



WARHAMMER®

ROB SANDERS

# ARCHAON

LORD OF CHAOS

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**Warhammer: The End Times**

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***A Tale of Malus Darkblade***

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

ARCHAON  
LORD OF CHAOS

Rob Sanders



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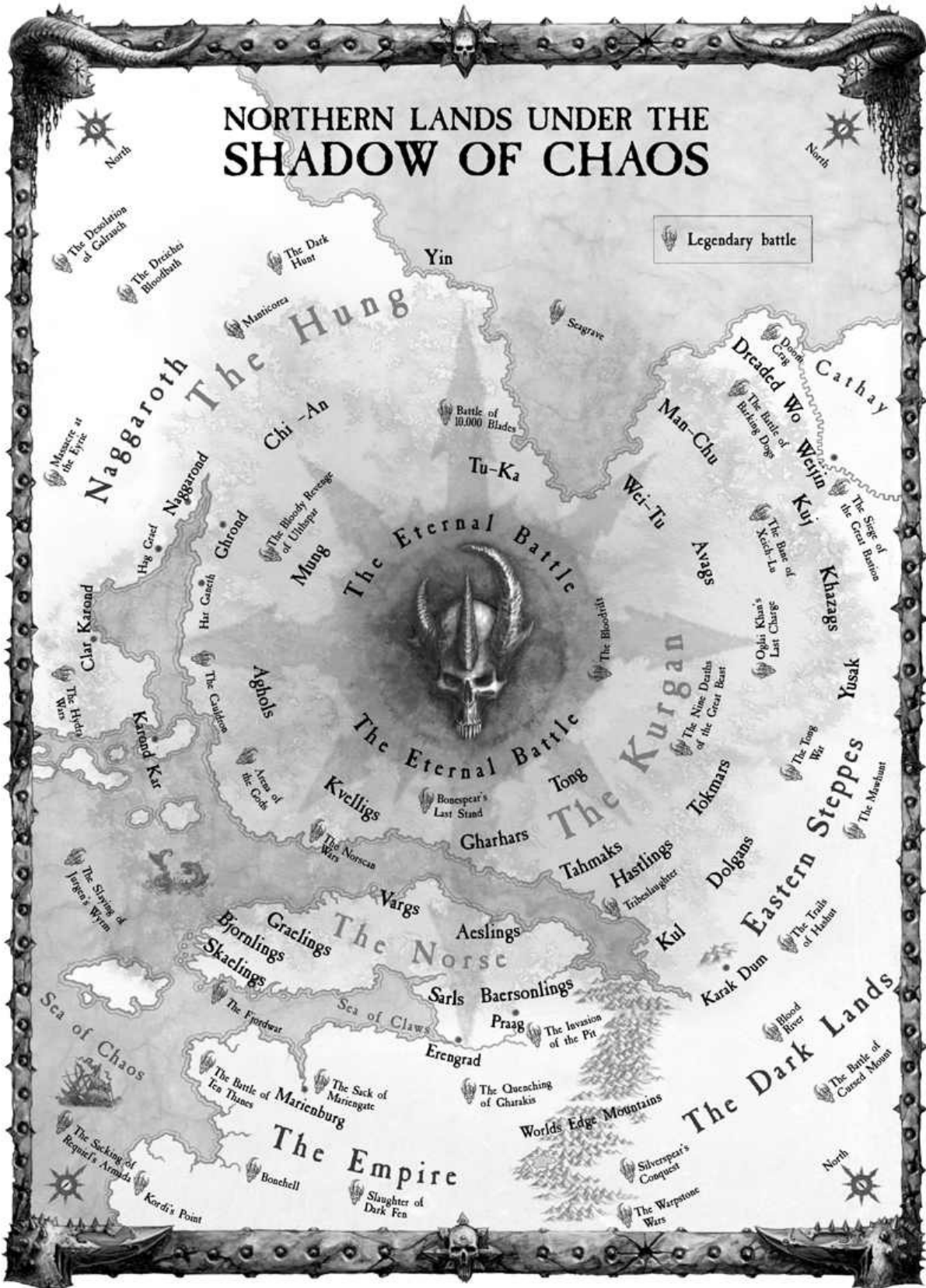
**This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.**

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

**But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering Worlds Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land.**

**And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.**

# NORTHERN LANDS UNDER THE SHADOW OF CHAOS



*'Thank the gods for their ignorance. For if the prayers of mortals were universally answered, there would be naught left living, since all pray for an end one to the other.'*

– Ignatz van Offen, *Offered Truths*



VOLUME ONE  
THE LORD OF ALL

*'And doom came decked in the flesh of man,  
Death to all he didst devise,  
No infernal could against him stand,  
Twas thunder under brimstone skies.'*

– Daemonsong



# PROLOGUE

*'At the dawn of the world, wisdom – savage and untamed – was with the beasts. The Dark Gods did not speak to the weakling races. The ferals, the half-breeds and the children of Chaos were sent to show the monster man how to express himself through the beast. And we were forever repaid in blood and hate.'*

– Great Bray Gorganhok of the Dark Tongue,  
*The Lore of the Wilds*

*Hyborphregor Ice Shelf  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of Scars*

The storm had come.

He was there. Among them. At one with the howling gales that swept up sinister shores, through the black spuming peaks and across the Wastes of everlasting ice. Like the rolling thunder of such unnatural tempests, Archaon had travelled far. From one side of the miserable world to the other, he had slain his

way south. He had sought out the dark challenge of the Ruinous Powers. He had rescued the artefacts of Chaos from obscurity and the hands of enemies unworthy. All to become the Everchosen of the Dark Gods. The Lord of the End Times. Herald of inescapable Armageddon.

He had butchered those foolish enough to believe themselves chosen. Bestial warlords. Exalted warriors of daemon patronage, with lies bleeding from their poisoned ears. Sorcerers and witches, whose wretched powers could not save them from the cold judgement of Archaon's blade. He had been the end to monsters and slain what could not be slain. He had slaughtered entire armies, including his own, for their unworthiness. Only those worthy of the apocalypse would join Archaon, as he ushered in the End Times to come. And so here he was. As far to the daemon south as any of manflesh had ever been. Flayed raw by the infernal freeze. Courting madness with the boundless horizon. A willing slave to ceaseless slaughter.

Archaon trudged through the black snow. His armoured boots were wrapped in the furs of some barb-skinned beast, the bony spines of which gave the warrior purchase across the frost and ice. The skies raged away above him, spitting and swirling like a ghostly, maddened creature, chasing its own tail. The armour of Morkar, First Everchosen of Chaos scalded his skin with its raw embrace. Archaon could not feel such pain. He wouldn't allow it. The common miseries of existence were nothing to him now. With every step he took towards a doom of his own making, he became less of a man and more of an idea. An abstraction. A living misery for others to endure. He was not some character in a great tale told. He was the silence after the words. The covers of the tome slammed shut. The crackle of page and ink on the fire. He was the nevermore.

Holding his shield out before him, Archaon turned the worst of the storm's fury aside. Splinters of ice shattered against the eight-pointed star of Chaos. The Chaos warlord cut an indomitable figure, smeared in the relentless blizzard, his cloak, loincloth and the furs of shaggy beastfiends he had butchered streaming after him like the tail of a comet. He jangled with skulls on chains that produced a mournful moaning in the wind. A sad and bitter tune for the bodies Archaon left in his wake.

The Chaos warrior's trudging footsteps slowed. He felt something through the soles of his armoured boots. Through the furs and skins wrapped about them. Through the snow that crunched like charcoal and the obsidian ice that gleamed with darkness. A tremor. A quake. Archaon took several cautionary steps back. The ice was moving. It was rising. The frozen mask that was Archaon's face

creaked its way to a stiff smile beneath his skull-helm. He had found it.

Skidding back down the slope of the buckling ice and cascading snow, he listened to the crack of the ice floe as it shattered beneath him. Like a pair of spearpoints thrusting up through the ice, two mighty pinnacles burst free of the frozen land. They were jagged and sharp, crafted roughly from some kind of volcanic rock. As Archaon stumbled away through an avalanche of snow and ice that threatened to engulfed him, a great palace erupted from the frozen Wastes. Half swimming away from the dark wonder, Archaon peered up at the infernal architecture of the daemon fortress. It allowed both for the perverse flourishes of a Ruinous palace and the jagged crenellations of a fortification. As the ice parted and crumbled, the mighty building shuddered skyward. The gloom of the heavens broiled above it. Strange lights rippled through the maelstrom and lightning cracked between the twin pinnacles and the firmament. It rent the sky asunder.

As the mountainous palace trembled to a stop and the billowing clouds of black snow began to clear, Archaon could make out the strange architecture of the monstrosity. Although it was hewn from sharp, black stone – jagged and irregular – the palace had been crafted in the likeness of a daemon form. The twin pinnacles were both towers and the thumb-claws of great folded wings that formed the building's mighty walls. A craggy head of infernal horror nestled between them, forming the palace dome, while the broad, muscular body, with its rugged arms, cloven-clawed legs and spiked tail had been crafted crouched as the formidable fortress foundations.

'I have you now, dissembler...' Archaon growled, each word a stream of white from his helm.

The Chaos warrior had chased the fortress across the Southern Wastes. For months now – years for all Archaon knew, for time moved with a perverse uncertainty at the bottom of the world – Archaon and his men had drunk the black snow and feasted on nothing but beastflesh.

The continent was overrun with monstrous half-breeds and beastfiends: savage tribes of creatures that were dread fusions of animal and daemon. Hordes that, like their damned brethren hiding in the forests of the Empire, were drawn to the most twisted, gifted and monstrous of their kind. Shamans and beastlords led their great tribes one against the other, for a miserable patch of black ice that they might call their own and the base glory of their fell gods. Archaon had roasted their flesh, worn their bones and daubed his armour with their steaming blood. He had used their hides for warmth and had yoked their barbarian

strength as the warlord of united tribes, for the creatures prized victory and dominion above all things. In doing so, Archaon had brought battle to the daemons, monsters and fiend princes that ruled this frozen hell. This beast he had sought alone.

The Forsaken Fortress, it was held, could never be sought out. Never be found. Those who had seen it had simply happened upon its dread form towering out of the Wastes. By the time they had returned to show others their find, the monstrosity had gone. Sunk down once more, below the ice. Daemon palaces and the forts of black ice crafted by the tribal beastfiends could be found across the Wastes, especially in the continental interior. The Forsaken Fortress moved at whim, however. The stone of its construction had come from far below or beyond the ice and was cursed, like the daemon prince to whom it belonged, without permanent form. Be'lakor...

The Shadowlord. The Dark Master. First of the oblivion princes. Harbinger of the Ruinous Powers. Be'lakor, who had always been with him and stalked the Chaos warrior still across the Southern Wastes. Archaon would not be stalked, and resolved to hunt the dark power that hunted him. Perhaps then he might gain answers to his questions. He might learn the locations of treasures of Chaos he had yet to find. The attainment of such would prove his worth to the dread Powers of the world and grant him the title of Everchosen of the Chaos gods. He would be the Lord of End Times and the Herald of the coming apocalypse. Only then would he show man, beast and god the folly of their existence. He would plunge all, his patrons, his enemies and everyone else, into an everlasting darkness. A true oblivion. A place of neither good nor evil where nothing could be won or lost. An eternal nothingness. A kingdom devoid, where not even Archaon would rule.

The daemon prince Be'lakor and his Forsaken Fortress could not simply be found, since none knew where the damned palace would appear. Archaon had been forced to trust his wanderings to uncertainty. To the potion-fuelled ramblings of Bray Shaman, the interpretations of auroral ghostlights, the bargains of daemon princes, cursed with the telling of truths and the riddles of his wizened sorcerer Sheerian. Khezula Sheerian, who had served the Great Changer. Sheerian, whose advice had seen Archaon slaughter his own army and sent the Chaos warrior into the jaws of the Chaos dragon Flamefang. Whose reading of ghostlights, shamanic ramblings and infernal lies now sent Archaon into danger again. Into the lair of daemon royalty. Into the clutches of a creature that had watched them from afar with doom-hungry eyes.

Such miserable intelligence placed the Forsaken Fortress on the Hyborphregor Ice Shelf. The enchanted jewel, the Eye of Sheerian, confirmed its disappearance from where it had been last reported amongst the fiery peaks of the coast. With this, Archaon had set off for the daemon palace. Leaving his bestial army with Eins and his Swords of Chaos, with the storm-wracked skies making flight for the warriors impossible, Archaon had been forced to cross the midnight ice on tuskgor-dragged sleds and mounted on strange daemon steeds. He had killed them all, pushing the creatures with such unrelenting ferocity across the frozen wilderness. The final leg of the journey Archaon had trudged on his own, insisting on no less fortitude from himself than the beasts he had sent to an icy grave.

Now that he was standing before it, there didn't appear to be a way into the daemon palace. This made a perverse kind of sense to the Chaos warrior. What need such a creature for a gate, door or portcullis at the front of his palace? Why risk such a weakness in fortification, when monsters, roaring armies of bestial half-breeds or daemonic foes might happen upon the Forsaken Fortress and attack? Why not offer them the indomitability of solid rock?

Scrutinising the towering fortress, with the glass storm raging uselessly about it, Archaon saw that half way up the structure, below the daemon dome of the palace, was a great carving in the stone. The eight-pointed Ruinous Star of Be'lakor's calling, across the dread architecture of the daemon's chest. It was the same star that adorned Archaon's shield. Like the Chaos warrior, the daemon prince served doom in all its forms, not favouring one dark god over another. At the centre of the star, however, Archaon saw a sliver of light. A weakness. A crack in the stone, as though the mighty fortification had been breached. Within, the blue ghoulishness of unnatural light shone.

Archaon shouldered his shield and clawed his way up through the snowbank. He had come this far. The Forsaken Fortress would not forsake him. If the thing attempted to descend into the ice it would have to take him with it. Where the ice and palace foundations met the snow steamed. When he reached out to it, the stone felt strange against his gauntlets. It wasn't the searing cold he had come to expect. Through the metal of his fingertips, the fortification felt warm, as though heated by some infernal fire within. Hauling himself up the precipitous wall and using the crooks and crannies of the volcanic stone for finger and footholds, Archaon climbed the daemon palace. With the architecture crafted to resemble the infernal prince himself, Archaon felt as if he were ascending the mountainous form of a titan or god.

Sidling along jagged ledges, dragging himself up by his fingertips and leaping for razor-edged purchase, Archaon climbed the stone perversion. When he reached the bottom point of the Ruinous Star, he hauled himself into the great arrowhead cut into the stone. From there he settled his armoured back against one side of the carved shaft forming the arrow and both his boots and gauntlets against the other. Braced between the rock, the Chaos warrior shimmied and scraped his way up the centre of the star, where he found the sliver of an opening. It did not appear to be part of the infernal design. If anything, it looked like damage. The fortress seemed to have been stabbed in the heart. Passing his shield through first and angling his horned helm, Archaon slid his backplate, breastplate and muscular torso through the cleft in the rock.

Within the daemon palace, the sound of the blizzard died to nothing and Archaon was bathed in a dull blue light. It was impossible to tell where the ghoulish illumination came from, since there were no brands or torches. The floor possibly, or the walls. These, unlike the rock-like architecture of the exterior, were smooth. The lines of the chamber flowed. Everything was rounded and organic, as though the ribs, bones and spikes of the daemon's skeleton had been reproduced within.

Taking the weight of his shield, Archaon drew *Terminus*. The templar blade smouldered in the gloom of the palace. The Sigmarite sword had travelled with its wielder to hell and back. It had sparked blade to blade with daemon swords and been buried in the corruption of the doubly-damned. Its metal and the carved iconography of the God-King had been stained by the slaying of thousands in the name of the Ruinous Powers... and still a little of its nobility remained. In the deep strength of the blade, the trueness of its cleaving edge and the ring of its metal off enemy steel, it still carried some of the calibre of its former calling. Despite this, and in some ways because of it, there was no blade Archaon would rather have between him and a foe. Indeed, to the daemon and the damned, the sword still stank of faith and burned the flesh with its cold virtue.

Leading the way with the faintly glowing blade, Archaon moved through the rib-lined chambers and rachidian passageways of the palace. He was focused. He was ready. Should any daemon servant proceed from the darkness or rush him from the strange architecture, the dark templar would cleave them in two. There was nothing, however. No horrors haunted the palace. No things waited for him in the shadow. The Forsaken Fortress seemed empty. Yet Archaon felt like he was being watched. The darkness that afflicted the lengths of bone-lined corridors was a mirror through which he could not see but could be seen.



*You are far from home...*

The voice was everywhere. The boom was bottomless, like the abyss, and the words seethed like hellish flame. It was a voice he had known his whole life yet had never heard... until now.

The Chaos warrior moved across a large chamber, looking about him. He slowly turned and swished *Terminus* all around. He peered into the dark recesses of alcoves. He crooked his neck to look back the way he had come, the path now lost to shadow. As he moved through the nightmarish interior of the palace, the murk receded to reveal a large figure in the centre of the chamber. Like the Forsaken Fortress, it was horned, cloven-clawed and broad of wing. To Archaon, it appeared to be a replica of the fortress in miniature.

At first, he took it for the daemon overlord of the palace itself, but as his shuffled steps and defensive turns took him closer, he saw the infernal figure for what it was. A throne. Crafted from the same rough stone as the palace in which it sat. The daemon prince's crouching legs formed the seat, its star-scarred chest the back and its clasped talons the arms. The horned horror that was the daemon's grotesque head formed a kind of crafted crown, while the leathery, outstretched wings, hewn from volcanic rock, gave the throne a hellish grandness. For all its imposing abomination, the throne was empty, like the palace.

'I am where I need to be, daemon,' Archaon answered back finally. His words returned to him with a strange quality, echoing through the torturous skeletal structure of the daemon palace.

*That is more true than you can ever know. Though not many who have sought out the Forsaken Fortress have found it.*

'I am Archaon,' the Chaos warrior spat, angling his helm about the dark entrances to the chamber. 'I am the chosen of the Dark Gods and the end to the entire world. Nothing is beyond me.'

*I am beyond you, chosen one.*

'And yet here I stand, *Be'lakor*,' Archaon spat. 'I have your name, daemon. I have all your names. Shadowlord. Dark Master. Cursed of the Ruinous Gods. You, who have watched me from oblivion, like the craven being you are. I stare back, abyssal thing. I see you now, daemon prince, though there be little or nothing to see. And here I stand, before your cursed throne within your cursed castle.' Archaon waved *Terminus* at the darkness in invitation. The blade smouldered with expectation. 'Time for us both to take a closer look, don't you think? If I'm lucky, as with your palace, I might get to see inside.'

As Archaon turned, his weapon ready, his good eye and the darksight of his ruined socket everywhere, he set his afflicted gaze once more on the mighty throne. In it, crafted in his own image, sat the insanity that was the daemon Be'lakor within a rocky palace that was the same.

'Daemon,' Archaon told it. 'You have an undue fascination with yourself.'

The beast laughed. It was horrible to hear. Like the deep torment of rock and earth, as the land quakes and continents heave.

*And with you...*

As the creature spoke, the blue inferno burning within him escaped his ugly maw.

'I'm here to put an end to that, creature,' the dark templar told it, moving slowly and steadily in on the thing in the throne. A great infernal blade of jagged black steel stood upright before the throne, held in place by the loosely clasped talon of the stone arm. The daemon prince's own claw rested on the pommel spike of the weapon.

*Oh, you are, are you?*

'But first you will give me the satisfaction of all that is unknown to me, but known to you,' the Chaos warrior threatened.

*You want secrets...*

'I want truths,' he told it. 'And I'll have them, even if I have to cut them out of you, dread thing.'

*The living truth that is Archaon, chosen of the Chaos gods.*

'Aye.'

Archaon moved in. The daemon prince reared from his throne of stone, dragging his colossal blade with him. The beast's wings spread and he thrust his ferocious daemon head forward, shaking the crown of horns as he spoke.

