implanted the Boon. His skin became leathery and always felt like it was moving. He looked down at the blood on his gauntlets. The weight of duty hit him like the fist of a silver-armoured warrior who had once bested him in combat.

It gave his unremembered thought form.

Lambent Protector Geltz Valewarden.

‘Eclipse!’ he boomed. ‘Rally on me. We fall back to the citadel. All other units, press the assault.’

The armoured warriors managed their escape well. They extracted themselves from the fighting at the cost of many of their daemonic and mortal allies. Some waited for a reprieve or killed their current opponent before extracting themselves while others hauled cultists in the path of incoming blades and hammers.

The swell of bodies soon separated Geltz and his inner circle of warriors from the battle. One took a hammer thrown from a swooping Stormcast flyer but it glanced off the curvature of his paudron with little more effect than a snarl of pain.

Geltz cast his gaze over the battle again. The Stormcast Eternals’ initial assault had smashed a hole right through the daemon host, separating it into three. They pressed their advantage against all three with wedge formations plugging the gaps and strafing runs from above opening up further holes which their shield wall immediately filled. The walkover victory turned into a massacre of his own. Why had the sorcerer not told him of the incoming army?

Another member of the Eclipse turned to Geltz, Shale judging by the reaping wheat insignia on his gorget. ‘Retreat, my lord? We still have them greatly outnumbered. See how the lightning strikes as they die.’

‘Falling back,’ he corrected. He looked upon his warrior. ‘Do you remember what our purpose is here?’

The question took Shale aback. ‘To reap the mortal crop, my lord. We feed the fortress and return glory to the valley.’

Geltz released a long exhalation and nodded. His well of sadness filled a trickle more. He had lost too many. He feared he may have even lost himself. ‘Remain with the army, Shale. Fall back in stages and do not let it rout, no matter how many of our own you need kill to motivate the rest. Give us time to reach the citadel.’

‘My lord.’ Shale took to his orders without question or hesitation.

Geltz spurred the remainder of his warriors on with only an inkling of how many death sentences he had just signed. ‘No more questions. We have more important matters to resolve. Make the best of the respite--we’re not done fighting yet.’

#

Another Stormcast Eternal had fallen to the creature in the walls and worry trickled into those remaining. The one nomad turned pale as paper and the three Stormcasts left, Ancanna, the Lord Relictor and Castus, all cast about the chamber. Every time the creature had taken them unawares despite their vigilance.

Ancanna scoured the walls and there it was, that imperceptible ripple. He slammed his hammer against a shimmering bas relief of a warrior holding shield and spear, and instead of smashing masonry, ichor showered from it.

Castus leaned on his lightning hammer as the creature hit the floor with a crack of carapace. 'Prime? How did you spot that?'

'It's not the first time we've met.' He gestured to the hole that he had created in the wall. A hole that led into another passage. 'Onwards. Every moment we linger more daemons flood our Lord Celestant and our brothers Stormcasts. Let us put the sorcerer of this citadel to Sigmar's justice.'

Winding staircases turned to sludge as they stepped on them, ladders of some unknown fleshy substance and a stream of daemons barred their way. Ancanna and his remaining few ploughed through them all, each reaped a fearsome tally of kills.

'There,' Ancanna called and pointed with his hammer into a chamber of turning machinery so immense that it filled the entire space in a sphere of moving metal arms. 'It seems we have found our sorcerer's lair.'

The Lord Relictor entered first, holding Castus, Ancanna and the nomad back. He touched his reliquary staff against the ground and uttered a prayer to Sigmar. Lightning crackled along the top of the reliquary and the air became thick and tangy with ozone. Then the sound of grinding, tortured metal filled the chamber. Coloured smoke whirled, drawn to a central point. The spinning, mechanical arms followed, twisting and bending.

#

A single mote of magic quested its way down the spiral staircase. It shot out of a window into the space between towers, shining blue and green against the night sky. On it travelled, down, through chambers of blades and rooms composed entirely of daemonfire. Nothing touched it, for pure magic felt no pain nor suffered cuts from metal.

It found its way back to its master and embedded itself in the back of its skull.

Axanthral the Cultivator awoke, gasping, his eyes bulging. His neck constricted by the Quietus Apparatus and barbs digging into his flesh, he managed a smile. A cruel, sardonic thing. The mote gave him the power he needed. He threaded the magic through the tentacle around his neck, withering it from the inside. It loosened. Blood spilled from him but he thought nothing of it. There was always more blood.

Empowered by the mote, and the reprieve it gave him from strangulation, Axanthral channelled power through him and blasted the Quietus Apparatus apart in a cascade of daemonfire and focused magic.

Thrown to the floor by the blast, he peered up at pitiful shreds of flapping tentacles, burned raw. For the first time, he noticed the chamber otherwise empty, the mutated Court of the Vale missing. Ulgoloth would face severe punishment for that but first he had invaders to thwart. Judging from the rage of the daemon spirit, the intruders still remained, though a hint of satisfaction flared in his bond with the spirit, suggesting one or more of them had fallen. It felt predatory. It had them trapped somewhere.