*Well you can't have it, mortal, Be'lakor roared at him, his words searing with hellfire. You impudent worm – bold of word but feeble of flesh.*

'I thought you might say that,' Archaon returned. As Be'lakor dragged the tip of his infernal blade across the floor of the throne room and turned it upright in his claws, the Chaos warrior did the opposite. Turning *Terminus* about in his gauntlets, he aimed the point of the crusader blade at the floor. 'See, you can't give what you don't have, daemon.'

Archaon stabbed his Sigmarite sword straight down into the floor of the throne room. Instead of turning the blade tip aside like the smooth rock it appeared to be, the material admitted its length with a shower of sparks. The blade steamed with the honour of its past deeds in the name of the God-King. The stone about it

began to bubble and churn. Be'lakor let out a roar that descended into a hideous shriek. The palace trembled about Archaon and the daemon. It shuddered. It quaked. The daemon prince clutched his chest and crashed to his knees. The Ruinous Star scarred into his flesh steamed also. The infernal blade tumbled from his grip, falling straight through the floor with a splatter of stone, as though it had been dropped into a lake.

Archaon turned his greatsword in the broiling stone of the wound. Be'lakor screeched. His wings flapped and his spine arched. His knees sank into the floor and his claws trailed stringy stone where he had splashed the morphing material in his infernal agonies.

'Now we're talking,' Archaon told the daemon. 'This is a language that both of us can understand.'

Be'lakor's claws tore at his daemon form. He was becoming one with his surroundings. In the throes of white-hot pain and the purity that still afflicted the crusader sword's steel, he was changing. The palace was also losing its consistency. Liquid rock glooped and streamed from the ceiling while the ribs and bones contorted within the structure. Be'lakor and palace were as one. Except neither were Be'lakor.

'Your name, daemon,' Archaon demanded as his sword burned in the monster's flesh. Its wings and features dribbled away. The creature sank into the floor. Into itself. It splashed like a flailing swimmer before thrashing beneath the surface of the stone. Its face rippled through the horrific visage of a thousand other diabolical things. Archaon pulled *Terminus* from the daemonflesh. For a moment everything was silent. The shrieking agony that shook the palace was gone. The Forsaken Fortress had melted to a ruptured, contorted mess.

Archaon lost his footing as the floor seemed to sink through the palace. The Chaos warrior turned the greatsword about in his grip, aiming its tip back at the floor at his feet. Like a corpse in a river, the daemon floated to the surface of the stone. It was a lesser thing now. A thing of arms and hidden form, lost within the twisting folds of a hooded shroud. As the colour of the stone bleached from it, the daemon began to move.

Archaon lifted *Terminus* higher, indicating his intention to bury the Sigmarite sword in the creature's extended form once more, but the walls liquefied about him. The palace cascaded around him towards the ice floe. The fingers of one puny arm begged him to desist. The razor gales of the Southern Wastes and blizzards of splintered ice once again intruded on the scene. Archaon was standing in a sea of stone. The sea retracted to a lake. Then the lake to a puddle

about the daemon until finally the thing held only its own form. Archaon stepped forward, holding his shield before the maelstrom and *Terminus* high above his head.

‘Enough of your tricks, dissembler,’ the dark templar told it. ‘Your name.’

‘Long forgotten,’ the creature managed. ‘Along with the face that it belonged to.’

‘Well, Changeling,’ Archaon roared through the howling wind. ‘It matters not that you are known. Only what you know.’

‘You sought me out?’

‘Yes, daemon,’ Archaon said. ‘It is said by the bestial shamans and diabolical creatures of this land that you are a deceiver and that you meddle in the great affairs of this dark world. That you hold a looking glass to both the damned and the damning and that you become what is seen.’

‘I have my questionable gifts, Archaon,’ the Changeling hissed, ‘as the chosen of the Ruinous Powers must have his own.’

‘Then you have held your glass to the infernal prince I seek,’ Archaon said, circling the prostrate monstrosity with his sword as snowfall gathered about the daemon.

‘I have studied him.’

‘Why, darknid thing? Speak and live to hold your mirror again.’

‘It pleases my master...’ the Changeling told him. ‘...the great Lord Tzeentch, to have the Dark Master’s ambitions frustrated.’

‘And so you impersonate Be’lakor, his form, his fortress.’

‘To god-pleasing perfection.’

‘You are a twisted thing, Changeling,’ Archaon told the daemon, ‘on a crooked path to nowhere.’

‘It is my fate,’ it told him. ‘It is the fate of all the Great Changer’s servants.’

‘So I was told by the monstrosities that led me to you,’ Archaon said. ‘Your damned journey, your twisted path, might not be any use to you, lost one. But it might be to me. Archaon, chosen of all the Dark Gods. Choose, Changeling. Assist me or accept that your journey ends here, with my sword as your grave marker, at some Byzantine crossroads on your lost path.’

Archaon grabbed the daemon by the lengths of its twisted shroud and dragged it over to a black snowbank that offered a little shelter from the storm. In the depths of the snowbank’s shadow, the blizzard died to a whisper. Archaon stared at the daemon. About them the southern continent was a blasted winter wasteland of warped confusion. The shredding splinters of ice drifted to the

ground and stopped. The snow began to creak and freeze about them as the temperature plummeted. Archaon's plate scorched his skin with the abyssal cold. He tensed as the daemon creature before him got to its feet in the snow. Subtle but horrific changes were taking place inside the depths of the thing's hooded shroud. Something more resilient to the numbing surroundings. 'Don't test me, warped servant of Tzeentch.'

'As I said,' it told him, ever at change beneath the frosted folds, 'it pleases my master to frustrate the daemon prince you seek. How may I assist you, great Archaon?' The Chaos warrior nodded. Satisfied.

'You have studied Be'lakor?'

'As I have studied all whose flesh I assume,' the Changeling said. 'As I have studied you, Archaon, whose boundless ambition surpasses even your ageless father-in-shadow.'

'What did you say?'

'I say too much, perhaps,' the Changeling tittered. Archaon shook his helm slowly. The Chaos warrior had crossed the surface of the known world and had travelled to hell and back. His experiences – the dark truths, the betrayals and the slaughter – had long washed anything approaching sentimentality from his cursed bones. There were truths he must know, however, even about himself, if he were to proceed in his apocalyptic quest.

'You say what your Ruinous master wants you to say,' Archaon told the Tzeentchian monstrosity. 'You are a miserable messenger. No more. So, let us play your dark lord's game. You mentioned my father. To which I am supposed to reply, "I never knew my father". Or my mother, for that matter. I'm an orphan. Abandoned on the steps of an Imperial temple. A temple of the thrice-cursed God-King.'

'Your mother was a nothing,' the Changeling told Archaon. 'Baseborn. Simple. Unremarkable. Unclouded of heart in a way our foetid kind abhor. The kind of heart our masters revel in corrupting.'

Archaon burned into the Changeling with an unswerving gaze.

'But they never got the chance.'

'No,' the Changeling said. 'Her blood is on you, Archaon. She died in birth. In the labours of delivering the apocalypse to the world.'

Archaon's gauntlet creaked about the hilt of *Terminus*. The Tzeentchian servant was enjoying this.

'And my father?'

'You have had several, Archaon,' the creature told him. 'The wretch whose

wife you took and then left to raise your youngling brothers.'

'I have brothers?'

'Half-brothers,' the Changeling cackled. 'But they are long dead, Archaon. You have outlived them, chosen one.'

'My father?'

'Is Be'lakor, of course,' the Changeling's cackle became a howling laugh. Archaon surged forwards and landed a heavy kick in the creature's midriff with an armoured boot. The impact smashed the daemon back, sending it tumbling through the black snow. Archaon stomped after it, standing over its broken form. The Changeling did not get up. It coughed. It wheezed. It choked and spat daemon blood from the recesses of its shroud. The blood sizzled on the ice.

'The passion of the present will not undo the painful truths of the past,' the Changeling told him.

'Be'lakor.'

'You are his, chosen one,' the thing coughed. 'Did you not question, not for once, what you have achieved and how you could have achieved it? Out of the thousands, nay *millions* of lowly creatures of this world that ache for the power to challenge their stars and change their fate, why should it have been you? Why should you have risen from obscurity? Why should you be the chosen, the Everchosen of Chaos? The Herald of the Apocalypse... the Lord of the End Times?'

'Then I am...'

'Nothing... something... everything,' the Changeling hissed from within its hood. 'Like me, like all who serve the powers of light and the powers of darkness, you will be what you are needed to be. Have no doubt, though, Archaon of the distant Empire. You are blessed with daemon lineage. You are the son of a prince, chosen one – which in some corners of this foetid world would make you a prince in your own right. You are special not just because of what you made of yourself and your circumstances. Look at you. You stand where no mortal man has stood before. You are undoubtedly an indomitable soul. You are also special because of what others made of you and the circumstances of their own. Principally, your father-in-shadow.'

Archaon leaned in. The tip of *Terminus* reached into the Changeling's hood. The daemon leaned back into the black slush.

'And what does my father want of me?' Archaon asked through clenched teeth. 'You have been him. You must know. Why does he stalk me? What does this thing of darkness want?'

‘What he has always wanted,’ the Changeling answered. ‘From the dawn of time. What my master, the Great Changer denied him. To command the legions of hell. To be the master of the entire world again. To subvert my master’s curse of eternal servitude and be the Everchosen of the Chaos gods.’

‘What does that have to do with me?’ Archaon growled.

‘Everything, I suspect,’ the Changeling said before the seething steel of Archaon’s sword. ‘But in truth, I do not know. Some daemon secrets are buried deep, beyond even my arch-powers of study and reproduction. You are wrong, Archaon. I deceive. I do not become. The infernal and almighty have a way of showing you everything, yet truly telling you nothing. Unlike my Ruinous master, I cannot be all and know all.’

‘I don’t believe you, deceiver,’ Archaon told the daemon.

‘That is irrelevant,’ the wretched creature said. ‘I have told you all I know. The rest you must ask of your father-in-shadow, himself. For only he knows.’

Archaon held the Changeling there. The deep freeze of the Southern Wastes crept up through their bones. ‘I have done what you have asked, chosen of Chaos. Destroy me,’ the daemon said finally. ‘Or release me.’

Archaon considered.

‘Before I make that decision,’ the Chaos warrior said. ‘One more thing. You must know Be’lakor’s palace, to have reproduced it so faithfully. Where is it, Changeling?’

The daemon hissed its hatred at Archaon.

‘The Forsaken Fortress appears and disappears at perverse whim,’ the creature told him.

‘This I know already.’

‘Sometimes it remains for weeks,’ the Changeling said, ‘sometimes for seconds. Right now it sits on the Pustular Plain.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Tis a realm far to the west,’ the Changeling said. ‘Where the ice melts to a boggy tundra about a rash of volcanic peaks that suppurate and ooze with disease.’

‘How might I reach such a damned place?’ Archaon asked.

‘By travelling south...’

‘You said it was far to the west,’ Archaon growled.

‘You could never reach the Pustular Plain on foot,’ the Changeling told him. ‘And certainly not trailing an army of beastfiends. The journey is far and the geography between here and there challenging and ever changing. By wing, by

sled, by exhausted step you could not make it in time.'

'Then what could?'

'In the south, close to the continental interior towards which you have waged war, you will find other daemon palaces.'

'About the Gate?'

'The Gatelands,' the Changeling said, 'Yes... there you will find the palace of the daemon lord Agrammon. He keeps an infamous menagerie in the palace grounds, housing every dread creature imaginable. His prize possession is Dorghar, daemonic Steed of the Apocalypse. You will need to gain entry to the palace, steal the beast and break it. For it is the only creature I know can make the journey to the Pustular Plain in the time you may or may not have.'

Archaon turned his helm to one side and peered down at the Changeling, attempting to penetrate the depths of its hooded shroud. With sudden violence the Chaos warrior stepped forwards, putting a boot on the daemon's chest and forcing it down into the black slush. He held *Terminus* above the creature.

'The Steed of the Apocalypse,' Archaon seethed.

'The fourth treasure of Chaos,' the Changeling cackled, the information forced from him.

Archaon marvelled for a dread moment. The fourth treasure of Chaos. He had been traversing obsidian and ice for longer than he could remember. Slaying daemons. Butchering beastfiends. Searching. Ever searching. It was one of the reasons he was seeking out Be'lakor, the oblivion prince. Answers. It seemed now he would have them. The eternally burning Mark of Chaos that he wore on his flesh. The fabled armour of Morkar that clad that flesh. The Eye of Sheerian, the sorcerous jewel retrieved from the Chaos dragon Flamefang, now safely ensconced in the skull-face of his battlehelm. All great artefacts of darkness that had belonged to former champions of evil. Those who had borne the blessing of the Ruinous Powers in equal measure. Those who had achieved the title 'Everchosen of Chaos'. The fourth was a steed worthy of such a warrior. A steed he would tame and who, in turn, would carry him across the Southern Wastes to the Forsaken Fortress.

'And you were going to tell me this when?' Archaon roared at the Changeling.

'You never asked,' the daemon said silkily. It was true. Archaon hadn't. The Chaos warrior grunted. Taking his boot from the creature's chest, he started to trudge back through the snow and rising storm. He had left his army of beastfiends many leagues distant. His winged Swords had been grounded in the storm and, although hardy and ferocious, the monstrous half-breeds that made up



his horde were riotous and slow. It was the reason the Chaos warrior had set off alone in the first place. Archaon heard the daemon Changeling's harsh laughter on the frozen air.

'Beware, Archaon,' the Tzeentchian wretch said. 'The daemon lord Agrammon is a slaver. Take care you do not become part of his infernal collection.'

'To hell with you, daemon,' Archaon snarled, holding his shield once more before the shredding gales.

But they were already there.

*'Beyond the maps and charts of man,  
where gold lies cold and un plundered,  
there lies a bleak and hellish land,  
of savage darkness and thunder.*

*No tree or forest ever grows  
in this lightless realm of cold,  
a land of ice and midnight snow –  
scorched by storms of shrieking souls.*

*Through swarms of beasts and frenzied fiends,  
fights a man who has travelled far –  
in him the end comes to these lands,  
in search of signs and treasures dark.*

*A wretched place that knows no peace,  
before his blade dread daemons fall –  
to his banner flock bands of beasts:  
a monstrous horde behind him forms.*

*He leads them through an ancient gate –  
a raging portal overwhelmed –  
through which his destiny awaits:  
passage to an abyssal realm.'*

– Necrodomo the Insane, *The Liber Caelestior*  
(*The Celestine Book of Divination*)



# CHAPTER I

*'The Great Beast is the land's fury to vent,  
Decimation for others to know.  
He is the topless mountains' torment  
And unending desolation's woe.'*

– The Cloven Tribal Chant

*The Haemorrhagia  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

Archaon went south. Ever south. The ice froze to breaking beneath his boots and the air seethed with burning lethality. The wind howled its mournful goading and the heavens churned their black intention. The chosen of the Dark Gods pushed on through the midnight drifts, the skins and furs trailing about his plate crisp with the biting freeze. Behind him the Swords of Chaos trudged, their black wings held before them to deflect the worst of the snow carried on the burning gales. Decked out in a hotchpotch collection of plate and mail scavenged from daemonic foes felled in Archaon's path and furs skinned from shaggy half-

breeds, they had the appearance of frosted gargoyles. Eins. Zwei. Drei. With the misshapen Vier, twisted to grotesquery, stomping up behind them. His malformed wings, now useless for flight, were extended about Giselle.

Giselle Dantziger. Former Sister of the Imperial Cross. Giselle, who had carried from the Hammerfall the *Liber Caelestior* – heavy with the secrets of Archaon's future and inescapable damnation – and changed the fate of all the world. The friend whom Archaon had made prisoner. The prisoner whom Archaon had taken as a lover. The girl who was in equal parts his death and salvation. Whose heart, even in this damned place, still beat with simple devotion to the God-King who had abandoned her touch. Whose touch was torment, burning with an indomitable purity. Whose touch Archaon could not seem to live without. She tripped and stumbled under the weight of the furs in which Archaon had buried her. Woolly hides that he had skinned from the shaggy beastfiends of the continental interior and that had formerly protected the half-breeds from the murderous cold.

With his other twisted wing, Vier did his best to protect Khezula Sheerian from the maelstrom. Sheerian, daemoniac sorcerer of Tzeentch. To whom the third treasure of Chaos, the enchanted jewel, the Eye of Sheerian had belonged. The ancient carried himself with perpetual pain and the burden of a wizened body. Hunched and using his bone staff to drag the deformity of a bird's leg through the snow, his filthy robes were a patchwork of sinew-sewn skins and a cloak of heavy black fur. His age-mottled skull was bare to the broiling heavens and the lustrous strands of his moustache trailed behind him in the harsh wind.

Whereas Archaon found that he loved Giselle but in turn was hated by her, the Chaos warrior simply hated Sheerian. Despite his animosity towards the sorcerer, Archaon had found the daemon to be a useful guide. In the depths of the Southern Wastes, where the beast hordes, long-forgotten monstrosities and the dangerous daemons of Chaos held sway, Sheerian's survival depended as much on Archaon's sword arm and savage leadership as Archaon's depended upon the sorcerer's dark counsel. The sorcerer had his uses. As he hungered for his precious Eye, its intoxicating gift of farsight and the secrets of the world it revealed, Archaon ached for the further treasures of the Ruinous Gods. The artefacts of darkness through which Archaon would earn the dread title Everchosen of Chaos. Sheerian's cursed knowledge, sorceries and his interpretation of the Eye's enchanted sights had helped to keep them from harm.

He had guided his worldly master (for beyond Archaon, Sheerian served no other than the dreaded Tzeentch) on towards his destiny. He had revealed the

Gore Glacier, the treachery of Algis-Kar and the dark secrets of the Winter King. It had been Sheerian who had revealed the treachery of the daemonic thing Archaon had come to know as the Changeling, and in doing so had not only learned the location of the oblivion prince Be'lakor, but had also betrayed a brother Tzeentchian. If the Great Changer hadn't been such a twisted entity of unfathomable evil, Sheerian might have feared an infernal retribution. As it was, Archaon half suspected the sorcerer would receive some warped gift or malformed blessing instead.

Thunder crashed across the skies. Lightning slashed the firmament in two, throwing Archaon's army into impossible shadow against the obsidian ice of the Southern Wastes. A wretched cavalcade of shaggy hide, horn and muscle. Archaon's horde was an army of beasts.

The Southern Wastes were all but unknown by the men of the east and west and avoided by the elder races. Only the daemon, the monster and the beastman swarmed its black ice floes and mountainous wilderness. Tribes of savage half-breeds fought for warmth in their bones, flesh in their bellies and territorial supremacy. Many were ice barbarians, who wore the frost-threaded furs of conquered enemies and wielded primitive weapons of bone and stone. With no 'men' in the Southern Wastes there were no true 'beastmen', such as Archaon had encountered everywhere else on his doomed travels. The creatures of the Southern Wastes were an eye-stinging fusion of beast and lesser daemon, the infernal entities that plagued the benighted wilderness with their malevolence. They were beastfiends, led by the foetid best of their kind. Brutes blessed with either dark cunning or murderous might. Shamans who read tribal destinies in blood-splatters on the snow, the distant serration of mountain peaks and the crooks of exotic lightning that afflicted the skies. Beastlords, tyrant-gors and infernal bulls of brazen horn and mountainous muscle. Some suffered the specific sponsorship of Ruinous Gods, with monstrous mongrels and daemon princes leading warherds of the warped, the diseased, the obscene or the blood-mad.

Archaon had united many of the beasts, as was his gift. He was an exalted champion of darkness and the children of Chaos could see that. When confronted with one chosen of the Ruinous Pantheon, they expressed themselves in varying ways. Many simply attacked, like the wild things they were. Deep in their tainted flesh they needed to test him or at least sacrifice their herdkin on the altar of his dark sovereignty. Others had been warned of his coming by shamans and dread prophets, and lent Archaon their horde-strength out of the perversion

of spiritual sympathies. Others still saw the growing army coming out of the north, with Archaon at its head, and felt fear or admiration. They saw opportunities for savage communion with their dread deities in the wars to come. The slaughter that seemed to find the champion of Chaos. The unending brutality that stalked his benighted plate and the god-bane of his steel. The butchery that seemed forever in his path.

Some said in their beast tongue that he was uniting the tribes and warherds of the Southern Wastes under a single banner of eternal bloodshed. Some that he was leading them to greater glory about the infernal palaces of the pole – to the Great Gate and the oblivion beyond. To promised lands of fresh suffering and slaughter that they had never known. A few even whispered, with their thick tongues and fang-crowded jaws, that Archaon intended to end the world – and not just the world, but all the worlds that were and would ever be. And man, beast and god would come to know their end at his hand and the power of catastrophe he wielded with it. Whatever the truth, the half-breeds of the Southern Wastes fought, they failed and they fell in behind the droves of beastfiends, pack monsters, centigors and the caravans of herd-sleds that churned up the black snow in Archaon's wandering wake.

Behind the train of beastfiends, which hoof-trudged, snagged, butted and roared at one another, shaking their primitive skull-cleavers and bellowing crude threats, another trampled through the snow. He wore only the skins that others had lain across his sharp shoulders and the penitent chains that had always cut into his emaciated form. About his gaunt features and the wild-eyed stare of madness and devotion, he wore a cranial cage. The kind favoured by zealots and flagellants. The kind favoured by Gorst, who had followed his master across both the known and unknown world, from long before he was the abominate Archaon.

Gorst still bore the sacred Hammer of Sigmar, inked into his flesh and hanging as pendants of faith from his rusted restraints. These drew spitting, savagery and monstrous threats from the slaves to darkness about him, as they always had. Beyond their disgust that had long soaked into his skins and the barging snorting and bare-blade threats issued to the mad man, the beastfiends seemed suspicious and uncertain of Gorst. There was something about the symbols of goodly faith, or perhaps the way the lunatic Gorst wore them, that prompted mongrels and infernal creatures to bellow and snort their derision before stomping away. Perhaps Gorst, the all but skeletal man-thing, soft and vulnerable, was simply not worth the trouble. Or perhaps it was because dashing out his brains with a

butt or the bulbous head of a femur-club would be far too much trouble as Archaon, who favoured the wretch, would savagely end them for such an affront.

As Archaon slowed, peering through the maelstrom at the light on the horizon, the Chaos warrior gestured for the sorcerer Sheerian, Eins and the beastlord Moraq Half-Horn to come forward. Sheerian struggled with his hunch and his leg through the snow to catch his master up.

‘My lord?’ the ancient managed through the storm. Eins was with him, but as usual the winged warrior did not speak. Like a dark angel he simply drew level with Archaon and matched him step for step like a sentinel or shadow. Moraq Half-Horn dug his sharpened hooves into the sides of the woolly rhinox he was riding. Sitting behind the scrawny beast’s shoulder-hump and with reins of sinew guiding the twin horns erupting from the creature’s snout, Moraq joined them. Archaon’s barbarian horde was made of beastfiends of all the fell tribes he had conquered and the warherds that had joined his number for the honour of the coming slaughter. Many beastlords and chieftains led this assortment of mongrel creatures, routinely fighting one another for the right to lead the horde in Archaon’s name and to report to the Chaos warlord directly. This changed on an almost daily basis. Today it was Moraq Half-Horn.

Moraq urged his rhinox on. The animal was a shaggy, scabrous thing with a will of its own and it fought the beastfiend chieftain for control. Moraq shook his daemonic skull, with its single horn that erupted from one bony temple to curve beneath the creature’s own snout like a crescent. He bellowed and savagely kicked at the beast until it settled.

‘What is that?’ Archaon put to them with brute impatience. Eins remained silent but Sheerian attempted to wrap his thin, cracked lips around the dark tongue spoken by the beastfiends. With no men to afflict their monstrous wilderness there had been no need or opportunity to learn the languages of men. Archaon had found it easier to have the sorcerer translate his demands through the beastfiend’s own tribal tongue. This became more difficult still, given that the beast language of barbarian tribes and warherds were given to regional variations of their own across the continent. Archaon had been a scholar as well as a warrior in his previous calling as a templar of Sigmar, and over time had picked up the basics of the brute tongue. This did not stop him tormenting Sheerian with the duty of translation. Archaon listened to the sorcerer and the beastlord Moraq exchange savage, angry words through the cacophony of the storm.

‘He says it’s called the Haemorrhagia, my lord,’ Sheerian told him. ‘’Tis a

region of quakes and ruptures, where the land fights itself and the black blood of the earth bubbles up from the depths. 'Tis a birthing place of daemons, awash with pitch and flame.'

'A place to warm our bones and camp perhaps,' Archaon put to them. Again there was a furious jabbering between the two, replete with grunts, snarls and apparent cursing.

'He says that it is the territory of the Skullfest,' Sheerian explained. 'The bloodied gorfiends of Khorne. They celebrate their allegiance to the Blood God by taking the skulls of half-breeds from neighbouring tribes and daemons that crawl out of the birthing grounds.'

'And who leads this Skullfest?' Archaon demanded. Moraq told them.

'Ograx the Great,' Sheerian translated. 'Daemonkin of Z'rughl Ka'kadron'ath the Brassbound, Bloodthirster of Khorne.' Archaon nodded his helm. The Chaos warrior seemed satisfied. 'We could always go around, my lo—'

'No,' Archaon growled. 'My destiny will not wait on mongrels and skulltakers. We will go through these tormented lands. We will see how *great* this Ograx really is. We shall see if he lives up to his father's reputation. If he does not, it will be his skull honouring the Blood God and his lands.'

Archaon pulled away from the group once more, his boots crunching through the black snow. 'Ready the horde, Moraq.' As Archaon spoke, Sheerian translated his savage orders into beastspeak. 'And pass the word. No snow and scraps for your dark kindred. They feast on red meat tonight.'

The beastfiend bellowed its acknowledgement and hauled its monstrous steed around. Archaon looked back at the infernal glow rising from the dark horizon. 'Onwards,' the warlord commanded before pushing on through the snow. Each trudging step took him into the quake-tormented lands of the Haemorrhagia. The black blood of the earth oozed up through the ice, where it took to flame and brought warmth to the glacial darkness. The frozen insistence of the continent interior tried its best to douse the fires of the ruptured ice and land. Flames roared, guttered and hissed in blizzard and storm. The fury of the earth's hellish interior would not be denied, however. Soon great pits and raging fissures opened about them, forcing the horde cavalcade to slog, weave and sled through the fiery torment. Archaon began to sweat in his heavy furs and armour and, although it was a discomfort of a different kind, it was welcome. The chosen of Chaos and his army of half-breed wretches did not have long to enjoy it, however, for out of the fires' blinding glare their infernal foes came.

Archaon squinted through the pit-flares and eddies of flame. A snarling smile



drew back his lips and his gauntlet snatched for *Terminus*. The consecrated steel was once again to burn through the bestial and the daemon.

Bovine brutes of blood-stained mane and twisted horn stomped out of the brightness at him. Scores of them, and each branded with the hate-scorched sigil of Khorne. Archaon turned aside axes of razored bone and blades of wicked flint. The Swords of Chaos were about him, shielding their warlord with their gargoyle wings and parrying sweeps of their bone swords. Archaon frustrated their attempts to play sentinel at every turn, hurling himself headlong into the barbarian numbers. He leant out of the reach of throat-slashing flint, rolled out from under the cleaving descent of axe-fashioned shoulder blades and feigned left before darting right, out of the stampeding path of Ograx's bullfiends. *Terminus* opened up their backflesh, took horns from heads and stabbed through all but impenetrable muscle and fused ribcage to find the rupturing vulnerabilities within. Half-breeds died and the pits spat forth flaming coals and sprays of cinder in celebration.

They were but the vanguard of Ograx the Great's beastforce. Directed on by Eins and the staff-shaking Sheerian, Archaon's bestial horde rushed forward into the fray. Archaon was soon lost in a sea of muscle, shaggy hide and snorting steam. The land trembled beneath the hooves of Archaon's army and lakes of black ooze bubbled up about them. Pits gaped open and the earth tore apart. Flame reached for the skies. The ground upon which Archaon stood bucked and shuddered upwards, and he roared as the thunderous outcrop reared. He clashed *Terminus* against the eight-pointed star of his shield. Beastfiends bellowed their infernal celebration. Wretched horns were sounded and rude weapons of bone, twine and stone rattled as they were shaken jubilantly at the skies. Suddenly a hiss rose above the spitting of flame and tearing of the earth – a sound Archaon knew well.

'Shields!' he called savagely across the crashing sea of muscle and fur. He brought up his own. The Swords of Chaos extended their wings and enveloped themselves in a bubble of battle-hardened leather. Vier's warped remnants sprang out horribly, like a storm-shattered tent, to offer protection to the ancient Sheerian and Sister Giselle. The half-breeds of Archaon's hordes brought up their own defences – hide shields of cured flesh and shaggy fur, mounted on frameworks of entwined ribs. Nothing was wasted in the Southern Wastes. With little in the way of ore and metal to work with, materials were torn from the carcasses of the innumerable beasts that swarmed the continent. Weapons and armour were fashioned from friend and slaughtered foe. Archaon smiled to

himself as he held his shield above him. It was raining bone. Rib and fibula – straightened, sharpened, hardened and fashioned into arrows. Archaon waited. He listened to the splinter of bone off his steel and the thud of arrows into hide shields. As the storm passed, the Chaos warlord came out from behind his Ruinous Star.

‘Do your worst!’ Archaon roared. Below him it was as if a dam had broken. The sea of muscle and horn he had been holding back had been released. The base instincts of his legion’s brute nature took over. With Moraq Half-Horn leading the way and smashing his own beastfiends aside with the hammer-head of his saddled rhinox, the monstrous half-breeds of Archaon’s army surged forth through the havoc. Huge shafts of ice and stone erupted from the ground and spouts of pitch fountained about them. Fires spread and turned such fountains into furious beacons of flame.

Archaon leapt from one rising outcrop to another as his savage horde clashed with the beastfiends of the Haemorrhagia. Within furious moments they were among their attackers. Brays of stunted horn and shaved chest twanged their arrows off bows of blood-stained bone and strings of sinew. Horns were blown and a cacophony of weakling warcries rose from chests of red flesh. As Archaon’s brutes waded into the mobs of miserable half-breeds, the brays dropped their cowardly weapons in favour of crooked pikes bearing heads of crafted horn, splintered bone or razored flint. They hurled their wicked shafts at Archaon’s oncoming host but his beastfiends would not be denied. Hoof-hobbling on, sometimes with jagged pikes embedded in furry legs, shoulders and chests, the warherd charged the brays.

There were hundreds and hundreds of the infernal creatures. As Moraq and his beasts cleaved their way through the mob, the darkness gave birth to endless multitudes of red bodies. The murk rumbled with the bestial braying of hundreds more, awaiting their turn to honour the Blood God. To stab and gouge. To skewer and twist their primitive pikes in the flesh of their tribal enemy. Leaping and dropping from rising outcrop to rising outcrop, Archaon could see why Ograx the Great had held the Haemorrhagia for so long. Long enough to become infamous among innumerable other savage chieftains.

The Haemorrhagia rumbled beneath ice and rock. Beneath the thunder of hoof the world split. The ground shook. Flaming pitch vomited for the sky. The hellish earth opened up to reveal its infernal secrets.

Archaon perched with the agility of a cat on a shuddering outcrop. He cast his gaze across the waves of red muscle and twisted horn, rolling in from the

twilight of the Wastes. He leapt off the rocky shaft, with *Terminus* and shield held high. Crashing down through the horde of brays, Archaon cleaved a half-breed in two. He brained beastfiends with his star-emblazoned shield and broke monsters with an armoured boot. He turned. He slashed and smashed through beastmeat. Bone spears split against the metal of the shield and the Sigmarite blade seared through daemon-pledged flesh. About him great rents opened up in the Wastes, and snow steamed away as clefts and chasms swallowed beastfiends whole. The gaping rifts unleashed an infernal glow on the battlefield.

Both the creatures branded with Archaon's mark and that of the Blood God fell to a fiery doom, braying and bellowing away their misfortune. Archaon hopped across the parting fissures, cutting and cleaving through the blood-soaked brays as he went. He jumped the flaming crevasses that opened at his feet and butchered his way through beastfiends as he stormed across the trembling ice. Creatures thrust at him with unthinking savagery, stabbing and cutting, but the pikes sparked and splintered off the unhallowed armour of Morkar.

'Enough!' Archaon roared as he bludgeoned brays with his heavy blade. Blood leapt from the screeching beastfiends with every furious strike. 'I want the Great One!' Archaon shouted across the torment of the earth, the *whoosh* of flame and the suffering he had created in his wake. 'I want the champion of Z'rughl Ka'kadron'ath. The Brassbound's kindred. The bestial prince. Ograx of the Blood God – where are you?'

Archaon's words were hot but his mind cut through the chaos and confusion like cold steel. He wanted to draw out the monster – and it worked. The Haemorrhagia shook with the thunder of the half-demon's roar. A great shaft of black rock erupted from the ground with an explosive shower of cinders, carrying the form of Ograx the Great high above the fray. Archaon felt his face contort into something halfway between a snarl and a smile. As another spur of ruptured earth rumbled skyward nearby, Archaon took the murderous steps and barbarian lives it took to reach it. As the rock took him above the steam, smoke and glare of the battlefield he saw his opposite. The bestial warlord Ograx.

He was big, even for one of the southern half-breeds. The light of the fires gleamed off the brazen surface of his shaggy legs and cloven hooves. They were living metal, like a sculpture that had achieved a life of its own. A belt of flayed flesh and fur scabbards sat on his hips, surrounding the nightmare creature in a nest of weaponry: flint-serrated swords of bone, pick axes of sabre teeth, scapula hatchets and short, broad blades of daemoniac design. Ograx's broad chest was a wall of red muscle, from which hung shrunken skulls, furs that danced in the

wind and scraps of armour torn from his infernal victims. His face was a glowering mess of scars and bovine madness, amongst a princely crown of bifurcating hell-horn. As the two warriors of Chaos were thrust up at the sky, Ograx pulled a mighty axe from where it had hung across his mane-trailing back. It was a primitive weapon of bone and blood-stained sinew, holding the colossal length of the axe-head in place. The haft was a twisted spine while the axe-head was an actual head. A previous victim. The cranial-crest and snaggle-toothed upper beak of some Tzeentchian daemon. Rancid flesh still clung to the prize.

‘Now, creature!’ Archaon called at the beast-champion. ‘Your master has waited long enough for the skull of one of his own.’ As the Chaos warrior was finding, Ograx was easy to provoke and manipulate. He was a living fortress of flesh and fury. Fury, however, could only take the monster so far. It had little trouble taking Ograx across the flaming gulf between them, however. With a daemoniac roar the bestial prince was in the air, his skull-axe held high above him. There wasn’t enough room for both of them on the rocky outcrop and the beast’s hooves alone would crush him into the stone. At the last moment, Archaon leapt for a rocky shaft rising beside them. As his previous purchase crunched below the landing daemon prince, the Chaos warrior pushed himself immediately back.

Slamming Ograx with the star of his shield, Archaon knocked the bestial champion from his footing. With a bellow of raw frustration, the creature scraped down the side of the shaft with his hooves and the claw of a hand. Brazen hoof-tips and talons sparked down the rock as the monster heaved himself to a halt. The skull-axe swooped about, forcing Archaon onto one foot as the daemoniac beak bit into the rock at his toe. Kicking the weapon away, Archaon swung *Terminus* below him, batting the skull-axe clear and cutting away crag and cranny from the rockface. As the furious Ograx was forced further down the shaft, the stone ledge upon which he was perched gave way and plunged the hulking half-breed down into the flaming pit that had opened about them.

Leaning out, Archaon peered down into the steaming glare, looking for some sign of Ruinous life. It came in the form of a scapula hatchet flung furiously from the inferno and nearly taking the Chaos warrior’s head off. Pulling himself back to the trembling shaft of rock, Archaon swore. Another razored shoulder blade came spinning at him like a throwing-axe, and the dark templar shattered it with a cleaving blow from his heavy blade. Seeing the red eyes of the half-breed prince searing up at him from the murky glare of the pit, Archaon released his

grip on the shuddering spur and dropped down at the beast.

It was a long drop. Archaon's boots found their way to an incline of trembling rock, but it was all he could do to not plunge face first into the flaming lake of pitch that sloshed, spat and fountained with explosive insistence about the roasted isle upon which he had landed. Skidding through the scree, the Chaos warrior skipped back into a regular step. Ograx was suddenly there. Out of the smoke. Out of the steam. More importantly it was the half-breed's skull-axe that came for him. Allowing himself to skid beneath the terrible arc of its daemonic beak, Archaon was forced to release *Terminus* and put both hands behind his shield. As the blade rattled along the surface of the hot stone, Ograx turned with merciless force and intention. His axe struck Archaon's shield and smashed the dark templar back. Rolling across his pauldron and furs Archaon brought the shield back up at a crouch but again the skull-axe was there, with the monster's bone-shuddering brawn behind it.

Archaon risked a glance behind him. *Terminus* had come to a stop at the burning shore. The greatsword had skidded and bounced its way across the pitch pools of bubble and flame and was slowly sinking, blade first, into the black slurrp. Still at a crouch, Archaon began to work his way over to the weapon but Ograx had him. Again and again the skull-axe came for him. Archaon could feel the beast-prince's god-fuelled might behind each strike. Ograx wanted nothing more than to slam the beak straight through Archaon, armour and all. And between his infernal weapon and the brute strength in the mountain range of muscle that ran down his arms, Archaon had no doubt that he could do it.

Skidding. Kneeling. Shuffling. The dark templar watched his blade sink while his shield and his bones took the mindless and unrelenting onslaught of the creature. As the cross guard descended, Archaon threw himself into a messy roll, arm over arm, holding the shield close. Ograx was all over him. Stomping through the grit and pools of pitch with his hooves, the half-breed brought his axe down on Archaon with furious insistence. With each roll the Chaos warrior just managed to get the shield between him and the impaling beak. On the roasting shoreline Archaon reached out for the sinking *Terminus*, the fingertips of his gauntlet trapping the pommel as Ograx battered his shield – and the shield, in turn, battered Archaon into the ground.

Clawing *Terminus* up out of the boiling pitch, the Chaos warrior heaved back at the skull-axe with his shield and an exhausted arm. Archaon swung the weapon at the half-breed's legs. The edge of the greatsword sparked off the creature's brazen leg, failing to cut into the metal. The raw frustration of the

strike took Ograx from his cloven hooves and put him on the burning rock. Archaon swung *Terminus* down at the half-breed's chest but the prone creature got the bone shaft of his axe between the blade's edge and its intended target. The insistence of the parry carried up the Chaos warrior's sword arm, jarring his shoulder. Boiling pitch flicked from the steel and scorched a line across Ograx's broad chest.

Archaon heaved *Terminus* down at the monster but the half-breed was incredibly strong and pressed the haft of his skull-axe back at the dark templar. For a long time the two warriors held each other there. Archaon adjusted his balance and the angle of the blade. The daemonic bone of the axe's spine would not break under the templar blade's cleaving edge, however, and the pair assumed the trembling stillness of a quake-tormented sculpture, Archaon matching his skill and indomitable will against the bestial savagery of the muscle-bound monster.

Archaon became aware of movement about them. From the bubble and slurp of the steaming pitch, the creatures of hell were emerging. Wretched daemons and winged horrors crawled forth from the depths. Slick and black with pitch, many of the gargoyles were aflame and climbed up the walls of the pit, their talons taking them up towards their prey. They dripped with the black blood of the earth and extended jaws and wings lazily, as though they had just been awoken from infernal slumber in the dark womb of the below. This changed things for both Archaon and Ograx. From the shrieks and screams above, the monstrous beings of the Haemorrhagia were indiscriminate in their slaying, with bodies of the warlords' beastfiends flying down into the hellish pit. As half-breeds of the Blood God and the eight-pointed star thrashed and boiled in pitch and flame, the creatures began to claw their way up the searing shore towards the two warriors.