Axanthral used it. He failed to summon his daemonic mount and a quick glance to the Quietus Apparatus and the deflated flap of scorched daemon flesh told him it would not be returning for some time. Growling, the sorcerer used his own legs. With speed that belied his withering limbs, he

headed up. A feeling from the daemon spirit told him the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes was compromised. His next best place of power remained.

He made for the roof of the highest tower. From there he could open the aurora and unleash his daemons upon the intruders.

Chapter 33

Sigmar's Justice

Geltz led his elite guard through the traps and winding streets that surrounded the Aurora Citadel. The sounds of his staggered retreat rang behind him but that was not his concern. The Eclipse--no, the Valesguard, he reminded himself--asked no questions of their destination.

As instructed, Lieutenant Ven awaited on the Arable Road at the northern gate of the fortress. It helped to think of the old names. Geltz's duty lay with the old kingdom and thinking of how things used to be helped keep the Dreadguard down. That writhing, angry part of himself raged against his discipline, straining to regain control. Six carriages bearing the wheat and scythe insignia of days long forgotten awaited, each with horses tethered to the front.

A few of the Valesguard betrayed their surprise at the sight of the caravan. Geltz kept a close watch for treachery. He and Ven had dealt with the obvious traitors, but the masters of the citadel were duplicitous creatures by nature, and hid their intentions well. None wavered.

At a gesture, Ven unfurled the Golden Banner and six of the Valesguard immediately dropped to their knees and began reciting the oaths they took to the banner lifetimes past. The others followed until all bent knee. Geltz and Ven nodded to one another and more figures emerged from behind the carriages. Deformed things, mutated remnants of humanity, though they dressed in the faded fashions of their forgotten age. Once regal vestments bore modifications and stitching to change them to their wearer's current size, whether that meant a single arm of bloated musculature, an extra limb or other more disturbing mutations. The head of their number bore a crown, a golden laurel fashioned in the shape of ears of corn, the source of the valley kingdom's former wealth.

'My brothers,' Geltz began, 'I have led you astray. I sought to ensure the survival of our people by playing supplicant to a power beyond my reckoning and I brought this damnation upon us.' He paced along the kneeling Valesguard and hazarded a glance to the mutant wearing a crown, his king. The king bowed his head and Geltz proceeded. 'I then beseeched the same power to restore us to our former glory when the change took hold, and yet my actions only worsened the problem. At my command, you have performed heinous acts. I am shamed and chastised, a traitor and deceiver.' He knelt before his own guard. 'And yet I request you accept me as your servant. Allow me to lead us from this hell and seek other means to restore the Court of the Vale and regain our honour. Will you follow me once more?'

'We would leave our ancestral home?' Ven challenged.

Geltz took a moment to come to terms with the idea in his own mind. He was suggesting abandonment of an ideal they had clung to for generations. 'First we make for Shyish. We restore our bodies. Only then do we return to reclaim our homeland.'

'By whatever means,' the Valesguard replied in chorus.

To Geltz's further surprise, Ven, the king, and mutated remnants of the court gave their own voices to the declaration.

'By whatever means,' Geltz repeated and looked out to the path ahead, a twisting road through the hell they helped create. Somewhere beyond the valleys of their own kingdom, a realm gate awaited but the armies of Sigmar still fought with cultists and daemons, barring their path. The retreat had fallen back too quickly. He sought out the flying warrior that reminded him of his duty and restored

his courage. The hero still fought above the heads of warriors and struck daemons from the sky with his flashing blade. It hurt to call such a warrior his enemy.

It took only a glance to pick their quickest route through the fighting and away from the citadel. Silver armour blocked them.

He was right. They were not done fighting this day.

#

A blast of magic withered the fleshy portal atop the final flight of stairs. Axanthral stumbled through it, gaunt of face and gasping for air. At such a height, winds whipped around him and pulled at his flesh. Atop the highest tower of the Aurora Citadel, the sorcerer took only a fleeting glance at the battle that raged ever nearer his position before marking out a complex circle of symbols and sigils over the circular tower top.

As he completed each sigil, smoke wisped from the chalk and burned it into the flagstones. He marked circles within circles and as each one completed, they glowed in white, blue, purple or green, each circle a different colour. Magic of this nature always required sacrifice. The cutting of so many threads now within the outer walls of his fortress drew enough attention from the Realm of Chaos but he needed to complete it. He tore his robes open. Many scars covered his ashen skin, sigils of spells long past but without the assistance of the Chamber of a Thousand Eyes and the focus it provided, he needed something bigger.

Taking his sacrificial dirk, he outlined the symbol of his master, the Changer of Ways, and etched it into his flesh. As with his arcane circle, the sigil first turned to smoke. It burned at his flesh as though every line blazed like a raging inferno. Afterburn gave him only a moment's reprieve before convulsions wracked his body and he threw his arms wide. His head lolled back so violently that his spine emitted a series of popping sounds. Arcane light poured from the sigil in his chest, an emerald green so powerful that it shone for leagues.

The force of magic slammed Axanthral to the floor and the light wisped in the air. It curled, forming daemonic visages before questing out across the sky in a ribbon, sucking in all light around it to make the rest of the sky dark as pitch. Despite the tortured faces swirling in the light, to those fighting beneath, it would appear almost peaceful.