Archaon risked a withdrawal. Leaning back he brought his blade off the axe haft, allowing Ograx to move. As the bestial prince brought his skull-axe around for a leg-smashing sweep, Archaon resisted the urge to bury *Terminus* in the prone half-breed and settled instead on smashing his heavy blade down on the skeletal weapon. The skull-axe was smashed from Ograx's clawed grip and bounced across the hot stone out of reach. Archaon brought *Terminus* up to finish the job. To bury the monstrous creature in bludgeoning blows with the blade. He had grown accustomed to such wretches – the bested in battle – begging for their miserable lives or at least hiding fearfully behind outstretched arms and faces fixed with dread. This was not the end Ograx the Great had

promised himself. He arched his back, leaning into his death. A growl trailed off into a hiss of hate as the champion gave Archaon the full horror of his half-daemon visage and the infernal glow of his eyes. Ograx dared Archaon to end him. For his innumerable sins, Archaon hesitated.

The Chaos warrior was hit from the side. The world became a tumbling mess of rocky floor and leathery wing. Archaon had been tackled by several creatures that had hauled themselves up the shore. Bounding for him and taking the dark templar down, like some great cat of the plains might a horse or rhinox, the daemonic furies had him on the ground. Archaon became aware of tearing claws, snapping jaws and the slip and slide of pitch-slick flesh. There were four of them, he thought. They savaged him with primordial strength and speed, searching for the soul hiding within the inconvenience of flesh. Between the slap of wing and the snap of jaw, Archaon caught sight of Ograx. He had left the half-breed prince prone and without his daemonic weapon. The brute was swarming with furies. Archaon didn't know whether to be pleased or insulted – either the creatures had sensed in Ograx an easier kill or a more formidable threat. The Chaos warrior settled on the sting of the latter. The monsters would not have been the first to be fooled by the muscle and rage. They would pay for their primitive assumptions.

Archaon rolled, dashing the brains from a snapping fury. His gauntlet, clutched in a fist about the hilt of his templar blade, landed a snout-crunching blow on another before the Chaos warrior rose from the hot stone and shook a third from his armoured back. The fiend received an elbow to its mangled maw, knocking it stumbling back into the pitch rolling up the shoreline.

'Meet *Terminus*,' Archaon snarled, turning the Sigmarite blade with a bend of his wrist. The things circled on all fours, wings held close to their backs, spitting and hissing like the creatures of hell they were. One lunged at him but he punched it aside with the star-blazoned surface of his shield. Another came for his throat but Archaon swiped it down with a flourish of his blade. The blessed steel burned through daemonflesh in a way the pitch had failed to, and the beast released an unearthly shriek of agony. Archaon suddenly felt pain of his own as the third monster latched onto his wrist with its crushing maw. Whirling into a savage turn Archaon dragged the beast around and sent it slamming into the creature he had just opened from the chops to the naval. Still dragging the monster, he thrust *Terminus* forward, taking the first daemon through the chest. It released its infernal claw-hold on reality and died right there on Sigmarite steel, leaving the dead meat of its horrid, worldly form skewered on the blade.

Death, right there before the fury's burning eyes, had persuaded the third brute to unclamp its twisted maw from Archaon's arm. The Chaos warrior turned on it and with a savage thrust of the head, smashed its face back into its skull with a butt of his skull-helm. A back slice with his greatsword cut the distracted monster all but in two, leaving Archaon facing one lone and uncertain beast.

'Come on, thing of darkness and flame, don't disappoint me now...'

With a predator's patience it paced back and forth before surging for him. Archaon moved, allowing the beast to pass by before bringing the flat of his heavy blade down on the creature's skull. There was a wet crunch that sent the daemon to the floor. Stalking up behind it, Archaon stamped down on the monster's head, crunching his heel against the burning rock beneath. He paused to soak up the havoc in which he found himself.

Above, a three-way battle had unfolded about the opening pit. The savages of his own warherd were taking the fight to the Blood God's beastfiends, while both were forced to defend themselves against the infernal horrors that were crawling up from cracks, flame-howling pits and fissures that were opening up across the lands of the Haemorrhagia. He saw Moraq Half-Horn, still fighting from the saddle of his slain mount. His Swords of Chaos, like lieutenants amongst the half-breed savages of Archaon's horde, slashing with boneswords and parrying with unfurled wings. The sorcerer Sheerian, mumbling incantations and tapping his staff on the flesh of passing brays, prompting limbs to erupt from bestial torsos that clawed and strangled the afflicted creatures. The misshapen Vier, keeping Sister Giselle beneath his own mangled wing – the girl holding her furs about her like a comforting embrace, her face inflicted with the blankness of a battlefield stare. Before him Ograx the Great was a nest of writhing daemons. Archaon could hear the bellow and roar of the mauled half-breed.

The Chaos warrior allowed a snarl to fall from his lips. Slipping *Terminus* into his back-scabbard and shouldering his shield, Archaon scooped up Ograx's weapon from the roasting stone. He hefted the axe, feeling the weight of the daemoniac skull. Turning the spine in his gauntlets, he spun the beak and the skull-crest around. The grit crunched beneath his boots, flames roared from the pit and furies snapped and snarled with savagery. Within the mound of infernal flesh, Archaon could hear Ograx the Great bellow his pain and frustration. Archaon nodded to himself. It was decided.

Lifting the skull-axe above him like a woodcutter, Archaon brought it straight down on the nearest hellfiend. Like a pick into stone, the beak of the weapon thudded through the back of the fury, prompting the creature to screech its agony



and surprise to the heavens. Archaon tore the creature off the Blood God's chosen, dragging it back across the hot stone. Resting a boot on its thrashing form – a frenzy of wing and claw – Archaon finished the monster with another heft of the daemonbone axe. He peeled the infernal beasts from Ograx. The skull-axe crunched through torsos and hooked heads from shoulders. Archaon battered monsters aside, allowing them to claw and skitter their way through the trembling grit, before slamming the axe-head into them and then the brutes into the stone.

Finally, Archaon saw the bestial prince, his face and broad chest further mangled by the claws of the furies. Ograx was drowning in winged daemons, both alive and dead. Many still had the beastfiend's assortment of flint blades and scapula axes buried in their infernal flesh. Archaon dragged the carcasses from him as the bestial prince held a fury's head before him, smashing its face with a clenched fist while its twisted jaws snapped for him. This had gone on long enough, Archaon decided, and heaved the skull-axe over one shoulder. He brought the bone weapon down with such force that its beak cleaved straight through the back of the fury's head and out through its face, drizzling Ograx with honouring gore from the Blood God.

The beastfiend heaved the daemon to one side, leaving it atop the mound of other corpses, and got unsteadily to his feet. The two warriors of Chaos regarded one another as the havoc of battle, firestorm and slaughter unfolded about them. There were few words suitable for such an encounter, even in the beastfiend's dark tongue, and Archaon did not deign to use them. Actions spoke louder in the cacophony of Haemorrhagia. Turning the gore-dribbling skull-head of Ograx's axe in his gauntlets, Archaon placed it in the hot grit at his feet and kicked it across to the bestial prince. Ograx watched the weapon bump and hiss through the grit to his hooves. As the monster slowly picked it up, Archaon found his own hand twitch. The muscles in his arm were tensed and ready to reach for *Terminus* from his back-scabbard. Ograx was a savage. A daemonic half-breed. A barbarian disciple of the Blood God. Anything might happen.

Ograx looked up about the edge of the pit. His brays were falling into the pitch and flame, forced back by the savage hordes of Archaon, where they were being torn apart and discarded by the furies of the Haemorrhagia, climbing up out of the fiery depths. Ograx pulled a horn from his furs and put it to his ugly lips. As he belted a lungful of air through the crude instrument, the very air about them trembled. The sound threatened to stop the heart and burst the ear. The brays of the Blood God knew the sound.

‘Hold!’ Archaon called, the boom of his voice amplified by the pit. At the signal of the two warlords, the bestial hordes slowed to the stillness of a standoff. Creatures stood obedient and uncertain. Even the ferocity of flame and tearing earth seemed to die away. Ograx called out orders in a bullish voice. Archaon had his own: ‘Destroy the daemons that crawl from the depths,’ he ordered his savages. Warcries and thunderous threats built in the chests of half-breeds as bestial kin found a brute camaraderie in the faces of their former foes. With the thoughtless compliance of a yoked animal, the creatures fell on the plague of winged monstrosities crawling from the pit, stabbing, bludgeoning and mauling the furies with a shared and monstrous rejoicing. The gods would have their grotesque games and Khorne would have skulls for his eternal throne.

Climbing up the side of the pit, slashing and skewering furies from his path as he did, Archaon hauled himself up over the edge. He turned to find Ograx the Great behind him. Archaon offered the bestial prince his gauntlet. After a moment’s feral consideration, Ograx put his claw in Archaon’s hand and allowed the Chaos warrior to help him up. The battle continued about them. The Haemorrhagia vomited forth all it had – firestorms, the rebellious earth and the scourge that was spawned from the bowels of the Wasteland interior.

Archaon directed his horde to take the battle to the very land itself. It was as if the Southern Wastes themselves were contesting his supremacy. Such winged monsters were the stuff of nightmares. Daemoniac creatures of whim and monstrous fancy. They were no match for Archaon, the savage hordes of the dark templar and Ograx the Great combined. As the ire of the land died down, the flames faded and the boiling pitch drained away, the great rents in the landscape came together like healing wounds, and winged horrors that failed to crawl back into the dark womb of the earth were torn apart by bestial hordes beneath the flayed flesh of Archaon’s banner.

The Chaos warrior walked through the carnage. The land was a carpet of daemonflesh, rotting away with supernatural speed. The Swords of Chaos stalked close by, ever watchful for treachery. Through the muscular silhouettes of beastfiends, Archaon caught sight of Giselle. The girl was shadowed by the misshapen Vier, whose twisted body towered over her. It had been Archaon’s instruction that the winged marauder not leave her side. The girl for her part had not been the same since their encounter with the Chaos dragon Flamefang, and their unfortunate arrival on the damned shores of the dark, southern continent.

Giselle wandered as if in a horror-drunk daze. Her face was at once disgust and disbelief at the ghastliness she had endured, and the bleak acceptance of her

fate to come. Archaon, who cared little for his own hardships and almost nothing for anyone else's, could barely look her in the eye. They had been intimate once but that had been a long time ago. The girl's remonstrations and Sigmarite curses had become a lost hope to save him. Such cares had become futility, infatuation and perhaps even love.

Archaon himself found little space in his heart for such sentiments, crowded out by the darkness and doom that he had become. He desired an end to all and yet, when it came to the girl, Giselle Dantziger, there was a part of him that desired existence. Not just the endless violence and burning desire for wars to be won and foes to be conquered. Another kind of existence. Fleeting moments of flesh against flesh and hearts that seemed to beat as one in the hollow emptiness of the world. Perhaps he had indeed fallen for the girl, but he would never admit that to himself, let alone to Giselle herself. Besides, their time at the top of the world had passed. Archaon had fallen so much further since then. He had been lost, but now he was truly damned.

Yet still he kept the girl alive, rather than cast her aside as he had so many. Her hallowed touch was agony to him. Somehow, in this benighted place – or perhaps because of it – the girl's simple faith in a false god, a God-King, had not abandoned her. It had been a long time since he had known such agonies. Now her mere existence seemed to burn his soul. She was a little of what remained; in the stale echo of her original affections continued to live the man he had once been. It was a weakness, Archaon knew this, but he could not bring himself to end the half-felt, half-remembered scintilla of his former existence. A life the many dark deeds of his doom had eclipsed and he could barely remember. For Archaon it seemed to live on only in his consuming hatred for the world, the gods that plagued it and the mortal multitude that were the slaughter-in-waiting. Only in Giselle did he exist as anything else and, for some perverse reason, Archaon couldn't find it in himself to destroy that. So, Giselle Dantziger lived on. A ghost of a girl, buried in furs and surrounded by fiends who would die to protect her in the most lethal of lands, simply because Archaon, their dark lord and master, wished it so.

The sorcerer Sheerian approached, hobbling with his staff. Moraq Half-Horn was with him, dwarfing the ancient with his brute bulk. The half-breed, in turn, was buried in the shadow of Ograx the Great.

'A truce, my lord?' the Tzeentchian put to him. Like everything the sorcerer said, it was some kind of a subtle challenge.

'An assimilation,' Archaon settled upon.

‘But how can we trust such a mindless animal?’ Sheerian asked. Ograx snorted, the stinking mist engulfing the ancient. The sorcerer stumbled back a little but was undeterred. ‘A servant of the Blood God, for whom any of our skulls might serve as tribute.’

‘I’ll trust a mindless animal over a Tzeentchian sorcerer any day,’ Archaon told the ancient. ‘A mindless animal can be loyal. This is more than I can say of the Great Changer and his duplicitous minions, for it is in their nature to cog, lie and deceive.’

‘My lord,’ Sheerian protested.

‘It is done,’ Archaon said. ‘The bestial prince and I have reached an accord, at least for now. If my skull had been destined for the Blood God’s throne then I don’t doubt that Ograx here would have been the one to take it.’ Archaon gave the hulking monster a slight nod, which the half-breed returned.

‘Pray, sir...’

‘Pray yourself,’ Archaon said, ‘and keep your foetid gods happy, for I don’t get to choose, sorcerer. I am to be Everchosen of the Chaos gods, the Herald of Ruin in all its cursed forms, not just the Powers towards which I feel wretchedly inclined. Now, convey my words in the dark tongue of the beast. Inform Ograx here that his warherd will join my own and that together we shall travel south and bring the wrath of the half-breed to the Gatelands and the infernal kings who grow soft within their palace walls.’

Archaon watched the bestial prince carefully as Sheerian spoke his words in the guttural tongue of the beastfiends. He saw Ograx look down on Moraq Half-Horn and then back at Archaon. When he spoke, it was with savage pride.

‘Well?’ Archaon asked.

‘Ograx the Great wonders for whom he fights,’ Sheerian translated.

‘Tell him he fights for the glory of his god,’ Archaon said, ‘and through him the glory of all the Ruinous Gods – for it is through them that the darkness of all the world will be realised. Tell him I am the instrument of that realisation – chosen of all gods as he is chosen of his – and as such he fights for me, as the best of all the half-breeds of the Southern Wastes do.’

Something seemed to trouble the creature.

‘Or he can fight for his life...’ Archaon warned. Ograx moved quickly for such a hulking beast. He was suddenly behind Moraq, his great, bulging arm around the half-breed’s neck. He picked the creature up by the arm-lock and his infamous half-horn, the chieftain’s back against the scarring of his broad chest. Moraq’s flailing hooves and thrashing arms told of the incredible force behind

Ograx's mighty frame. Suddenly it was over. Moraq Half-Horn's body fell like a rag doll at the bestial prince's brazen hooves, while the beastfiend's head – replete with the shock on the unfortunate creature's face – remained in Ograx's grasp. The monster threw the head down at Archaon's boots.

The dark templar stared at the half-breed hulk. His Swords of Chaos had cleared their bone blades from their wing-sheathes and Sheerian had stumbled back into his master in shock at the sudden violence.

'Treachery, my lord,' the sorcerer screamed. 'Skulls for the Skull Throne of Khorne!'

'No...' Archaon decided. He didn't move. His muscles were tensed but he didn't want Ograx to know his display had startled him. 'A skull for me,' the dark templar informed him. 'The Blood God's diplomacy, if such a thing exists. An offering. A bargain to be made – but with conditions.' Archaon looked straight at Ograx. 'The half-breeds fight for you, correct?' Archaon put to the bestial prince. 'And with them, you for me.'

Ograx the Great nodded his ugly head slowly. Archaon nodded his agreement also.

'Ready the horde, mongrel prince,' Archaon said turning to leave. 'We march on the continental interior, the Gatelands, where daemons rule and worlds beyond our own wait to be discovered.'



## CHAPTER II

*‘Those that worship the Prince of Excess are free to serve as slaves to darkness.’*

– Lothal the Lost (Flesh inscribed)

*The Scabyrinth  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

The ragelands of the Haemorrhagia gave way once more to the howling freeze of the Southern Wastes. Archaon pushed his horde of half-breeds to their limit. Such creatures were used to the idle violence and wanton debauchery of holding territories. Even encroachments and invasions were laggardly, aimless affairs following whatever gorfiend or beastlord had indulged its aggressions that day. The beastfiends of the Southern Wastes were not used to hoof-marching and cavalcadery, where the inhospitable conditions and unnatural geography prohibited such madness.

This did not stop Archaon leading his ragged horde of barbarians and bestial savages from the front, setting the pace for the miserable creatures as they

trudged through snowstorms and black drifts, across lakes of ice in which entire armies of daemons were encased, and glaciers that oozed ichor and doom. He led them between ranges of serrated mountains and along rivers of lava that snaked and steamed through the frozen wilderness from the flare of distant peaks. All the while, the lunatic Gorst followed in the horde's hoofsteps, trailing his master – as he always had. Nothing could stop the wizened madman, jangling in his chains and head-cage. No drift of black snow was too deep, no frost-shattered maze of dagger peaks too towering for the flagellant. From time to time Archaon would inquire after the madman. Every time Gorst was taken for gone, however – lost in some unnatural storm, picked off by a monstrous predator of the Wastes or simply swallowed by the darkness – the lunatic would appear. How he achieved this, the Dark Gods only knew.

Archaon took each step with dogged assurance. Time and distance had little meaning in the insanity of the Southern Wastes. This he had long known and tended to measure the passing of both in the number of half-breeds crashed to the ice, dead from exhaustion and exposure. Ograx's blood-brays were particularly susceptible to the deep cold of the continental interior, having formerly made their herdlands in the warmth of the Haemorrhagia. Every so many deaths, Archaon would open the Eye – the blazing jewel he had taken from the sorcerer Sheerian and the Chaos dragon Flamefang.

Ensnared above the eye sockets of his helm's skull-face, Archaon engaged the Eye's supernatural abilities. The gem glowed with damned energies, allowing Archaon to see far beyond even his own enhanced senses. Great distance and the obstacles of rock and storm were nothing to the Eye. It brought Archaon, in gaze at least, from horizon to horizon and beyond. With the great artefact, one of the six treasures of Chaos that marked a man as Everchosen of the Ruinous Gods, the dark templar had plotted the course of his incursion into the Wastes at the bottom of the world. He hoped that one day he would unlock the sorcerous jewel's secrets further and learn to extend its view ahead in time, as well as space. He looked forward to the time he might see the prospects of the very next moment, hour, day or year in the same way that the Eye already allowed him to see beyond the limits of his earthly gaze – to see his future, his destiny, rather than simply aching for it in the unknown of the present.

His relentless trek through the lands of shadow, ice and insanity, trailing a mighty cavalcade of brute half-breeds, had taken him south. Further south than any man had ever been. The Eye had reached over the black horizon for him to reveal a great canyon, a crescent canyon that cut deep into the Wastes. It was

colossal, and curved its crooked way into the darkness of the polar interior, the infernal whimlands of Chaos, where sanity and reality had no business. The sorcerer Sheerian told Archaon that the chasm was one of eight mighty tears in the fabric of the interior that had been created by the calamitous collapse of the great polar gate – the gargantuan portal that led from the mortal realm to that of the Chaos gods. The Eye showed Archaon the shattered remains of the gate and the amaranthine balelight that bled into the world, reaching up from the rift and into the broiling skies like a Ruinous dawn.

Huge fragments of midnight stone – warpstone that ate the very balelight about it – sat strewn across the infernal region, too massive for even the strange forces of the Gatelands to erode. About them the Eye revealed the sovereignties of the great entities of ruin and the earthly palaces of daemon lords and princes. Topless citadels. Nightmarish palaces. Colossal fortresses of paranoid madness. Such abominations, crafted in stone, metal, flesh and bone, reared from fossilised battlefields, the carcasslands of rotting daemonhood and vast ruins of ancient grandeur and dream-bastions yet to be built. A place where the manifest melted before the mind and the desires of darkness achieved a warped reality.