Until reality itself screamed.

The Realm of Chaos tore a path into the Realm of Shadow. Daemons flooded from the chilling aurora. Shrieking, chattering abominations met the angelic lights of Stormcast Eternals who soared up to meet them head on, each creating a smaller aurora of their own from their wings. Their silver armour reflected the light, creating halos around each of them. Hammer and javelin met fangs and fire in a brutal clash of the heavens.

#

Fighting raged through the streets in the city surrounding the Aurora Citadel, Stormcast against daemon and cultist. Mutants and marauders from the warbands drawn to the citadel joined the battle. Even a cohort of hulking dragon ogors, driving slave warriors before them, brought their arms to bear against the Stormcast Eternals. Percussive thunderclaps of their great hammers mixed with the roar of fire and shriek of daemonic tongue. Lights from the whole spectrum of colour flashed in their conflict.

Knight Azyros Gallus Swiftwing fought at the heart of it. His sword flashed from ray-like daemon to fury, then down to plunge through the neck of an unsuspecting cultist below. His lantern shone as a rallying point to the Angelos Conclave who hunted in packs at his command, and as a beacon to the Stormcast Eternals on the ground who fought a bloody war. No matter how many of Sigmar's lightning bolts crashed to reclaim his fallen warriors, the beacon of the Knight Azyros shone. It told them that the Knights of the Aurora still fought. It told them to drink deep from their well of Sigmar's power and fight on.

Their enemy's retreat had given the Cloudbursts the advantage and they pressed it hard. Lord Celestant Sonos Cloudburst gave the slaves to Chaos no reprieve, leading from the fore and smashing them over and over with lightning fast sorties, splitting the enemy force into fragments and then destroying them.

Gallus caught his first sign of the enemy commander since the retreat began. He gained height, weaving between flights of Prosecutors and scoring cuts into the flesh of daemons as he weaved between them. Sight of the commander brought a taste of bile up from his gut. He longed to put down the traitor and wreak vengeance for his Lord Castellant.

'On me!' he called, catching up to a wing of six Prosecutors. Together they rode the winds amidst the storm of lightning and daemonfire, bolting towards the commander and his guard. They had distance to cover and the enemy already moved. But something struck him as off. Much as he sought to strike his target down, Gallus maintained enough discipline to assess the situation.

The commander and his armoured warriors guarded a train of carriages. Deformed monstrosities moved with them, warped by the taint of Chaos. The sight of them filled him with revulsion. They flew a different banner, one of gold instead of the dread eclipse banner under which they had fought at Valescroft. Still far beyond the reach of the Knight Azyros and his flight of Prosecutors, the enemy commander and his guard formed a wedge, their intent obvious. He was going to smash it into the Stormcasts army's flank.

He sped at the fore of a wedge of his own, he and his Prosecutors shooting like an arrow of light across the sky. Daemons barred their way and the swirling winds of the storm, now boozing its fury, made for difficult flying. But the Angelos Conclave was forged for such tasks. At Gallus' lead, daemons did little more than slow them, casting them down with sword and javelin and the explosive boom of celestial hammers.

Still they were too slow. The knight had just too much ground to cover and too many daemons spewed from the aurora intercepted his path. He could do little beyond roar his frustration at the Dreadguard and his elite guard when they crashed into the Stormcast Eternals' extreme flank. Liberators buckled under the sudden strength of arms that hit them. Gallus spat a curse as the hulking blue monstrosities that accompanied the enemy commander tossed aside a Liberator and a second knocked three from the shield wall off their feet.

The Lord Celestant's voice sounded below. 'Extremis Chamber, form at my side!'

Half a dozen Stormcast Eternals atop dracoths fought themselves clear and joined their Lord Celestant as he drew the attention of the threat at their flank. Gallus took it all in from his elevated position. Having punched their hole, the enemy changed formation with the drilled precision of Stormcasts. Having seen the opening, a shoal of screamers and regiment of bipedal daemons with avian heads and wielding barbed axes made to join the enemy commander.

Something was still amiss.

‘Wait!’ Gallus called out to the Lord Celestant who drew rein, causing his dracoth mount to rear and snarl.

‘Speak your piece, Azyros,’ Sonos Cloudburst replied. ‘Time is short and Sigmar’s justice waits for none.’

Gallus glanced back to the flank to confirm his suspicions. ‘Leave him, my lord. They are leaving.’

‘Leaving?’ The Lord Celestant hesitated.

Just as the enemy commander and his guard trampled the Stormcast flank, so too they crushed the daemonic force that swung around and sought to join with them.

‘What in Sigmar’s name?’ Sonos said. ‘What are they leaving *with*? If it’s important to the enemy, I want it stopped.’

‘I think we have problems enough, my lord,’ Gallus countered.

The Knight Azyros gestured with his sword to the inner defences of the citadel. Defenders had taken to the ancient battlements. Arrows and magic rained upon the Stormcast Eternals and Sigmar’s reclamation struck the ground with too high a frequency. Atop the highest tower, motes of magic swirled. A single figure glowed with emerald light and conjured a withering bombardment of magic that hammered at the Stormcast Eternals below.

Lord Celestant and Knight Azyros shared immediate understanding.

‘Strike him down, Gallus,’ Sonos Cloudburst said. ‘By whatever means, get this rift closed.’

He made to add something but a titanic roar erupted above. All gazes shifted to the aurora. A second roar, higher pitched, answered, followed by the snout of a great, black-scaled head. Daemonfire spewed from within the aurora, two jet-like infernos of yellow and green flame that vapourised two flights of Prosecutors who fought too near. The aurora widened around the head as a long, scaled neck followed. Giant claws seemed to be tearing it open further to make room for a second serpentine head, lithe and more angular than the first. Both heads emitted roars and shrieks, followed by another gout of fire. Both long, snaking necks joined to the same, massive torso, one with an underbelly that glowed crimson and green before the heads bellowed their daemonfire.

The Lord Celestant raised his glaive to the elite warriors of the Extremis Chamber. ‘Ride with me, Knights of the Aurora. Let us separate those heads from that body!’

The Extremis Chamber responded in chorus, their dracoths joining with roars of their own. With the Lord Celestant at their head, the dracoths thundered through the servants of Chaos barring their way, trampling them underfoot and striking them down with the thunderous peal of their weapons. Such foes were beneath the notice of the Extremis Chamber who had larger prey in mind.

Gallus turned to the five remaining Prosecutors with him. ‘Jurus, give word for the Angelos Conclave to support the Lord Celestant. The rest of you are with me.’

#

The Stormcast Eternal, Kell’s last remaining protector, dropped to one knee by his fallen brother, both hands fending off the creature from the wall. It had killed the other Stormcast by emerging unseen when his back was turned and plunging long claws under his breastplate. Kell and Orinstar had watched the warrior fall, both knowing their exit, knowing they could have prevented it.

Kell gripped the hand axe at her side, her knuckles white with strain. So much depended on her. With the flood of refugees from Valescroft having joined the Third Moon Collective, staying hidden would prove ever more difficult. She cursed the moment that Orinstar had left this decision to her.

'Above you,' the Stormcast grunted. 'I see the way out. Go! Get yourselves out and I'll hold this.'

Kill him, the wind whispered. Be free. Return to your life on the move.

#

Ancanna, Castus, the Lord Relictor and single remaining nomad burst through the door and into a courtyard beset by fighting. Their location took them by surprise. Glancing up, they saw the chamber of magic that they had destroyed, yet they had only gone up and up since leaving it. Somehow they emerged two floors below it.

'A curse on this forsaken place,' Ancanna growled. *And a curse upon the shifting allegiances of traitorous nomads*, he added to himself. Had Kell and the Aelf led them astray inside the citadel? The moment of the door closing that split his strike team remained fresh in his mind. Might the battle be won already without having to fight through so much of the hellish madness of the citadel? He buried the thoughts where they belonged - with the bile in the pit of his stomach.

Fighting raged all around them. Stormcast Eternals bearing the stormcloud insignia of the Cloudbursts clashed with daemons of all sizes around them, both on the ground and in brutal melees in the skies around the many towers of the fortress. Before him, the Knight Vexillor died to the fires of a horror before a group of other daemons tore him apart with wicked claws. Castus roared his fury and smashed them apart. His lightning hammer growled the Stormlord's anger with every strike.

Ancanna, the Lord Relictor and the one remaining nomad also joined the fray, fighting together, an island of order in a sea of chaos. Though terror showed on the nomad's face, he fought with the bravery of a Stormcast Eternal. Hand axe and knife brought to bear, he fought defensively, covering Ancanna's flank and striking only when opportunity arose.

From their vantage, high on the battlements of the inner defenses, Ancanna's group commanded a view of the full, terrible battle. The number of Stormcast Eternals present meant the Cloudbursts had arrived. They had pushed warbands back from Valescroft and took the fight across levels of battlements, through the damned city that surrounded the tower and across the valley. He sought his Lord Celestant, Sonos Cloudburst. Unlike many generals of the Stormcast Eternals, Sonos would not be where the fighting was thickest, he and his warriors of the Extremis Chamber worked as line breakers. They would find a weak point and smash through it. If there was no weak point, they would create one with the lightning breath of their dracoths and the tips of their spears.

But Ancanna did not find his Lord Celestant crashing through enemy lines. He sighted him amidst a maelstrom of fire and lightning. Only three of his Fulminators remained and they did battle with a gargantuan beast from the Realm of Chaos, a two-headed dragon.

An instant of silence covered the battlefield when the Lord Celestant fell.

Crushed beneath the jaws of one of those great, draconic heads, Sonos Cloudburst's body gave out. The shock of it pierced Ancanna like an arrow, drew a wordless cry of anguish from within him. Sigmar's reclamation bolt exploded beside the great beast, burning its underbelly and causing it to rear. Unphased by their leader's demise, the three Fulminators swung around and charged the beast. All three of their spears pierced it at once and caused it a grievous wound. It flailed and knocked two from their mounts while a gout of uncontrolled flame blasted into the sky. One of its

heads fell limp but the creature fought on, swiping its rending claws through a cluster of Paladin Protectors.