As Archaon's determined steps led the horde down into the opening of the crescent canyon, beastfiends gave rancid thanks to their gods for the respite. With craggy stone walls rising up either side of them and a winding path descending into the frozen hell-hole of the Wastes, the crescent canyon offered shelter from the cut-glass gales and heart-stopping temperatures. With every hoof-fall down into the canyon depths, the temperature rose. Heated by the volcanic activity in the bowels of the earth and hot springs, the rockface of the crevasse became warm to the touch. The lifelessness of the icescape above gave way to unnatural mosses and lichens. The petrified roots and branches of hardy shrubs and woody foliage reached out for the horde as they made their way along the canyon.

The half-breeds were all but dead on their hooves, stumbling along in a listless train of savages. Archaon did not slow as he reached the shelter of the crescent canyon. He did not camp as any other warlord or general might have. He increased the pace further, snowdrifts and the slippery surface of glaciers no longer slowing their progress down. Although he did not share his desires with the brutes and lieutenants of his exhausted army, he was intent on reaching the Forsaken Fortress of Be'lakor before it disappeared once more, forcing him to criss-cross the frozen continent in aimless futility. He would not have the Dark Master escape him and, to ensure that, he needed a daemoniac steed fleet enough



to catch him and his capricious castle. The Changeling had shown him where he might find such a mount, so on he trudged. Through the canyon's torturous twists and turns, through the brush of midnight foliage sprouting from the grit path and drooping from the overhanging rock.

As the canyon cut through the twilight wilderness of the Wastes, it bifurcated into a series of smaller, deep ravines. The single path became many as the canyon turned into a maze of tight gulches, gorges and gulleys. Above, the ice sheet had managed to bridge the narrow chasm tops, providing a vaulted roof to the canyon, through which the bleak glow of lightning storms passed as if through black crystal. Sheerian called it the Scabyrinth, though Archaon knew not where the sorcerer had heard the term. Where the canyon had split into a delta of smaller paths, the ice had managed to reassert its supremacy and cover the canyon, like a crusty scab across a festering wound. It rained within the ravine's depths as the warm rock melted the under-ice to produce an ink-blot drizzle that guttered half-breed torches of bone and fat-smearred hide.

The drizzle sustained all manner of strange plants and animals. The Scabyrinth was an oasis of warped life – lowly creatures in the main. Things of long leg, claw and boot-crunching body. Wet serpents and spiders as big as Archaon's shield made their home in the crags of the rockface. Warpwater crayfish scuttled about the black streams created by the perpetual drizzle in the squelching gravel of the ravine floor, while leeches dropping from the canyon walls and fat, chitinous flies attempted to feed on the warm blood in their veins. It was a while before the horde encountered actual warm-blooded creatures, but when they did it was in the form of twisted vermin and packs of vicious wolf-rats.

As Archaon led his warherd down through the Scabyrinth, his half-breeds feasted. The legs of monster arachnids and malformed shellfish eaten whole provided an army's bounty after the necessities of cannibalism on the lifeless Wastes. They soon encountered those who viewed the undercanyons similarly. Beastfiend hunting parties and migrating daemonbreeds, who favoured the warm passage of the Scabyrinth over the murderous cold of the hail-lashed wilderness above. The disturbing forms of god-cursed spawn that leapt at them from caves and hollows. Malformed monsters of great size and ferocity. Some were hibernating in the twists and turns of the Scabyrinth undercanyons. Word was passed down the ragged line for half-breeds to be silent and soft of hoof.

Other creatures treated the depths of the labyrinth like a game trail, feasting on the things that travelled back and forth along it. Archaon and his beastfiends were forced to slay such abominations, swarming the great creatures while

hacking them with bone-axe and viciously stabbing them with spears. Such creatures also provided valuable sustenance. Archaon passed the word for half-breeds to cut strips of meat from the colossal carcasses and hang it from their belts for later. Archaon did not intend to stop. He needed his warherd strong. He needed them to keep eating so that they could keep marching and fighting.

‘We’re getting close,’ Sheerian said, hobbling up behind Archaon. The Chaos warrior knew what it must have taken to do that, pushing through the pain of aching joints and dragging his bird’s foot. It wasn’t simply to be agreeable or indulge in idle conversation. Sheerian knew better than to indulge such pointlessness. Archaon suspected that he wanted to be close to the Eye. Surrendering the jewel had been difficult for the sorcerer – to be forced once again to see the world as others saw it, cursed with the limitations of common sight. Archaon couldn’t trust the Tzeentchian as far as he could spit, and often suspected he was scheming some way to earn the mystical gem back. In the meantime, the best the Tzeentchian could expect was hobbling close to his master and bathing in the Eye’s sorcerous power. On occasion, when their needs were shared, Archaon found the sorcerer’s knowledge and advice tedious but useful. ‘Look...’

Sheerian pointed up at the ice above their heads. The black crystal of the floe had started to glow a dark purple as the balelight of the polar rift reached through the ice. ‘The Gatelands, my lord.’

‘And the palaces of doomed daemons,’ Archaon said.

‘Powerful entities, master,’ Sheerian added. ‘They bear the favour of the Dark Gods to hold sovereignty in such lands. It is a great honour reserved for the most dangerous and twisted of their kind.’

‘Do you have a point, sorcerer?’ Archaon growled, crunching through the wet gravel beside a black stream. ‘For, if you do, I would have you make it.’

‘Only that,’ Sheerian said, his bowed head mottled with age, ‘it would be wise to exercise caution here. That’s all.’

‘Understood.’

As Sheerian fell back, unable to keep pace with his master’s determined progress, Archaon reached a sharp corner in the canyon. Archaon could hear shouting, and the roar of a great beast bouncing about the twisted path of the labyrinthine ravine. It had been some hours since his sword had been baptised in daemonblood or nestled in the flesh of some monster or brute beastfiend. Drawing *Terminus*, Archaon came to a halt. Opening the Eye of Sheerian, the warlord peered up the torturous twists and turns of the canyon. He saw an

engagement of some kind. A monstrous creature, tormented by scores of infernal gors. One carried a banner of some kind.

‘Sorcerer,’ Archaon called, prompting Sheerian to hobble up behind. The Swords of Chaos moved forward like sentinels, bone swords drawn and wings extended protectively about them like warrior-gargoyles. Archaon raised a fist, prompting Vier to lay a twisted gauntlet on Giselle’s shoulder and bring the addled girl to a stop. Ograx the Great saw the signal also and slowed, settling his mighty skull-axe across his shoulders. Behind his hulking form the cavalcade of half-breeds and beastfiends slowed also.

‘My lord?’ Sheerian asked. Archaon drew him close, into the halo of light that the sorcerous Eye cast about the warlord when it was open, so that the Tzeentchian sorcerer might also be caught up in its dark potency and catch a glimpse or vague suggestion of what Archaon was seeing.

‘What do you see, sorcerer?’ Archaon demanded. ‘The banner: what does it show?’

Archaon saw the ancient’s shoulders gently fall as he once again sampled the gift of the Eye. When he was younger, Archaon remembered seeing Sieur Kastner doing something similar. He would similarly demonstrate such relief upon taking a swig from his flask. The relief of an addict. Sheerian took his time. ‘Sorcerer,’ Archaon demanded. ‘What do you see?’

Sheerian almost cracked his ancient face with a horrible smile.

‘We *are* near...’ the sorcerer said absently.

‘Sorcerer,’ Archaon told him, ‘I swear by your faithless lord, if you don’t tell me what you see, I’ll put out your greedy eyes.’

‘The claw symbol of the daemon lord Agrammon, my lord,’ the ancient told him. ‘Daubed on skins, armour and a banner. A hunting party, sent out to trap the exotic beasts of the Wastes for the daemon lord’s collection.’

Through the Eye’s shimmering gaze, Archaon saw the crude symbol to which the sorcerer made reference. A claw or pincer, an emblem of infernal royalty. The mark of the daemon Agrammon. With it Archaon saw the sensual sigils of the Prince of Pleasure, the Ruinous Power Agrammon honoured with his bottomless greed, his indulgence and his monstrous menagerie. The symbols were splashed across the shaven chests of beastfiend trappers: creatures of sickening flesh, entwining horns and long tapering snouts. Their eyes were blank and white, while in their pincer-fingers they held twisted tridents of sinewy bone, and long whips that they cracked about the foul creature they had trapped against the canyon wall.

Archaon turned the Eye on the monstrosity they had cornered. A primeval horror of scale and warty skin – gnarled enough to turn aside a blade – it was some aberration of the Wastes: a toad-like dragon. Its webbed feet splashed about in the shallows of the meltwater stream, and it unleashed thunderous croaks from its huge rubbery maw as Agrammon’s bestial trappers thrust their tridents at it and slashed their whips of sinew in the shallows. As one of the long-snouts splashed through the black waters at the toad dragon, forcing it back, the creature ballooned its bulbous throat and reared up. Opening its great maw the thing regurgitated its last meal upon the beastfiend. The vomit was a deluge of bloody bile and steaming bones. The trapper trumpeted a ghastly shriek from its long snout as the acidic contents of the toad dragon’s stomach drenched it. As flesh began to dribble from its bones, the Slaaneshi trapper stumbled towards its compatriot beasts but the long-snouts backed away. Within moments the beastfiend had become a steaming mound of melted flesh, hissing and dissolving on the shoreline of the stream. The toad dragon hopped forward, croaking its monstrous desire to be left alone. The Slaaneshi beastfiends trumpeted their own fears as they skipped back through the waters on the tips of their hooves.

Through the dizzying vision presented to him by the enchanted Eye, Archaon could see movement in the shadows. Along the opposite wall of the canyon, he could see the spiny silhouettes of rude wagons and ramshackle cages, dragged along by bipedal beasts of daemonic burden. The bars of the cages were barbed and twisted and held all manner of captured quarry. Half-breed prisoners. Wasteland spawn. Monsters and demons. Prizes of every shape and size for Agrammon’s ever-expanding collection.

A great black shape reared from one of the wagons where it had been making a fuss of the yapping pack of horned hunting hounds, whose tapering snouts had tracked the hunting party to the foul toad dragon. Rearing to full height and striding from the shadow of the canyon wall, a malformed hulk looked upon the failure of the beastfiend trappers to contain the toad dragon with sneering contempt. It appeared to be an ogre of some kind, warped by the corrupting insistence of the Southern Wastes. It was a horror to behold. Its flesh was black like the charcoal of a fire, while its back was monstrously hunched and its belly huge. The rest of the creature’s frame sported a kilt of roughly stitched skins and furs that covered the monster’s loins, passed across its belly and then over its shoulder before being pinned to its hunch on great spines that protruded from the hump. The furs did not conceal the creature’s blubbery chest, which Archaon assumed the ogre exposed in honour of its patron power. The monster sported a

second face – a malformed twin of some kind. Its eyes were misted and a milky black poison leaked from its mouth and dribbled down the ogre’s colossal belly. One of the monster’s arms was short and atrophied, while the other was muscle-bound and as thick as a tree.

‘What is that foul creature?’ Archaon put to his dread sorcerer.

‘The brute is called Jharkill,’ Sheerian said. ‘He is the best of Lord Agrammon’s hunters and the tyrant-keeper of his royal menagerie.’ Archaon nodded as they watched the monster from afar. As the creature stomped forward from the shadows it gave some kind of unintelligible instruction to its hunter half-breeds. Beastfiends on the canyon ledges above the toad dragon hauled down on staffs of monstrous bone, prising boulders off the canyon side that crashed down either side of the cornered creature. The boulders carried between them a rough net of sinew that trapped the toad dragon and pinned it to the shoreline.

The toad dragon would not submit, however. As it thunder-croaked its amphibious fury, the thing exuded a slimy pus from its warty skin that allowed it to squirm and slide out from under the weighted net. As it bounded forward, the monster’s grapnel-like tongue shot out from its gaping maw. The sharp tongue speared its way through the back of a fleeing beastfiend and out through its chest. There the fleshy grapnel opened and the tongue retracted like a whip, dragging the unfortunate creature back into the rubbery mouth. A second and third half-breed died similarly, trumpeting their horror from their tapering snouts as they were dragged to an acidic doom.

Stomping forward as the Slaaneshi beastfiends ran, Jharkill produced a great bow carved from the tusk of some previous victim-monster. Taking a bone arrow from a fur quiver that formed the back of its kilt, the ogre wiped the barbed arrowhead against its belly, smearing it in the poison that leaked from the mouth of its assimilated twin. Confidently stringing the bow as the toad dragon leapt forwards, the ogre held the arrow and hooked the sinew of the string on the clawed fingers of its atrophied arm. With its other monstrous appendage it pushed the tusk bow away from it, building a colossal amount of power in the barbarian weapon. As the toad dragon’s belly heaved and its bulbous throat filled with the rancid contents of its stomach, the ogre let fly, sending the length of the arrow hurtling at the monster. With a thud the arrow hammered through the creature’s scales and into the rubbery flesh of its shoulder.

The monster croaked in anguish, its bounding charge veering into a stumble and a splashing flounder through the shallows. Within seconds the poison had

taken effect and the toad dragon was lurching this way and that up the shore, its eyes dazed and rheumy. The thing finally crashed into the bank, its warty back rising and falling with the exertion of breathing. Its mouth fell slackly open, as though it were half-asleep, and sizzling vomit seeped out, collecting about the creature's head.

Archaon watched with interest as Jharkill approached the monster and gave his bow to a beastfiend that had trotted forth. Several other half-breeds approached, cautious of their master's fury in the face of their failure. The ogre slipped a length of sinewy string from his furs, upon which were strung tiny skulls, pendants of glyph-etched bone and crude effigies carved in horn and petrified wood. He handed the string to another beastfiend, who moved nimbly forward through the black waters of the stream to tie the savage charm about the toad dragon's neck. This done, the half-breed returned with one of the effigies – a small, primitive sculpture of some four-legged monster. This the half-breed gave to Jharkill, who had taken up the shaman's staff. The staff towered over even Jharkill and bore the ragged banner that had initially identified the hunting party as belonging to the daemon lord Agrammon. Above the Ruinous symbols of Dark Gods and fell masters, Archaon could see a cross bar upon which a plethora of primitive effigies hung. They were all shapes and sizes. Some were crafted to represent creatures that stood on two legs, while others were figurines of four-legged monsters, like the toad dragon. Others cut such strange shapes and figures that it was difficult to imagine what monstrosities they represented. The staff jangled as Jharkill brought it down and the half-breed tied the effigy to one of the many strings of dried sinew that hung from the cross bar.

To Archaon's amazement, the ogre cracked his staff on the rock of the canyon floor, causing the toad dragon to immediately haul its drowsy bulk from the shallows. Jangling the staff towards the wagons and wheeled cages that were lined up against the opposite wall of the canyon, Jharkill seemed to control the creature's impulses. The monster groaned, as if in some private torment inflicted by the staff, and hobbled between the jabbing tridents of Jharkill's long-snouts and the snarling of his horned hunting hounds. It dragged itself up into a large cage that had been crafted to accommodate such a creature and lay miserably down.

With the cage secured, Jharkill directed word to be passed for the hunting party's wagons to roll on up the canyon. Archaon nodded with approval. On into the Gatelands, towards Agrammon's palace with cages full of creatures damned and monstrous for his daemon lord's collection. As the wagons and wheeled

cages trundled away, the beastfiends of the hunting party trotted alongside, forming an escort. Jharkill walked up to one of the half-breeds, and Archaon recognised it as the creature that had initially fled in the face of the toad dragon's wrath. The beastfiend realised at the last moment that he was now to suffer his master's displeasure and turned his trident on the ogre too late. Jharkill snatched the beastfiend up from behind, ending the long-snout's trumpeting alarm by biting the half-breed's head off and tossing the decapitated body into the stream.

'Seen enough?' the sorcerer Sheerian asked.

'Enough to tell me how I'm going to get into Lord Agrammon's palace undetected,' Archaon said, turning and walking back to where Ograx and the Swords of Chaos had brought Archaon's army to a halt. 'We seek a daemon lord,' Archaon told them, with Sheerian translating his command into dark tongue for the bestial prince. 'A daemon lord who has something that belongs to me. I mean to get it back. There is a hunting party ahead, returning to this wretched daemon's palace. I mean to go ahead alone and join it by the time it reaches its destination.'

'You are going to steal the Steed of the Apocalypse?' Sheerian asked.

'I am,' Archaon said with supreme confidence.

'How will you find it, my lord?'

'The Eye will guide me,' Archaon said.

'I fear on this occasion, master, the Eye will not be enough,' the ancient mewled. 'For the daemonic beast Dorghar has many forms. It is a creature of ill will and monstrous temperament. I fear it will be difficult to locate.'

Archaon considered. Sheerian was, of course, correct.

'I am told this creature is the most prized of all Lord Agrammon's foetid specimens.'

'Some say that's true, my lord.'

'Then it will no doubt take pride of place in the greatest of the menagerie's cages and enclosures,' Archaon said. Sheerian nodded slowly, for the sorcerer could not fault the warlord's logic.

'You go alone, my lord?' Sheerian interrupted once again.

'Yes,' Archaon rumbled.

'Take at least your Swords of Chaos,' the sorcerer said. 'Agrammon's palace will be crawling with half-breeds, daemonkind and infernals.'

'Lord Agrammon must not know of our presence,' Archaon told the ancient with cold certainty. 'Or else all is lost. The fewer of us that enter the palace, the fewer there will be to alert the daemon lord to our presence and intentions.' Eins,

Zwei and Drei stood in silence, but the stillness of their wings and the way they looked down at the canyon floor told Archaon that they were no happier about the prospect of their warlord entering an enemy palace alone. He was their warlord, however, and the order was observed without contention. Ograx the Great wasn't about to disagree. If the warlord Archaon wished to sacrifice himself on the palace altar of the daemon lord Agrammon, all the better. The bestial prince would simply take Archaon's barbarian horde for his own. For that reason, Archaon knew he could count on Ograx to hold the army back. 'Track the hunting party,' Archaon told him as Sheerian translated his words. He jabbed two fingers at the eye sockets of his skull-helm and then the same two fingers down at the canyon floor. 'Follow, but at a distance. Make camp near the palace and wait.'

Ograx wrapped his fat tongue around some choice words. Sheerian looked uncertain.

'For how long?' the sorcerer translated.

Archaon grunted. He had no sun or moon to guide them by. The only thing he could count on was the rhythm of bodily needs. Thirst. Hunger. Sleep.

'When the last gor of the horde has risen from slumber, on the third of such risings, three days as the rest of the world knows them will have passed. If I am not returned by then with my prize, then storm Agrammon's palace with every half-breed at your disposal.'

Ograx the Great nodded his head, heavy as it was with its crown of horn. As Archaon went to leave, Sheerian piped up once more.

'This steed, my lord,' the sorcerer said. 'It is one of the treasures of Chaos, is it not? A trapping by which the Everchosen of the Chaos gods might be known.'

'And possibly much more,' Archaon said, turning his head to one side. 'I would not risk so much for anything less.'

Archaon turned his back on the sorcerer. Ograx turned away also, intent on savagely issuing Archaon's orders to the horde through a brutal hierarchy of bulls, gors and taurs. He could feel Sheerian and the Swords of Chaos watching him go. He didn't look back. They had their orders and would obey them or there would be literal hell to pay. As Archaon trudged up through the wet gravel of the stream, he saw Giselle and Vier. The girl had wandered beyond the vanguard of the horde, waiting for Archaon's orders. She stood absently, up to her ankles in the freezing, black waters, the musty furs in which she was buried trailing through the meltwater stream. Vier hovered nearby in his own agonies, uselessly stretching his malformed wings. Archaon nodded to the Chaos warrior,



whom Archaon had assigned as Giselle's minder and bodyguard. Vier bowed his head with difficulty, a signal of silent obedience.

When Archaon's gaze passed across Giselle, he found to his surprise that she was looking back. It was still the blank stare of horror relived – the kind of fixed mask of distant pain that Archaon had seen in soldiers returning from slaughter. The pair looked at one another across the umbra of the canyon. The flash of perpetual storms glowered through the ice above them and cast the pair in a ghoulish light. Archaon slowed. Giselle stumbled about in the water, her gaze unbroken. Fat droplets of meltwater plunked about them like rain. He thought she gave him a *look*. A softening of the lines about the mouth. A hardening of the eyes. It was an accusation glared across the twilight. He was leaving again. Leaving her in the care of madmen and monsters. Leaving her in this godforsaken place. Simply leaving her. Off to slip steel into beastflesh. To bring daemons to their knees. To carve the name Archaon in misery across the surface of the unknown world.