As if watching his Lord Celestant fall was not enough, a sound so chilling pierced Ancanna's ears and set his blood to ice. The avian shriek came from the aurora where a titanic amount of daemonic energy gathered. Where the lesser daemons coalesced quickly, either flying through the aurora or shooting through like comets of energy before assuming their form on the ground, this one gathered and gathered.

With so many bolts of lightning striking as Stormcast Eternals died, the defending Chaos forces began pushing them back. The flood of reinforcements from the aurora proved too many for a finite force of Stormcasts.

Blasts of magic from above scorched the earth beside Ancanna. He smashed two avian-headed daemons down with his hammer and looked up to the source of the magic. Atop the highest tower, he caught sight of the Knight Azyros doing battle with something of monstrous magical power. A beam of purple energy lanced from the creature's hands and evaporated one of the Prosecutors fighting alongside Gallus. The magic then jumped to two others, leaving the Knight Azyros to fight alone.

'Relictor!' Ancanna called, smashing a fury aside as it dived from above and tried to rake him.

'I see it,' the Lord Relictor responded. Blasting himself clear of enemies with a storm of lightning, he waved two Prosecutors down and said something to them that was lost to Ancanna in the din of battle. He then brought his attention back to the Liberator Prime while another wave of enemies charged for him. 'Reinforcements await in Azyr but they are few. Plant the standard. You have my support.'

Ancanna knew already that the reinforcements were a last chance and far too few to turn the tide. The aurora had to close. Whatever was forming in the immense swell of daemonic energy above could not be allowed to enter the Realm of Shadow. The Lord Castellant was dead. The Lord Celestant had fallen. The Lord Relictor was swamped with daemons and fighting to the limits of his abilities.

Blood trickled down the face of the one nomad who had followed Ancanna into the courtyard, the one who had stayed true. The man bled from a dozen wounds and the swings of his axe became laboured and slow. But he fought.

Not just earth and stone, Ancanna thought, taking heart from the nomad.

'Sigmar,' he muttered, turning his gaze skywards to where the Knight Azyros battled the sorcerer. 'I place my shield between innocent and tyrant. Grant me strength to weather the blows.'

Hooking his shield to his back, Ancanna barrelled through daemons to scoop up the Vexillor's banner which still burned with daemonfire. At direction from the Lord Relictor, two Prosecutors hooked him under his arms and leapt into the air. Wind rushed past them, daemons wreathed in fire made for them but died to the bows of Judicators below. The silver, stone and flesh that made the Aurora Citadel blurred in front of his eyes at their speed of ascent. He glanced below and caught sight of a warrior in silver fighting alone against a swarm of enemies. The figure laid about him with a halberd, a whirl of perfect form and destruction, celestial light glowing from something at his waist. Another flight of Prosecutors swooped past and blocked his view. When his vision resolved again, he saw nothing of the lone warrior.

‘That’s as far as we can get you,’ one of the Prosecutors said and dropped Ancanna on a ledge just one floor from the tower roof. ‘Help the Azyros. We’ll cover your ascent.’

Ancanna clashed his fist to his chest. Never had he felt so proud to fight for the Cloudbursts. A flurry of celestial hammers smashed his way into the citadel and cleared the first wave of daemons that rushed at him from within. One staircase was all he needed to climb. He surged forwards into the daemons barring his way and lay about him with hammer and shield, both as weapons. Charged with the thought of his Knight Azyros fighting alone against such sorcerous might, Ancanna hammered his way through and emerged on the windy tower top as a bolt of purple magic spun Gallus around. The Knight Azyros dropped out of sight.

Crying out in rage, Ancanna smashed the enemy banner from its place atop the tower and rammed the Aurora Banner, that of his Stormhost and depiction of Ghal Maraz, in its place. A single lightning bolt struck the banner and charged it, sending crackles of lightning spitting from it.

‘Sigmar’s wrath upon you!’ the Lord Relictor bellowed from below, a sound that carried to the tops of the towers, and slammed his reliquary staff down.

The swirling storm exploded in a torrent of lightning strikes. They fell with unfathomable power and frequency. The noise shook the foundations of the citadel while the power of the bolts blasted apart fortifications and incinerated servants of the dark gods. They rained down in a sustained flurry of destruction and earth-shattering intensity that gave even some of the Stormcast Eternals pause. Screamers of the Change God and furies crashed to ground, blazing like meteors and setting light to the cultists upon whom they landed.

Bolts hammered down in the courtyard around the Lord Relictor, thick and blue with white-hot cores. As the afterimage faded, they revealed Knights of the Aurora fresh from the forges of Azyr, sigmarite clad and ready for war.

‘Finish it!’ the Lord Relictor shouted. ‘Lay low the tyrant!’

Ancanna raised shield and faced the sorcerer.

‘That will not help you,’ Axathral the Cultivator said, surrounded by an aura of malevolence, energy building around his gnarled hands.

Ancanna bashed the lip of his shield into the sorcerer’s chin, the image of Gallus falling replaying in his mind’s eye. ‘Defend yourself.’

#

The combatants circled atop the tallest tower. Obscene runes to dark powers glowed at their feet while the banner that stood in their centre sparked with lightning and glowed in a halo of heavenly light. Above them, angels and daemons fought amidst a swirling storm pierced by an aurora from which the Realm of Chaos spewed forth. Fights and fires raged on the battlements and in the ruined city below them while lightning speared from the sky.

Ancanna rained blows on the sorcerer, each hitting an invisible barrier around the hellish creature. It responded with lashes of pure magic which displaced across Ancanna’s shield in coruscating colours like ripples of fire. Neither gained ground on the other.

As their fight drew on, the killing continued throughout the citadel beneath them and in the skies around them. With the aurora flying, time did not favour the Stormcast Eternals. Ancanna knew this and exploded in a flurry of hammer blows that, though all hit the invisible barrier, batted the

sorcerer about the tower top. With neither gaining a telling blow, the sorcerer changed approach. He muttered foul words and projected his energy downwards. He levitated while the floor turned to a sludgy substance that sprouted arms which reached for Ancanna's legs, burning at his armour like acid.

With the Liberator Prime stuck in place, the sorcerer unleashed an almighty bolt of magic that blasted the sigmarite shield apart. A second bolt shot from his fingers which Ancanna blocked by thrusting his warhammer in the way. Energy rippled around the weapon as Chaos magic met celestial magic and shockwaves shuddered up Ancanna's arm and through his torso.

The sorcerer rained more blows upon him, all the while the ground pulled at him, the burning sensation now passing through his armour and searing his feet and legs.

#

Kell made her decision. Her axe spun end over end and found its mark. From its hiding place behind a mirror, two halves of a blue-fleshed creature slapped to the floor. 'Begone, whisperer in the wind,' Kell said.

'You're certain?' Orinstar asked.

Flustered and drained of energy, Kell nodded. 'The wind whispered to me thoughts only of deception and fear. The warriors of the storm showed only honour.'

The Aelf nodded and plunged his short sword into the creature held fast by the Stormcast Eternal.

#

Pain lanced through Axanthral's skull. He clasped his hands to the sides of his head and screamed. It felt like someone had reached into his brain and yanked part of it out. His eyes rolled back. The place in his mind that Infergurgle had filled left a gaping chasm of fiery pain.

#

Ancanna brought his hammer down. Celestial light flashed as it crushed the sorcerer's skull, the crunch of bone sounding like a crack in the earth. As the sorcerer dropped to the floor, the aurora emitted a tortured screech that pierced the air for leagues around. It closed like a vacuum, tearing daemons that had partially passed through it asunder, before folding in on itself. The titanic entity forcing its way through emitted a shriek of rage and anguish as it stretched and twisted, hauled back to the Realm of Chaos. The Azyrite storm remained, still grumbling and roaring its fury, still emitting bolts of lightning where Sigmar reclaimed his warriors who still fought for the battlements or in the streets and courtyards of the citadel's influence.

Lightning struck the Aurora Banner beside Ancanna once more and lit it as a beacon. Ancanna lifted his hammer to the warriors below, his message clear: the blow was struck, the fortress taken.

It spurred the Stormcast Eternals. Though leaderless, they isolated the defenders and crushed them. Without their numbers replenished by the daemons of the aurora, the battlements soon belonged to the warriors of Azyr. Cultists lost their nerve and fled through the streets around the citadel, many picked off by the hammers and arrows of Stormcasts but others slipped through, as was always the case with servants of the dark gods. Duplicity and escapism were their ways.

Breathless and tired atop the highest tower, Ancanna watched his brother warriors finish the battle.

Chapter 34

Consecration

‘Well fought, Liberator Prime.’

Dawn cast a glimmer of light upon the Aurora Citadel. Ancanna hadn’t moved from the tower top. He glanced to the Knight Azyros and then back out over the silver-clad warriors reorganising below. Liberator. Who exactly they had been sent to liberate? He saw only Stormcast Eternals. All but one of the nomads had left them in the mad labyrinth of a citadel. Had the others died, betrayed them, or simply fled? His mind’s eye conjured the image of him looking back to see Kell within the citadel twisting something before the doorway turned to stone and cut his strike team in half. Perhaps he imagined it. Likely not.

She thought them slow and dumb, the Stormcasts. But every Stormcast Eternal harked from a life of war and death, and no two warriors experienced the same war. Ancanna’s eyes were faster than she credited him. He knew duplicity when he saw it, and he had watched an intentional action. He drew his attention back to Gallus to avoid incensing himself further.

‘Have we done it?’ Ancanna asked. He brushed some dried earth from his armour and rubbed it between his fingers. ‘Have we gained more than earth and stone? Why take this citadel if those we sought to inspire by its capture fall?’

And who had they captured it for, he wondered. He had put so much hope and trust into Kell and the nomads and yet they fell. All but one. He thought of Sigmar’s crusade to liberate the Mortal Realms. Had they left it too late? Zealots and turncoats were all he had seen during his time in the Realm of Shadow. What was the point of fighting when they liberated lands for traitors and tricksters who could so easily change their allegiance?