Archaon felt the pang of something he'd thought forgotten. Something dull and heavy in his chest. Responsibility? Guilt? Love? These were feelings fraught and fragile: sentiments unbecoming of the Everchosen of Chaos. With a will that burned with resistance the dark templar turned away, striding into his future with determination and fury at the miserable world, at the gods – both those that were Ruinous and those that were simply untrue – and at himself.

With Giselle's gaze burning into his armoured back, Archaon marched south, following the black stream and the curving progress of the crescent canyon. The wagon tracks and the hoofprints of the Slaaneshi hunting party were clear to follow and before long the twists and turns of the Scabyrith became one colossal cleft. He no longer walked with the waters of the stream but against them, and before long Archaon felt the canyon floor ascend, rising to meet the plateau of the continental interior, the Gatelands and the sovereign territories of infernal royalty. He stomped his boot prints into the grit, passed water against the canyon wall and broke the stems of petrified foliage as he passed, all to make it easy for Ograx and the horde to follow his progress and scent. He even left the messy corpses of marauding creatures he happened upon to leave no doubt.

With the progress of the wagons slowing and the cavalcade winding its way up the canyon side, Archaon decided to make his move. Shouldering his shield, the dark templar advanced on the servants of Slaanesh. Hugging the crags and clefts and moving rapidly between the cover offered by boulders and sparse, black foliage, Archaon crept up on Jharkill's wagon train. Darting out from between

huge rocks that lined the zigzag ascent, Archaon made a heavy run uphill towards stragglers of the cavalcade rearguard. Grabbing beastfiends from behind by their horns and their snouts and savagely snapping them around, the dark templar despatched the creatures. With the rearmost cage wagon bumping its way up the incline, dragged by two bipedal steeds and a beastfiend skinner at the reins whipping the beasts of burden with delirious abandon, Archaon made his move.

Unbolting the cage, which seemed to have been fashioned from the bones of some great Wasteland beast, Archaon found himself face to face with some kind of sabre-toothed hellcat. The thing looked half starved but unleashed a heart-stopping roar. Archaon pushed his way into the cage, infuriating the beast further and prompting the hellcat to leap at him with its trap-jaw open. The Chaos warrior didn't have time to tangle with the creature and had to take care of it before the beastfiend skinner noticed the commotion in the back of the wagon.

Grabbing the hellcat by its sabre fangs, Archaon turned aside the creature's savage attack. Bringing the blood-matted fur of its mane under one arm, Archaon tightened his lock around the beast's neck. Scrabbling back with its cruel claws, the hellcat attempted to extricate itself from the Chaos warrior's stranglehold. Gritting his teeth and trying to keep the creature's struggles to a minimum, Archaon squeezed for all he was worth. The brute's snapping and snarling suddenly changed to a throttled whimper. Finally something felt like it was breaking within the creature's muscular neck. As the struggle subsided and Archaon lowered the hellcat's emaciated body to the cage floor, the dark templar released the beast.

Catching his breath, Archaon sagged. Around the hellcat's broken neck, Archaon found the sinew string that carried Jharkill's shamanistic skulls, glyph-pendants and carved effigies. Slipping it off the creature's great head and around its sabre teeth, Archaon hung the cursed thing about his own neck. Resting his pauldron against the dead beast, Archaon heaved its carcass across the floor of the cage and out of the rear door. As the hellcat's lifeless body rolled back down the incline and off the edge of the narrow, rocky trail, Archaon slid his shield off his shoulder and slipped *Terminus* from its scabbard. He found a suitable hiding place for both sword and shield between the wheels, in the mangle of bones and sinew that made up the underside of the wagon bed. He then proceeded to bolt the cage door closed and lock himself within it like the myriad other specimens Jharkill and his hunting party were returning to the palace menagerie.

Checking that the beastfiend skinner was still fully involved with driving the

infernal beasts that were dragging the wagon up the meandering incline, Archaon sat back against the barbed bones of the cage. Resting his own aching bones, Archaon tried to relax. He jangled the charms and effigies hanging about his neck. He would play the role of the compliant prisoner. He watched through the bars as the Southern Wastes juddered by. After a torturous ascent up the canyon wall, the hunters' train of wagons set out across the nightmare lands that afflicted the continental interior. The sky was a churning tempest of eddies and whirling blackness, lanced by spidery bolts of unnatural lightning that seared across it like a web. Here the elemental ferocity of wind, ice and hail lost its potency.

Archaon couldn't count the number of times he had almost frozen to death out on the Southern Wastes or been burned alive in some fiery pit or river of lava. The Ruinous wilderness had thrown everything it could at the dark templar. The Gatelands existed at the pleasure of whim and dark fancy. The realities of the cold and harsh weather were not constants there and so as the wagon train creaked and squeaked across the blasted, hellish landscape Archaon was treated to all manner of atmospheric madness from above. Storms whose thunder only existed in the mind, as a skull-splitting ache of the head. Infernal lightning that struck the ground, creating birthing pits for savage entities. Pellets of lead that fell like musket balls from the tumultuous heavens. Clouds of soot and flame that seemed to consume one another like monsters battling for supremacy across the sky. Dew that settled on everything like spots of black ink. Glowing banks of mist that swept in to change the very landscape across which it drifted.

The land below the bone-jarring progress of the cage wagon was little better. The wheels crunched through shattered obsidian while the black clouds of dust, kicked up by the wagons and the beasts hauling them, willed change on everything it coated. Hellquakes thundered up from the depths of the Wastes – unforgotten echoes of the catastrophic collapse that destroyed the polar gate and spilled ruin and death into the world. With every moaning tremor and furious rumble, the architecture of derelict palaces – warped, grand and ancient – rained about them. The battlefields inbetween were landscapes of carnage. Infernal bodies upon bodies, mummified into the land and covered with slaughter anew. The wagon train weaved through the harsh terrain of corpse mounds, ridges created by the fossilised remains of toppled monstrosities and fields of rib and bone that made for a bumpy passage.

The wagon train halted several times. A mire of carcasses and ichor forced the cavalcade into a detour, while Jharkill and his beastfiends suffered the rabid

assaults of infernal skirmishers, issuing forth from the palaces of the damned and fortresses of the mighty. Jharkill added their corpses to the surrounding slaughter before moving ever on. South. Towards the gate. Towards the palace of his royal master. Archaon sat against the barbed bone of the cage like a good prisoner. He wasn't exactly enjoying the ride but he had walked across so much of the dark southern continent that he enjoyed at least not trudging through some blizzard or snow drift.

Trumpeting calls of alarm from the Slaaneshi beastfiends alerted Archaon to an approaching problem. Grasping the bars with his gauntlets and peering about, the dark templar could see little. When the black outline of a distant ruin moved, Archaon couldn't quite believe what he was looking at. The black towers of the derelict palace suddenly reassumed their former baroque glory, almost as though the furious warpflame that had gutted it had never been. The towers bucked skyward slightly, leading Archaon to believe that the land beneath it had moved. And it had. As the gleaming towers of black stone and brass majesty collapsed in on themselves and the walls of the fortress-palace toppled, a giant cloud of dust and corruption reached up from the calamity and into the heavens. Resting his skull-helm against the bone bars of the cage, Archaon saw that there was a ripple of the past – or possibly the future – passing through the Wasteland itself. Like a rogue wave at sea, the landswell had moved beneath the palace, restoring it to its former glory, before rippling through its foundations and destroying it again.

Now it was surging across the Wastes, bringing brief life to the mummified, mangled and long-dead that were quietly rotting on the ancient battlefields where they were butchered. Thrown up into the air by the rippling force, the warrior daemons, beastfiends and spawn screeched the horror of their last moments, thrashing and snapping before falling back behind the swell and reassuming the entangled stillness of the grave. There was little Archaon could do but grab the bars of the cage and hold on. As the black earth rose beneath the wagon, Archaon was suddenly confronted by the horror of intermingled bodies. Rather than wood, the wagon and its cage was largely constructed of bone, horn and sinew – the dead being a plentiful resource in the Southern Wastes and trees sparse. The dead whose bones had been meshed and tied together to create the cage were brought back momentarily to terrible life. As the wagon tumbled it was as if Archaon had been trapped inside a shrieking spawn.

With the moment of horror passed and the bars of his cage age-browned bone once more, Archaon found himself on his back. The wagon had been knocked over onto its side, and as the dark templar picked himself up he could see the

landswell bringing the abomination of life to the battlefields of the east. With Jharkill barking gruff orders and long-snouts moving along the wagon train to secure beasts and right wagons, Archaon waited. The beastfiends got behind the bars of his cage and pushed the rickety vehicle back onto the braced ribs of its bone wheels.

One of Jharkill's bestial underlings gave him the blankness of its white eyes, seeming not to remember placing him there. A tongue slithered out from its long snout and tasted the warp-curdled air. Jharkill had collected so many specimens for his infernal master – monsters, savage beasts, spawn and daemonkind – that it was impossible to keep track. Taking Archaon for some warrior-daemon in his hell-forged plate, the creature eventually moved on, trumpeting at skinnners to get their beasts and wagons moving.

Archaon cast a glance down the corpse road behind the wagon. Somewhere down that road, Ograx the Great led Archaon's horde after him. Looking forward, beyond the beastfiend skinner and his pack-daemons, Archaon could see the dread that lay ahead. The Gatelands. The storming balelight of the beyond, blazing for the heavens where the polar portal used to be. The serrated silhouette of infernal palaces encircled the raging gateway like a black crown, and before long the wagon train found itself in the shadow of one of the largest.

The road up to the palace of the daemon lord Agrammon was a well-worn path in the mummified remains of those foolish enough to have attacked it. The track weaved its way between colossal fragments of black stone, half buried in the cursed earth. Their size and grandeur led Archaon to believe that they were fragments of the polar gate that used to tower over the dread lands of daemonic sovereignty. Other hunting parties had joined them on the approach, and Archaon got the impression that Agrammon's ever-expanding menagerie was an endless enterprise. No monstrous specimen would be so impressive, no daemon so infamous or spawn so exotically repulsive as to sate the daemon lord's appetites and complete his collection.



## CHAPTER III

*'...sits Agrammon, daemon lord of a palace proud, in the Gatelands of infernal sovereignty. A serpentine nightmare of slithering indulgence and grasping tentacle, it is the Cagelord, a turn-key for the Prince of Excess, a collector, an enslaver, a master of the hoard. Its madness is greed, but not for gems or metals precious, not for cravings sweet or more land than a daemon can use. He is a gatherer of the flesh, a presenter of prisoners, of creatures exotic, of beasts infernal and myriad, keeper of a menagerie monstrous, about his palace proud.'*

– Horror-Scribes of the Endless Mountain,  
*Bestiarum Diabolika*

*The Gatelands  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

As the rickety wagons closed on the main gate, Archaon saw that the massive exterior wall was made of metal. This came as a surprise to the Chaos warrior,

since he had seen precious little of it in the frozen Southern Wastes. He assumed that Agrammon had the ore mined from beneath the Gatelands and processed for his needs, although Archaon couldn't tell what kind of metal it was. The walls were a bold black and covered in sculpted barbs, wicked skewers, spikes, hooks and grapnels. All were sharpened to a flesh-snagging point and glistened with poisons that sent victims into spasms. Archaon knew this as he saw the beastfiends and daemons that had impaled themselves on the wall and were dancing a jig of delight to their death.

Increasingly the Chaos warlord thought that he had made the right decision. The twisted wall alone was designed to shred any attacker desperate enough to scale it. A direct assault by his horde would have resulted in horrific casualties. If he were to be captured by the daemon lord Agrammon or fail in his objective then it still might. Archaon licked at his dry lips.

A single tower extended high above the palace walls, made of the same twisted metal. It was covered in downwards slanting spikes like an urchin, making a climb almost impossible. Looking up at the cloud-grazing height of the citadel, its bulbous bell tower and the pincer-shaped crescent that crowned the tower spire, Archaon thought such a climb would be suicide regardless. As the train of wagons and cages rattled in through the twisted gatehouse, Archaon saw Jharkill talking to a daemonette – one of many Archaon saw stationed about the palace, standing in armoured corsets and executioner's hoods. They clutched sickle-spears and walked up and down the menagerie thoroughfares.

The colossal courtyard between the palace wall and the citadel was the metal of cages and the black stone in which the barbed and twisted bars were set. Cage had been built upon tangled cage, three, four, and sometimes five stories above the black gravel of the thoroughfare. They had been built around one another in all sizes and configurations. They were uniform only in that they were woefully insufficient to house the captive creatures inside. As the wheels of Archaon's wagon hissed through the gravel, he saw monstrosities undreamed of, daemonic abominations, god-cursed spawn and bestial slaves with exotic fur and extravagant horns, housed miserably together as a single collection. He saw things with wings, things all limb, beasts of claw and fang, creatures of scale, blubber and armoured skin, great monsters that slithered, malformed titans and packs of lesser infernals that hissed through the barbs and bars of their cages at the new arrivals. The menagerie was colossal and its number of deplorable specimens impossible to count.

What struck Archaon instantly was the stench. The ripe funk of thousands of

creatures all eating, defecating, living and dying in close proximity. The cramped conditions were nothing less than wretched. Archaon gagged as the reek overwhelmed him. The noise too was unbearable, the bestial misery palpable. The Chaos warlord had never heard such a chorus of woe. The menagerie was a nest of caged suffering: a collection of creatures, sitting in their own filth, waiting to die. All wore Jharkill's shamanistic tokens of obedience about their necks, or at least what passed for necks on the more warped specimens. Long-snout menials moved between the cages ladling slop and throwing rancid meat between the bars, but Archaon suspected that the only thing keeping the creatures of the menagerie alive was the unnatural hardness of their warped constitutions. What pleasure Lord Agrammon could derive from this, Archaon thought, the Ruinous Gods only knew.

The wagon train trundled around the exterior wall before the gravel thoroughfare started to work its way inwards in a concentric spiral, finally arriving, Archaon expected, at the centre citadel. It was an insane design. It was completely impractical, unless your objective was to slavishly admire every exhibit, in every cage, in the entire menagerie. It occurred to Archaon that Agrammon had designed the spiralling layout of the twisted collection with exactly that in mind.

Progress stopped and started along the wagon train as dead exhibits were dragged from the barbed nightmare of their cages and replaced with new captures. The monstrous cadavers were then loaded on the wagons for dumping on the Wastes. As the cavalcade worked its way inward, Archaon realised that his turn was coming. Claspings his gauntlets around one of the bars of his cage, he hauled on the bone – quietly but insistently – so that it snapped. Archaon left the broken bar in place. It was not the only thing he would be leaving with the wagon. His shield and the blade *Terminus* were hidden under the wagon bed, between the wheels. Upon re-earning his freedom, the Chaos warrior would need them and so had broken the bar as a means of identifying the wagon once more.

Finally, in the doom-laden shadow of the citadel, the wagon came to a stop. The long-snout skinner climbed down and proceeded to open the cage under the infernal gaze of three daemonettes that had moved in on the wagon. Razed wire spiralled through the abundance of their dread flesh while drool continually dribbled from mouths filled with needle-teeth, working its way down their voluptuousness like a river finding the path of least resistance. One of the daemonettes held several hounds on a spiked chain. The creatures had tapering muzzles like the beastfiends in Agrammon's dark service and snuffled the



ground about Archaon's feet as he was led down from the wagon.

A second daemonette used the crescent claw at the end of her sickle-spear to motion the Chaos warrior on. She looked on him through the slits of her executioner's hood with a predatory fascination, pushing him towards a cage opening with the curved blade of the sickle headpiece. Archaon took a moment to hold his ground. He wanted to be sure that he hadn't indeed become one of Jharkill's slave specimens and a permanent exhibit in Lord Agrammon's menagerie. Whether it was because the shamanistic tokens about his neck had been intended for another captive or because the damned wards that weaved their way through his pallid flesh like a network of veins countered such primitive charms and enchantments, Archaon didn't care. All he needed to know was that he wasn't going to spend the rest of his days voluntarily stinking out a cage at the bottom of the world.

Archaon's reluctance only angered his infernal keepers. A third daemonette slashed at the gravel with a barbed whip, while her rank compatriot pushed Archaon harshly towards the cage with her sickle-spear. Nodding and raising a gauntlet, the Chaos warrior approached his twisted coop. Two long-snouts were carrying the rotting half-eaten remains of a beastfiend with two bovine heads and interlocking horns, an aberration that must have taken Lord Agrammon's fancy. Climbing up the thick bars of the enclosure below, Archaon hauled himself up through the opening of his own cage – the cage that the corruption-dribbling corpse of the half-breed had just vacated. The daemonette slapped the bars with a claw and said something suggestive and unintelligible before bolting the cage closed.

As the daemonettes, the long-snouts and the wagons moved on, Archaon took in the degradation of his surroundings. The twisted metal of his cage made up the walls, floor and ceiling of several others, for the enclosure itself was enclosed with but one set of bars facing the thoroughfare for observation. All manner of monstrosity and warp-sculpted deformity was present. Above Archaon the cage housed some kind of huge carrion bird – a thing rotten and spoiled in itself but impossibly alive. It pecked at the bars and itself with its great bone-crushing beak and let loose an almost constant stream of milky excrement through the bars into Archaon's enclosure. The Chaos warrior moved about the mess in the limited space he had, allowing the stinking ooze to splatter a nest of blind wyrms in the cage below. The obscene creatures didn't seem to mind at all, their bulbous heads only emerging from the rippling sheath of their squirming bodies to snap at the cage roof and Archaon's boots with their hook-toothed

maws.

Casting his gaze through the forest of black bars, Archaon saw a pair of hairless giant rats, conjoined at the tail: one twin feeding on the flesh of the other. A feral spawn jabbered and threw itself mindlessly at its cage door, while stabbing at itself with great bone scythes that might once have been wings. An almost constant stream of mind-splitting screams emanated from a thing nearby that hung from the ceiling bars of its cage by a monstrous tail, while its pectoral wings dangled about it like the fins of some shark of the sky or ocean depths. Below it a daemon beast, some great steed or juggernaut, slowly rusted in a pool of its own ichor, groaning and moaning like a guttering forge. On the other side of his cage Archaon could see that one huge creature had given up entirely. Either out of monstrous habit or spite it had blighted its enclosure with a haze of silk, forming a web in which a pulsing cocoon still gave the impression of horrid life.

Of the things that had a face, from his cage Archaon could only see two. The first inhabited the darkness of a cage across the thoroughfare. It claw-stomped up and down the enclosure, rearing its emaciated body up on its hind legs. Even at skin and bone it was twice the size of Archaon and its flesh was red raw with sores and infection. Patches of worn fur swarmed with fat mites feeding off the creature and driving it to distraction. An infested mane hung about the creature's monstrous, fang-filled jaws and ran down its back between the shredded leathery stumps of two mite-eaten wings and down the length of a tail that was shot through with thagomizer spikes. The creature stopped, seeming to know that it was being watched, before grabbing the bars with its fore-claws and bringing its daemoniac face forward with glowering malice. Like the rest of its body the flesh of its face was a mesh of scratches and dappled irritation, but within it and above the fixed snarl of its leonine muzzle, its eyes betrayed a feral sadness. A knowing. A suffering that betrayed an almost human intelligence.

The creature stared at Archaon and Archaon stared back. The Chaos warrior could feel the monster's hate across the open space. The druchii of the north called such beasts manticores: monsters crafted of the Wastes, of unrivalled ferocity and spite. They were also treated with reverence and respect, since they were among the most cunning of Ruinous predators. Archaon had heard that rudimentary speech had even been witnessed in some creatures, if only to scorn the attempts of druchii hunters to capture them. Jharkill had bagged his prize, however, enslaving the scabby beast with his shamanic charms and caging it for his master's pleasure.