He thought of Valescroft and the rebuilding they had done. That work, he knew. Wood and stone did not change sides. Once fashioned for its purpose, it stood. Perhaps some of the repairs they had made to the settlement still remained but he doubted it based on the plumes of smoke rising from it and the size of the armies that had clashed there. Twice those people had suffered in this short campaign. But he could always rebuild it. Wood and stone, he knew. People were different. And rebuilding the Mortal Realms, wresting them from the iron grip of Chaos, was about people and ideals, not wood and stone. He held the concept close as both his motivation and his damnation.

‘We talked about this post-battle reflectiveness of yours, my friend. There are those who stood.’ Gallus cocked his head, the turquoise plume atop his helmet blown flat in the breeze so high on the tower. His left arm hung at his side, pinned where the sorcerer’s attacks had fused his armour together. The hawk-like design of the pauldron had melted.

At the Knight Azyros’ gesture, Ancanna turned to the woman standing behind him. Kell of the Third Moon Collective.

Seeing her set Ancanna’s blood aflame, obliterating his melancholy. He reached for his hammer. ‘Betrayer!’ he roared.

Gallus leapt between them and stayed Ancanna’s hand. ‘Prime, no!

Through gritted teeth, Ancanna spoke, his baleful glare levelled at the nomad. ‘She separated us in this hell citadel, Gallus. I saw her activate the device that trapped us. Knights of the Aurora were sent back to the forges from her actions.’

‘Not so. I spoke with Augurun. Her and the Aelf, they dragged him out of the citadel after he almost fell to a daemon from within the walls. She felled it from afar with a throw of her axe; a throw worthy of a Prosecutor, Augurun claimed.’ The Knight Azyros stepped back from Ancanna and softened his voice. ‘She saved his life, Prime. She is not our enemy.’

Ancanna’s ire still raised, he planted his feet, lest his temper get the better of him. He had never recalled a time where he was so volatile. There was something about this place, this citadel of the Change God, that seemed to magnify his every nuance of emotion. After a few breaths, and replaying the words of the Knight Azyros in his mind, he released his hammer. Gallus, he trusted like no other. And Augurun was a Liberator as solid as could be hoped for. The Liberator Prime chose him for their strike on the citadel for good reason. With command of his senses regained, Ancanna looked at the terrified nomad anew. Perhaps his suspicion would never leave but he remembered a time, not long past, that he had resolved to trust in trust.

She stood, scraped and bloody, her eyes wide in fear as she shrank away from Ancanna’s wrath, but, like Gallus had said, she stood. And she had stood with them since, despite Kimmani rejecting her help in the ruins. The sight of her tempered his doubts. Ancanna owed his life to her many times over. Likely the whole Strike Chamber did, for their scattered warriors would have been picked off by the citadel’s defenders without her community’s help in uniting them.

Ancanna knelt before the woman. He removed his helm to reveal his thick, wavy hair, dark eyes and sturdy chin. ‘Forgive my outburst,’ he said. ‘With duplicity and treachery so rife across the realms, it is easy to assume the worst.’

‘You look...’ Kell began, hesitantly reaching towards him, but failed to articulate.

‘Just like any one of your community,’ the Liberator Prime finished, his mood stabilising.

He would have given any under his command a severe dressing down for letting their anger overtake him as he had. With a settled temper came clarity.

‘We are not your masters. We need your help as much as you need ours. This fortress, this victory, is a speck in the vastness of this realm, and we have many realms to free. The Stormcast Eternals are your shield and they are your sword, as they are for every free person of the realms. The banner atop this tower is not a conqueror’s symbol but a beacon for any who wish to rally to it.’

Kell paused, taken aback. Her eyes still darted, mostly back to the single safe exit from the tower top. It shamed Ancanna that it had come to this, that the realms had been so dominated that ordinary people had to remain so guarded. It shamed him that in wading through so much deceit and evil had damaged his trust so much.

‘And those who don’t?’ Kell asked.

‘They are free to live as they may. If what the Knight Azyros says is true, I would welcome your axe. Your wits and your skill I have seen for myself, Kell of the Third Moon Collective.’

She nodded slowly and shuffled back a step. She looked down to her axe and then back to Ancanna. A grin split her face. ‘I’d welcome one of those hammers.’

‘We’ll teach you how to forge hammers of your own.’

Kell gave an awkward imitation of the Stormcasts’ salute and dashed away from the warriors into the citadel. Whether she would come back, with or without her community, was anyone’s guess. They had suffered under Chaos and the Stormcasts’ initial dismissiveness could not have helped.

They had been hunted while Ancanna fought his guerrilla campaign across the valley. Whatever she decided, her life, and that of her community, were changed forever by what they had done here. They no longer needed to hide or run.

Ancanna frowned at the flights of Prosecutors over Valescroft and the ruins of Art Eruditia, and another group soaring over the valley. 'What are they doing?'

Gallus laughed. 'I decided to let it be known what that banner stands for. The Angelos Conclave is carrying our message throughout the valley. I fear Lord Castellant Kimmani misjudged his speech. May he return soon and whole.'

Sigmarite clashed as both warriors saluted with fist to chest.

Ancanna thought of the Lord Castellant. Had he been there in the fray? Were those glimpses of a flashing halberd really Kimmani or another of Uglu's tricks?