‘Don’t worry about him,’ a voice came through the bars in dark tongue. Looking around Archaon saw a legless horror hanging from the ceiling bars of the cage next to his own. The thing had gangly, long arms, black skin and appeared to be nothing more than a truncated torso and a squashed head. ‘He just wants to be free, see?’ The half-daemon gibbered to Archaon and itself. ‘Thoughts. Thoughts,’ the creature said, slapping its narrow skull with a ghoulishly long palm as it dangled from the bars on the other. ‘Thoughts like that will kill you faster than the food around here. Hope. A dangerous thing is hope. It is Lord Agrammon’s weapon of choice. Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. He’ll get you hoping all right. Craving the impossible. Giving you an appetite for a freedom that just can’t be had. No, no, no, no, no. It’s the only thing to give you an appetite in this food-forsaken place.’

Archaon said nothing, allowing the creature’s sanity to unravel before him. The rising volume of the half-daemon’s voice and the creature’s captive excitability was drawing daemonette keepers towards them. That, Archaon did not need. Not if he were to effect a quiet escape from his confinement. The legless creature hung by one willowy arm. He jabbed a long finger at the manticore opposite. ‘He knows,’ the thing jabbered on to itself. ‘He knows.’ Then to a passing daemonette with three snuffling hounds on a spiked chain: ‘She knows.’ He blew the horror a kiss, producing from her both a seductive snarl and a stream of abuse, in an infernal language that Archaon did not understand. Hanging there the creature bowed his head and lowered his eyes, mumbling a theatrical apology. Archaon watched the daemonette pass. Even when out of sight he could hear the rhythmic echo of her spear rattling along the bars – waking and provoking.

Archaon turned. The daemonette’s spear had disturbed the thing in the cocoon. The sickening sound of swarming emanated from the pulsing hub of the silken haze. Whatever monstrous creature lay within was long dead, Archaon realised. Its body had been eaten from the inside out by thousands of warped spiderlings: translucent creatures the size of a hand that scuttled on stabbing talons. Their mouths were framed with fat fangs and within their abdomens squirmed a single eyeball that stared about their new surroundings. Archaon watched as, drawn by some kind of collective vision, the creatures descended on threads and crawled towards unfortunates in the other cages.

Turning back towards the hanging torso swinging before him on its arms, Archaon found the thing was licking its lips as it watched the spiders biting and swarming their thrashing victims.

‘We feast tonight!’ it gibbered before swinging back and forth across its cage. Archaon casually brushed a baby arachnid off his pauldron that had silently drifted down from the cage above. He squelched the miniature monster under his boot. The half-daemon was back before the bars, spilling over with madness. ‘Stay or leave. Leave or stay,’ the thing repeated before jabbing a finger at the sky. ‘There’s nothing out there for us. Death. Destruction. A becoming of that which we are not. Do I stay because of this?’ It rattled the string of shamanistic charms about its slender neck. ‘No. I stay for the safety of a cage. I stay for the food. I have a purpose here. I exist to bring pleasure to others – if not myself. Hope for nothing more than a wretched captivity and you cannot be disappointed. Oh no. That’s what our infested friend over there doesn’t seem to understand,’ the half-daemon said, swinging about its cage, bar to bar, with its long arms and spindly fingers. ‘Am I right? I’m right, aren’t I? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Over there with only his fleas for company. He paces. Paces. Paces. I fall asleep, he’s pacing. I wake, he’s pacing. I rant, I rave, I kill the thing in the next cage, he’s pacing. Do you know what they call him? The diseased one over there?’

Archaon shook his head slowly.

‘Mange,’ the half-daemon chuckled darkly, ‘for it is not just the creature on show in the cage but also the wonderful collection of mites that feed on his monstrous flesh. Where do you think you’re going monster?’ the half-daemon called across. ‘Perhaps he’s dreaming. Dreaming of somewhere high. Somewhere desolate and lonely, where the prey is fleet and the company wanting. Somewhere a monstrosity can... just... be.’

Archaon looked over at the manicomore in its miserable state, standing on its hind legs, clutching the bars with trembling claws and glaring with silent malice and suffering. The menagerie was crowded with mindless monsters, warplings, slaves to the darkness and the low creatures of the world. While they all suffered as part of Lord Agrammon’s legendary collection, it was the prisoners of the mind and not just the body that suffered the most. Savage creatures and abominations simply endured. Some no differently in their cages than anywhere else. Those that thought. Those that felt. Those that hoped. They were doubly doomed. The half-daemon babbled insanely but it was right about that. Beyond the ravages of imprisonment and starvation suffered by the caged captives, hope broke the spirit. It had broken the half-daemon, who – for all Archaon knew – might have been an exhibit in the menagerie for as long as it had existed.

‘It’s never going to happen,’ the half-daemon jeered across the thoroughfare.

Again, Archaon became concerned over the noise and the attention it might garner. ‘Accept it, beast. You’ve soared over your last mountain. You’ve slain your last piece of prey. You’ll never be alone again. You hear? You hear?’ the mad thing called. ‘Not so long as I’m here, creature of horizons lost.’

Archaon looked from the glowering manticore back to the half-daemon. The Chaos warrior had heard enough. Had waited long enough. Based upon the time it had taken to work its way around the concentric curve of the outer thoroughfare, Archaon estimated the wagon train would be closing once more on the inner thoroughfare. Several times he thought he had heard the movement of the cavalcade, the roar of beasts and the opening of cages, but with the babbling half-daemon pouring madness in his ears it was difficult to tell. Beyond the growing infestation of spiderlings, the half-daemon was dangling one grasping arm through the bars of Archaon’s cage. Despite the disarming distraction of the daemon’s blatant insanity, Archaon knew that it meant him harm and had probably been responsible for the death of the cage’s previous occupant.

‘Want to hear a secret?’ the half-daemon whispered harshly. He motioned with a single long finger, his willowy arm extended all the way through Archaon’s bars. The Chaos warrior approached.

‘Want to be one?’ Archaon put to the murderous half-daemon. He grabbed the monster’s hideous hand in his gauntlets and heaved. The creature’s head smashed into the twisted metal. It gibbered and screeched its surprise. Archaon hauled on the sinewy daemonflesh again, yanking the thing’s head and wretched torso into the bars – again and again. The thing had no doubt meant to do the same to Archaon and feed on his carcass – the fate suffered by the previous occupant. Archaon heaved mercilessly, allowing the creature to pull itself back before the Chaos warrior hauled it once more into the bludgeoning metal. Something suddenly went *crack* and the creature’s hold on the ceiling bars went slack. As the half-daemon became a broken mound on the cage floor, bloody and still, Archaon dropped its arm and walked to the door of his cage. He found the manticore staring intensely at him, the beast’s eyes glistening with bestial satisfaction.

‘I fear your view is much improved, monster,’ Archaon said. The creature blinked the baleful yellow of its eyes at him. Looking up and down the thoroughfare that curved between the lines of cages, Archaon lifted his boot and stamped down on the cage door. The simple lock shattered – for it was not metal and mechanism that kept the creatures of Lord Agrammon’s menagerie captive. As Archaon walked across the deserted gravel, the manticore leant out. A stringy

drool began to cascade from the monster's maw. It tasted something. Archaon hoped that it was freedom rather than the prospect of fresh flesh. 'Or perhaps, creature of darkness, you would prefer a view clear of cage bars altogether.' Before the door of the manticore's barbed enclosure, Archaon slipped the sinew string of Jharkill's charms and effigies from over his head and dropped it on the ground. He stamped down on the cursed thing, crushing the tokens of glyph-scored bone and stone into the gravel. 'Before I give you back the skies, great beast,' Archaon told him. 'Might I trouble you for a diversion? A settling of scores perhaps with your jailers or simply an opportunity to sate your all-consuming hunger. You look like you could use a meal.'

The manticore hissed through its sabre teeth. The stench upon which the words wafted almost made the Chaos warrior gag. Archaon could feel the harm the monster meant him through the bars. The Chaos warrior realised that he could be the meal the manticore needed.

He shook his head.

'You don't look that stupid, beast,' Archaon said. 'The last hundred things that tried to eat me are dead. Besides,' the Chaos warrior told it, recalling his battle with the *Yien-Ya-Long*. 'I cause horrible indigestion.'

Archaon reached through the bars of the manticore's cage. The monster growled as the Chaos warrior's gauntlets felt through its infested mane. Slipping Jharkill's bridle of charms from the manticore's head, he let it fall to the cage floor by the creature's clawed feet. The manticore looked down at the thing of dark enchantments and then up at Archaon. The Chaos warrior watched the beast stamp down on the charms and crush them into the floor. Grabbing the bars, Archaon heaved at the cage door and tore it open.

'Beast,' the Chaos warrior said, 'you are free. Unleash yourself on those who would see you back behind these bars.'

As Archaon stepped aside, the manticore fell down onto four feet. The creature was disgustingly lithe – all claw, slavering jaw and ribcage with a spiked tail flowing after it. Launching from the cage – its new-found freedom firing wasted limbs and appetite – the manticore tore up the gravel thoroughfare and bounded off the barbed bars of the opposite cages. Watching the monster surge away, Archaon turned and climbed up the cageside.

The creatures within screeched and spat at the Chaos warrior as he hauled himself up the twisted bars. Atop the row of cages, with monstrosities roaring their displeasure below, Archaon could see the citadel in all of its serrated glory. The crescent crowning the tower pointed its talon-tips towards the broiling sky.

Archaon could hear the shrieking trumpet calls of beastfiends and long-snouted hounds. Daemonettes were hiss-squealing. The manticore had bolted up the walkway and ripped through the first of Lord Agrammon's infernal servants it found.

Keeping himself chest-down on the cagetop, Archaon saw bloody bits of hound and beastfiend flying through the air. Suddenly Archaon heard the sound of claws on bars. Something was climbing up towards him. Moments later the horned head of a daemonette rose above the cage. The creature's wire-threaded face betrayed an infernal dread. Disgust flooded the Chaos warrior and he bent his armoured knee to kick the creature off. Then the daemonette's horrid face changed. From below, Archaon heard the roar of the monster Mange. The daemonette's pincers scraped across the bars as she was torn back down the cages and into the savagery below. With an echoing screech, the jailer was torn apart.

The wretched call of horns rose from the spiral-thoroughfare, drawing daemonettes and hounds down on the escaped monster. Archaon nodded his appreciation. Getting to his feet, the Chaos warrior padded across the top of the cages, perching on the edge and looking down into the next concentric thoroughfare. The train of caged wagons was there, where Archaon's ear had put it. Horrid beastfiends with tapering snouts and serpentine tongues were moving monstrosities, daemonkind and warped beasts from their bone cages to their twisted enclosures. The miserable creatures wanted nothing more than to visit their wrath on Lord Agrammon's keepers, like Mange was doing on the thoroughfare beyond, but Jharkill's primitive charms kept their monstrous natures in check. All they knew was suffering, despair and the need to obey. Archaon watched the cavalcade trundle along through the gravel under the watchful eyes of daemonettes, standing with their sickle-spears while snapping their arm-pincers at the beastfiends to move the caravan on.

Archaon noticed his cage wagon with the broken bar. Watching the daemonettes snap their claws and crack their barbed whips at the trumpeting beastfiends, Archaon dropped down onto the gravel. Keeping cages and their monstrous occupants between him and Lord Agrammon's watch-daemons, Archaon sprinted towards the wagon and grabbed the axle, skidding down between the curved bone of the wheels. Allowing the vehicle to crunch overhead, the Chaos warrior slipped his shield and the templar blade *Terminus* out from the crude workings of the ribs and sinew of the wagon underside.

Rolling aside before the wagons of the next train rumbled forth, Archaon

slipped the blessed blade of Sigmar into its back-scabbard and loosened the buckles on the weighty shield, sitting the eight-pointed star over one shoulder like a dark penance. He ran at the cageside of the opposite enclosures, the impact and rattling ascent disturbing the slumber of some three-headed brute and rousing the restrained savagery of a chimeric nightmare overhead. As he hauled himself atop the cages he set a flock of blood-sucking imps to whirling about their foetid enclosure in a maelstrom of wing and screeching ugliness.

This process the Chaos warrior repeated: climbing cages, dropping into the concentric spiral of gravel thoroughfares and crossing the keeper-haunted pathways unseen. He did this in the spiked shadow of the citadel, thrown across the stinking menagerie of the daemon lord by the bright hellshine of the great Southern Gate – working his way ever inwards, through the hoarded misery that was Agrammon's ever-unfinished collection of exotic monstrosity. There the daemon lord kept his most prized exhibits.





## CHAPTER IV

*'Today we sighted land. A frozen coast of darkness and storm. The horizon burned with eruption and hellfire. On the wind we heard the sounds of suffering and rage. The crew were unsettled and I came to know how my ambitions had damned us all. To the glad hearts of all on board I ordered prayers said and sails set for the safety of the north. This cursed land is no place for god-fearing men. I know that now.'*

– Rodrigo de Velasca, captain's log, *The Plutón* (lost)

*The Gatelands*  
*The Southern Wastes*  
*Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

From the cagetops of the inner thoroughfare and the curving promenade of the tower-approach, Archaon saw the twisted enclosures of barb and bar built up around the black-brick exterior wall of the citadel. In the cages he saw some of Agrammon's most prized specimens. Great daemons tethered to the tower wall with gargantuan chains of silver sat in an eternity of misery on floor-carved

wards and bindings. Spawn of exquisite grotesqueness and warp-sculpted grandeur. Monsters of every size and shape – crafted of nightmare, savagery and world-withering hate.

The enclosures about the citadel were guarded by a small army of daemonettes. The creatures' black leather armour was sewn into their obscene flesh with razored wire. Their pincers constantly clicked and snapped, while filthy locks of midnight hair danced entrancingly about the depravity of their bodies in braids, tails and blankets of black. Their faces alternated between horrific masks of needle-toothed glee and ghoulish, shrieking displeasure as they slashed the black stone of the promenade with whips and jabbed their sickle-spears through the bars of enclosures.

As Archaon worked his way across the cagetops unseen, ignoring the suffering, rancour and pleading from below, he looked for his prize. The fourth treasure of Chaos that deviant destiny had seen fit to hide in such a benighted place. Dorghar, demonic Steed of the Apocalypse. He could not see the monster, however. In the enclosure opposite was a gargantuan thing. A giant. A colossal savage long dead, its mummified flesh and brown bones sat wrapped in shredded furs and tattered skins. Its skull was a massive horned horror of empty sockets and tombstone teeth and its towering spine curved into a malformed hunch. The corpse giant sat in the enclosure, barely a fit for the twisted cage, in unliving despair and deathly stillness. Through the tatters of its clothing and the ribs of its barrel chest, Archaon could see the green curselight of sorcery that allowed the long-rotten twisted colossus to live beyond the grave.

Further around Archaon saw a great bird of fiery purple feather and strange flame that writhed about its body like a living hell. The cage floor was carpeted in the ash of plucked feathers as the demented bird half pecked itself to death in its miserable captivity, only to rise again. In the vivid inferno about the dark phoenix Archaon could see the torched souls of the great bird's victims thrashing in torment and reaching out for bars of the cage.

A shovel-nosed dragon was curled up in the next cage, its armoured skin a nest of crystalline shards instead of scales. The tips were blackened with old blood and scraps of flesh where the creature had sidled past its last shredded victim. The creature trembled with some kind of affliction or distemper, making its razor-sharp shards rattle like glass against one another, creating a haunting cacophony.

Beyond the dragon was a brute of a monster, its armoured hide stained red with the slaughter it perpetually sought. Its head was a horn-crested nightmare

within which snapped a crowded maw of fang and ferocity. A multitude of false eyes peered out from the abomination as its tree-trunk arms and the mountain of muscle that was its torso tore at its chains. Even wearing Jharkill's crude enchantments, the slaughterbrute seemed in a constant state of murderous agitation.

Then he saw it. In the enclosure next to the blood-drenched beast was a maelstrom of black and spectral flame. A furious miasma whose searing blaze and silky shadow could not settle on one midnight form or another. One moment it was a thing of slithering menace, the next a chitinous midnight horror. Its darknid form swirled from one shape to the next. A thing of leathery wings and serrated maw. An extravagantly horned head on a wall of steaming muscle. A monstrous pig of twisted tusk and hunched back. A blubbery creature of flipper and shaggy mane. A tentacular beast of bulbous head and innumerable eyes. A dark, reptilian monster of snapping jaws, powerful legs and whipping tail. A chimeric fusion of predators and their prey.

Looking this way and that, Archaon dropped down from the cage and rolled through the grit. His appearance in the thoroughfare drew a raucous response from the miserable beasts in the surrounding cages. Above Archaon, the citadel – spined like a great towering urchin reaching for the churning vortex of cloud and darkness above – blacked out the sickening glare spewing from the Southern Gate. Despite the welcome darkness, the Chaos warrior felt exposed. Lord Agrammon's prize beasts were roaring, moaning and screeching to the dread heavens and Archaon knew that the monstrosities guarding such wonders could see as well in the darkness as the Chaos warrior could see in the day – not that Archaon had seen the true light of day for a long time.

Thoroughfares beyond, he could hear Mange taking his revenge on such wretched custodians. Daemonettes squealed both their agony and joy as the monstrous manticore savaged them. Beastfiends trumpeted their alarm, calling more infernal sentries down on the escaped beast. Mange was not the only flesh-hungry predator bounding down on them on all fours, snarling heads from slender shoulders. Archaon pictured him rearing up like the beastfiends who sat about him in pieces. He could hear the manticore liberate other lethal monstrosities from cage and curse, adding their unleashed fury to his own.

Padding across the thoroughfare with the light crunch of a thief, Archaon walked past the twisted enclosures of Agrammon's most prized and deviant wonders. Stopping before the daemoniac darkness that raged in ever-changing torment and flame, Archaon knew that he had found *his* prize. The fourth

treasure of Chaos. Dorghar, Steed of the Apocalypse. Doomed to wretched captivity here, at the bottom of the world, kept at the pleasure of a hoarding daemon lord.

With the Chaos warrior standing before the enclosure gate, the swirling transformations seemed to slow. The fire and shadow drifted to a stop. The beast was a miasma of black that watched Archaon as an unbroken steed might the approach of a foolhardy rider. Archaon felt the daemon's hate. He had no doubt it meant him harm. As shadow bled into shadow and the darkness intensified, the creature settled on a form. Archaon stepped forward and gripped the warped bars of the enclosure gate. It was as though the infernal monstrosity had reached into his mind and selected its appearance from the foetid dungeon-depths of his memory. The darkness solidified into the shape of a huge, black stallion. A noble beast of glistening muscular flanks, shaggy hoof, midnight mane and tail.

'Oberon,' Archaon said with wonder. He remembered the black stallion of his youth. The horse that had served as his templar mount. The transformation was not complete, however. The flesh began to split with equine brawn, forming criss-cross scars that seemed to heal as fast as they formed. Spikes of sharpened bone erupted from black muscle and fur. As the creature snorted, its nostrils blazed with the fires of damnation, while what should have been a whinny was a howling, brain-aching roar of crackling, infernal fury. As the stallion closed its mouth and the glare of banelight faded, Archaon watched the black eyes of the beast flush to a Ruinous red.

'Let's do this,' Archaon said with relish. He took an armoured saddle, spiked stirrups and bridle-harness from a twisted post by the gate and entered the enclosure. He approached the infernal steed slowly. The creature seemed to settle into its new form. It stamped and snorted short bursts of hellfire. Archaon lifted the heavy saddle onto the dread stallion's back. Dorghar backed and bucked a little. Archaon held up a finger of his gauntlet as a warning. As the daemon shivered its caution and attempted to shake the saddle from its back, Archaon slapped the monster across its monstrous muzzle, causing the thing to flinch. It stamped back at him and got a savage backhand from Archaon's armoured hand. Dorghar stomped on, lowering its nose. Fire-threaded drool dribbled from between its tombstone teeth. Its nostrils blazed. The steed brought the raging damnation of its eyes level with the slits of Archaon's helm.