'It was that talk of glory and taking the fight to Chaos,' the Knight Azyros continued. 'You were right, Prime. Those people in Valescroft, they thought they were exchanging one tyrant for another. It wasn't the warrior that drew the people of Valescroft from hiding, it was the builder. It was when you started repairing their homes and workshops. Lifetimes spent preparing beyond the Gates of Azyr can give you a certain perspective on things. When you live for war, and all around you live for war, you can lose sight of why you're fighting. Kimmani didn't realise he was talking to weavers, farmers, potters... They don't want to hear about battlefield glory.' He gestured around to the warriors of the Strike Chamber. 'The Knights of the Aurora should know that better than any.'

Ancanna nodded solemnly. 'Kimmani. Have we lost him?'

'He's not with the Strike Chamber. Whether he's around or not, the Angelos Conclave have reported no sightings of him.' Gallus shrugged. 'He has his moments, but I share your fears. Two reforgings in such a short time. We don't know what that's going to do to him.'

It wasn't the reforging that worried Ancanna. Seeing the reclamation of the Lord Castellant dispersing across the sky still haunted him. Seeing his outline trapped in crystals within the chambers of the citadel, his form carved into walls, it all weighed on the Liberator Prime. He fidgeted in the silence that followed.

The Knight Azyros chuckled. 'You're stoic as that shield you carry, my friend, but you could heed Sigmar's talk of hope yourself. Although you'd never make it in the Angelos Conclave.' At Ancanna's frown, he gestured to the road leading towards the citadel where humans trickled towards them. Some pointed to the high walls, others began tending to wounded Stormcasts while more still began work to restore the citadel.

'And there,' Gallus nodded towards the Valescroft where even more humans withdrew from hiding. 'And in the ruins. I believe that's what we're fighting for.'

Ancanna took heart but doubt still gnawed at him. 'And the taint? After such vile occupation, how can anyone live here without becoming tainted themselves?'

'Trust in Sigmar.'

Twenty men and women formed a chain in front of one of the fleshy walls. Behind the bald man who led them, a banner stood. The Ardency of the Storm God. At their chanting, the daemon flesh

covering the wall bubbled and writhed. Ancanna made for his hammer but paused at Gullus' relaxed posture. The flesh sloughed down the wall, leaving bare stone.

'What in Sigmar's name?' Ancanna breathed.

'Did you see anything while staring out from the battlements?' The Knight Azyros shook his head. 'Notice the little victories, my friend. We have a long undertaking before us. They arrived not long after the battle. In fact, they bloodied their weapons on a few fleeing cultists. Apparently the image of Sigmar himself wielding Ghal Maraz appeared to them in a bolt of lightning atop this very tower. You wouldn't, perhaps, know anything about that?'

Much as he harboured little respect for the zealots, and their sudden acceptance of the Knights of the Aurora, Ancanna began to understand Kimmani's words and those of Sigmar himself, along with a thought that he had never managed to fully form. All three of them were right in their own way. The Stormcast Eternals were Sigmar's hammer. They struck hard and took the fight to the enemy. They needed the other races as much as the other races needed the foothold, that opening, that glimmer of hope that only the Stormcast Eternals had the strength and the glimmering spectacle, to create. With the guidance and help of Sigmar's warriors, the mortals would garrison the citadel. They would grow and flourish, even support the armies of Sigmar in battle. They had their place in every aspect of the Realmgate Wars. This war was not just about gods and daemons, it was about the ordinary person, the woman out foraging for her people who raised axe and helped beleaguered Stormcasts, the priests who, though misguided, remained faithful to Sigmar. All were needed to stand against Chaos.

Though this Strike Chamber of the Knights of the Aurora paid dearly for their victory and stood as a depleted force, they had their foothold. Sigmar would reinforce them in time, or call them back to Azyr. Until then, they would lead the liberated people of this valley and teach them of their new place in the Mortal Realms. They would hunt down the servants of Chaos that fled the battle and drive out the warbands and bandits that lurked nearby. From what they learned of the previous masters of the citadel, Axanthal the Cultivator had more of these human farms. The Knights of the Aurora would spread their message to every person amongst them.

There was one who fled the battle that stood in Ancanna's mind, the leader of the fell armies, the Dreadguard. What he had fled with, Ancanna could not begin to guess, but for striking down his Lord Castellant, he would feel the wrath of the Knights of the Aurora.

The Liberator Prime surveyed the blasted valley, the tang of ozone still rich in the air. One boot atop the crenelated wall, he gazed at an enslaved realm stretched before him, ground under the boots of Chaos, and he himself dared to hope. A fortress thought impregnable had fallen. The enemy had its nose bloodied. More importantly, free people in the ruins below no longer had to run.

Thunder rolled in the storm clouds above. The Aurora Banner still shone from its lightning charge, illuminating the silhouette of the Liberator Prime. Energy crackled through the pole and cast a halo of coruscating green and blue around the banner. Ghal Maraz, the Hammer of Sigmar, blazed on the fabric, not just untouched by the energy but highlighted by it, a message to the Mortal Realms from Sigmar himself: hope had returned and it was cast in the storm.