Dorghar moved forward, resting the flat of its head and the points of its muzzle-spikes against the Eye of Sheerian, and pushed at the Chaos warrior's helm. Warlord and steed pushed against one another, until finally Archaon

stumbled back. He allowed the beast the moment's illusion that it had won the battle of wills before slipping the studded, spite-cured leather of the bridle over its thrusting head. As the Steed of the Apocalypse stamped and turned with animal fury, Archaon made swift work of belting both bridle and saddle to the monster's furious form. Hauling the wicked bit up between the chisel-like blades of its teeth, Archaon rested the thick reins over the pommel of the armoured saddle. He came back to the front of the stallion and found Jharkill's bone charms jangling before the creature's chest on a string of sinew. Archaon knew that he had to tame the beast himself. He could not rely upon the beastmaster's primitive enchantments.

'Let's see what you've got,' Archaon told the steed as he tore the charm from the solidified shadow of the daemon. As he tossed the bone trinket away, Archaon might have expected some kind of bestial gratitude, as he had found in Mange's cage. Dorghar had no intention of fulfilling such an expectation. It snorted smoke and glowing cinders at the Chaos warrior. Once. Twice. A third time. Within a blink, the monster came at Archaon.

It charged the Chaos warrior and slammed him into the twisted bars of the enclosure behind. By the time Archaon's armoured body was smashed into the unnatural and unrelenting metal of the cage, Dorghar had changed form. The first time its head hit him it was a thick nest of spiked, skull-fused antlers. Archaon felt the full weight of the beast behind the charge and the spikes of the twisted antlers smash him into the cage side. With barely a moment to recover, the daemon steed came at him again, this time assuming the monstrous hammer-head of an unspeakable daemon that butted Archaon's battered body back into the bars. Dragging himself up, the Chaos warlord found that Dorghar had changed yet again; now its head had assumed the armoured shape of some hellish juggernaut. It came at him again, and this time the infernal metal of its head struck Archaon on his faceplate and crunched him between the battering ram of the steed's metal head and the warped bars beyond.

Archaon clawed blindly at the rivets and plates of the monster's head. He held on as the creature retreated. Tearing its head upward, Dorghar sent Archaon's armoured form into the barred roof of the enclosure. As Archaon found himself back on the floor of the cage in a demolished heap he spat blood at the inside of his helm. He pushed himself to his feet but found that Dorghar had morphed once more into a black, bovine monstrosity that kicked back at the Chaos warrior with its hooves. Archaon struck the wall of the enclosure once more with the force of daemoniac ferocity. As he tried to pick himself up he found the nightmare

form of the black stallion once more before him. Rearing. Roaring balefire. Cycling its spiked forelegs and shaggy hooves like a pugilist before smashing Archaon back into the ground with a savage kick. And another. And another.

Archaon's world became the grit of the cage floor and the sense-smashing impact of hoof on helm. The Chaos warrior's own fury got the better of him and, pushing himself up, he lurched at the beast. Launching himself at the stamping and hiss of steam from scorched nostrils, the Chaos warrior stumbled through the open door of the cage and into the black murk into which Dorghar had dissipated. The darkness suddenly became the whirlwind maelstrom of a storm. The blackness howled about Archaon like a cyclone, dragging the Chaos warrior into the air and catapulting him into the cage wall. As the storm the steed had become screamed darkness and flame about the enclosure, Archaon was tumbled along the barbed bars, pinned to the outside of the cage.

As the storm died to a shadowy whisper, Archaon brought his helm up off the floor. Dorghar had once again assumed the shape of the stallion – an infernal perversion of Oberon's noble form. It scraped its hoof through the grit of the enclosure and snorted like a bull. Dragging his smashed body up off the floor, Archaon smacked his helm with a clenched metal fist in the hope that he might knock some sense into his skull. The steed suddenly tore away, spraying grit behind it. Archaon came unsteadily to his feet and slapped a gauntlet on the pommel of *Terminus*. It suddenly became apparent that the beast wasn't coming for him. Like a streaking shadow it was thundering for the gate. Without the enslaving sorcery of Jharkill's charms, the daemon steed wanted a taste of freedom. It would make short work of the enclosure gate.

Archaon knew he couldn't allow the monster to escape. Instead of heading for Dorghar, the Chaos warrior turned and sprinted for the gate. Drawing *Terminus*, he turned the blade about in his gauntlet, grasping the weapon by its crossguard. As the infernal beast drew level, Archaon shouldered the steed from its step before smashing its head aside with the pommel of his Sigmarite sword. Slugging the monster with the grasped hilt of the greatsword, Archaon turned the beast enough to send them both crashing into the bars beside the gate.

Smashing the creature again with the pommel of the weapon, Archaon dropped the sword and grabbed Dorghar by its black tail. Dragging the dazed creature from the buckled bars, Archaon leant back into a swing and hurled the steed around and into the unforgiving metal at the other end of the enclosure. Dorghar stumbled away from the warped bars like a new-born foal, its legs unsteady. Shaking its head and snorting a brief burst of flame, the beast turned –

the monster's eyes were rageshot. Its hooves scraped the grit of the enclosure and it lowered the bone spikes on its head. Archaon scooped up *Terminus*. He knew what was coming.

Dorghar charged. The daemon was suddenly a blur. The streaking shadow came at the Chaos warrior. Archaon feinted one way with his great sword before side-stepping out of the steed's rocketing path. Leaping, he grabbed for the pommel of the beast's armoured saddle, allowing the creature's momentum to carry him up onto its back. Archaon was no sooner in the saddle than the daemon steed blasted straight through the enclosure gate. Within the blink of an eye it had blazed across the thoroughfare, leaving a flickering trail of dark flame behind it. Archaon braced himself as the beast struck the cages opposite. He roared as the steed turned and slammed both its brawny side and Archaon's armoured leg into the twisted bars.

Desperately clawing at the reins and thrusting his boots into the stirrups, Archaon slapped the beast's flank with the flat of his blade. The flesh of the beast seared and steamed on contact with the Sigmarite steel and the creature once again thundered off. Captive monsters hissed, spat and roared as Dorghar crashed along the side of the cages, dragging Archaon through the barbs and bars of the enclosures.

With Mange creating havoc in one section of the menagerie and Dorghar in the other, the attendant beastfiends and daemonette keepers were stretched. Between Jharkill's barbarian enchantments and the mangled labyrinth of cages, there was little to demand the attention of Lord Agrammon's servants, but this was something else. Monsters, mutants and daemons were howling in the cages while escaped exhibits tore infernal jailers to pieces and smashed their way to freedom.

Dragging itself away from the enclosures, Dorghar began to buck and kick with daemoniac fury, snorting flame and roaring its infernal displeasure. Bouncing and sliding savagely in the saddle, Archaon dug in with his heels, hauled on the reins and slapped the beast's flanks with the flat of *Terminus*.

Finally the monster settled and steamed but the Chaos warrior's efforts had far from broken the beast. Both Archaon and the steed heard the crank of a twisted portcullis and the screeching call for weapons. As a spiked gate in the side of the citadel shot up into its stone frame like an opening maw, hordes of daemonettes spilled out of the tower and into the menagerie thoroughfares. They were monstrous shieldmaidens of obscene form. The creatures shrieked and squealed their delight as they raced out onto the thoroughfare with sickle-spears and

spiked, black shields. Skulking between them were shaven beastfiends. The long-snouts were all sinew and scraps of leather and were battered between the bulks of the daemonettes as they trumpeted their alarm.

In Lord Agrammon's citadel guard, pouring out from the tower, Dorghar and Archaon found a common enemy. The daemon steed reared at the thrust of sickle-spears, kicking weapons out of clawed hands and heads from obscene bodies. Clutching the saddle with his thighs, Archaon held onto the reins with one hand while chopping down through rancid shieldmaidens and emaciated beastfiends with the other. Beneath him, the Chaos warlord suddenly felt the ripple of some shadow-spawned transformation. Archaon rose as the Steed of the Apocalypse grew in size. As saddlestraps and bridle cut into the beast's growing bulk, its horsehair sprouted to a shaggy black carpet of curls. An onyx horn and a colossal pair of curved tusks erupted from its changing face and Archaon found himself mounted on a demonic thundertusk. Dorghar roared as it reared and stamped down on the infernal horde gathered about it. Mulching daemonettes and beastfiends into the floor, the steed shook the ground with its fury, knocking Slaaneshi deviants from their footing.

As slender beastfiends clawed their way up through the midnight tangle of the steed's shaggy hide, Archaon cut through their miserable bodies with stabs and backslashes of his blade. Dorghar, meanwhile, swept its mighty tusks from side to side, smashing through daemonettes and breaking beastfiends against the caged sides of enclosures. Roaring, Dorghar thundered up the thoroughfare, making a mess of the citadel guard rushing out from the tower. Beneath him Archaon felt the steed transform once more. Its shaggy fur began to shed and its mighty form shrank. Sinking down onto the back of some kind of hellish black panther with burning eyes and obsidian claws, Archaon held on to the reins and armoured saddle as the cat bounded from one miserable beastfiend to another. Filleting each victim as it landed, Dorghar leapt from victim to victim – bounding off the sides of rattled cages and across the thoroughfare with fearful feline grace.

Archaon sheathed *Terminus* and took the reins with both hands as the steed accelerated up towards a throng of daemonettes who were approaching with their sickle-spears raised. Scrabbling left and right as the monstrosities hurled the razor-crescent crowned weapons, Archaon held on for all he was worth. Ducking and leaning out to one side to avoid the spears, the Chaos warrior had the distinct feeling that Dorghar was attempting to put him in harm's way. Hauling the beast out of the path of further weapons hurled into the ground



before them, Archaon prepared himself for a spine-jarring turn. The thing had daemoniac reflexes and a lithe, muscular body to match. Dorghar pulled suddenly left. With Archaon holding on for his life, the steed leapt on and then suddenly off the bars of a nearby enclosure. Sailing over the daemonettes and the spiked shields, Dorghar landed on the obscene carcass of a spearless infernal. Savaging the daemonette with its claws, Dorghar finished it with the crystalline deathtrap of its obsidian jaws. Snapping the monstrosity's head clean off, Dorghar spat it at the gathering numbers of Lord Agrammon's citadel guard before leaping clean up into the air from a standing start.

Clutching the reins and surging for the sky, Archaon rode out the sudden manoeuvre. Dorghar landed on the enclosure cagetops before bounding impossibly again, up at the citadel wall. Landing with savage grace amongst the poison-sickly spikes, the cat leapt from one to another – working its way up the side of the citadel, avoiding slipping off. Holding his chestplate almost to the steed's back, Archaon clung on while the beast ascended. Sickle-spears sparked off the metal of the tower as the citadel guard below attempted to acquire them. As the spears and appendage-claws of the daemonettes guarding the tower thrust through narrow arrow slits in the citadel wall, Dorghar was forced to abandon its savage climb. Feeling his stomach lurch, Archaon held on as the panther leapt away from the tower. With the concentric insanity of the menagerie below them like a spiralling maze, Archaon gathered the reins in his gauntlets. A snarl tore at his top lip as Dorghar took them both to their doom.

Plunging back towards the menagerie, Archaon felt the rupture of muscle and the crunch-transformation of bone below him. Once more Dorghar was changing. The dagger-clawed panther became a horrific bat creature of unfolding leathery wings, flea-infested fur and devilish flat-nosed face. Beating its great wings, Dorghar soared up – high over the menagerie that had been its prison. Archaon held on tight to the flying beast. The powerful motion of the creature's wings took the steed and its unwelcome rider over the forsaken Gatelands.

Far beneath them Archaon could see the ruins of fortresses and palaces built within the ruins of others. The land was black but not with ice. It moved like a carpet of insects. Peering down as the monstrous Dorghar banked, Archaon could see that the ruins, the contested borders, the warped Wastes of the Gatelands were swarming with beastfiends, daemons and other monstrosities. Dark things of savage ignorance, perpetually driven to spill blood in the name of their patron prince or daemoniac power.

About the pole, Archaon spied the fortified residences of infernal royalty and

the lords of damnation. Proud towers, festering battlements, brazen bastions and fortress monuments bleeding ruin into the air crowded the frozen lands about the blazing glare of the southern pole. They were built one on top of another, as though the palaces themselves – ever in a state of crooked enhancement – were vying for the most prestigious placement. A location commanding an unrivalled view of the blistering pole. A position closest to their Ruinous patrons. This created the silhouette of a dark, gargantuan crown about the shattered vortex of the long-demolished gate, through which the raw power of the beyond passed into the mortal world. Lord Agrammon's citadel and great menagerie was but one decorative piece of such dark reverence.

Again Archaon's stomach took a vertiginous tumble. Dorghar's banking roll became a plunge. As the monster turned, Archaon clamped his thighs around the armoured saddle and clutched onto the beast. Dorghar rolled wing over wretched wing, attempting to throw the Chaos warlord off, but Archaon had his prize. He had travelled across the Southern Wastes to acquire it and he would not let it go now. Beating its wings through the broiling skies, torn this way and that by the perversity of gales, updrafts and violent eddies, the Steed of the Apocalypse soared across the tower tops of the highest of the daemoniac palaces. Archaon hauled at the creature's reins but Dorghar plunged straight at the howling maelstrom of light and horror erupting from the ruined gateway and bleeding into the world.

Moving between realities was a sickening shock. Physically. Mentally. Emotionally. As the creature glided through the state immaterial – the very rawness of Chaos – Archaon felt a wave of indescribable intensity come over him. It was as though he had hit a wall of pain, of pleasure, of possibility – but had passed through it. He fought for control of his body and soul. His mind cried out both for relief and for more. He felt lost and as if he did not know himself, yet had never known himself or his place in the world better. Tears began to roll down his cheeks. He struggled to control his bowels and choked back the necessity of vomiting in his helmet. Experiencing the crude power of ruin – uncrafted and without purpose – was a dreadful feeling that both excited and appalled his every sense and shattered the very core of his being. It felt like he had died.

If Dorghar had intended such an overwhelming experience to unsettle and ultimately unsaddle its rider, the dread beast was disappointed. Bathing the Chaos warlord in the searing certainty of the unknown had not broken him. Archaon did not clutch his helm in immaterial agony. He did not slip from the

monster's back in a warped daze. He did not scream his sanity away. With his good eye, Archaon saw things that were not meant to be seen in the howling blaze of the polar gateway. Far below – if such a thing still existed for Archaon and the steed – predacious daemons, entities of the beyond and monstrous personifications, hungered for the fragility of his soul. They were a horror removed. Ever warping. Ever waiting. Ever wanting. Archaon understood how such sights could drive a man to madness and shatter his reason.

Archaon, however, was more than a man. He saw the impossibility of worlds connected like no one else. He could not only see what fear-feasting daemons and the Ruinous Powers of the otherworldly realm wanted him to see; with the darksight of his ruined eye he saw light where there was shadow. Perversities twisted themselves into a contorted sense. The burning certainty of his gaze lit the way to truths that commonplace dread refused to acknowledge. With the Eye of Sheerian he saw even more. The sorcerous gem burned bright in his helm, granting the Chaos warlord sights of dread wonder. The Eye revealed the daemons and their abyssal masters to be living corruptions. Realisations of the mortal condition. Self-determining entities, spawned and living out their unnatural existence in a stormy maelstrom of dark vision and emotion. They were the architecture of purest intention, draped in an otherworldly flesh formed of hope, of fear and of the unbearable, myriad states inbetween.

The wondrous prize not only revealed to Archaon the true nature of such infernal princes but also the principalities in which the horrors dwelled. Like a lens, the hellish haze of the pole magnified the powers of the sorcerous gem. Staring far to the north, directing his gaze towards the region the repulsive Changeling had indicated, Archaon could see the Forsaken Fortress. Like a great stone sculpture of a monstrous daemon crouching on the horizon, the palace taunted the Chaos warrior with its distant presence.

Archaon tore up on the reins and hauled Dorghar to the left, putting the Forsaken Fortress in their sights. The beast could not know that the palace was the Chaos warrior's objective and found itself swooping out of the blinding blaze. Beneath the saddle the creature was changing yet again. Dorghar had assumed the form of the black stallion. It favoured Archaon's memory of Oberon, only with the ragged wings of its previous incarnation. Beating through the stormy, dark skies of the polar maelstrom, the steed seared northward. Galloping through the churning heavens, swooping between the crash of the lightning and the plunge of thunder, Dorghar surged up through the broiling cloud and down at the Wasteland. The warped wilderness passed like a blur

below. The Steed of the Apocalypse weaved between the sky piercing towers of daemonic palaces and crooked citadels. Colossal fragments of the polar gate littered the wilderness whipping by, and within moments the beast was passing over the crescent canyon.

Archaon felt the scream of a storm erupt about him as Dorghar blasted up out of the curving canyon depths and back up into the maelstrom. Beneath him the creature was transforming once more. Not into some other monstrous beast but into a furious, living blaze. Like a comet streaking across the night sky, Dorghar accelerated. With the dread armour of Morkar protecting him from the worst of the flames, Archaon held on tight as the supernatural flame roared and whipped about him. Tensing his thighs and locking his gauntlets grimly about the reins, the Chaos warlord drew his armoured chest to the steed's blazing back. As an unnatural fireball blasting through strange skies, Dorghar galloped. He beat his fiery wings. He soared up through the heavens on a path of flame.

The frozen insanity of the Southern Wastes fell away from both warlord and steed. The flesh-shattering temperatures. The scalding gales of stabbing ice and agony. The warherds of beastfiends that swarmed the midnight land like a sea of muscle, shaggy fur and hate. The black of the ice receded. With it narrowed the deep clefts and canyons that zigzagged their way through the guts of the pole, meeting at the rift that bored its way through the bottom of the world.

Through the roaring flames that raged about him, Archaon saw the Southern Wastes recede. Warrior and steed travelled far, protected from the sky-scorching inferno that Dorghar had become. The dark creature beat its fiery wings and banked left and right, up through the storm-racked clouds and down through the broiling maelstrom that blanketed the continent with its unnatural miasma. Archaon held on as he felt the beast buck and writhe beneath him.

The blasted lands of ruin and flesh-searing freeze passed beneath him in a sickening blur. Dunes of black ice migrated across the Wastes. A ghostly haze swirled across the monstrous expanse making it appear like the surface of a phantom ocean. Glaciers of living obsidian grew. Mountain ranges of serrated darkness reached up out of the icy plateau. Volcanoes blazed their unnatural, molten fury at the skies, bathing the howling bleakness about Archaon in a strange glow. Dorghar tried to pull away but Archaon kept the beast on course.

The rocketing monstrosity raged north before the Chaos warrior angled its searing progress west. Guided by the Eye of Sheerian set in his helm, Archaon's farsight extended across the continent faster than even Dorghar could carry him. It took him across dread lands that were but a blink of cruel peaks, shrieking

winds and deep freeze – lands that were a streaming blur beneath the Steed of the Apocalypse. The sorcerous gem granted him a vision of the benighted kingdoms of the west, where innumerable warherds of innumerable beastfiends fought, butchered and ate one another, filling bellies and lending strength for the next day of rank slaughter. Not that days, months or years had much meaning in the midnight hell of the Southern Wastes.

Dorghar came in low across these killing fields of frozen blood, ice-mulched corpses and bestial swarms. Like a living carpet of murder and hate, the shaggy monsters fought one another with mindless abandon. Some were scarred, frost-blackened creatures of bare muscular chest, curved blades of bone, draped in skulls. Others were striped deviants dragging fiends separated off from their herds into hollows for last hours of perversion and horror. Hulking beasts of humped back, matted mountains of fur and filthy horns overcame fiend victims with a noxious stench so intense it could be seen, while shamans of fur and feather wielded staffs of crooked spine that they whipped about them, turning daemonflesh to a bloody gruel that was carried away on the icy gales. The beastfiends barely looked up from their savagery and slaughter as Dorghar blazed its path above them.

Archaon gritted his teeth as the steed coursed upwards through the moaning maelstrom of cloud, punching up through the obscurity and into the searing silence of a world above the world. A darkness of crystal cold where the sickly stars shone once more. The Chaos warrior fancied that he could see the great curve of the world and the shattered lands of ice and berg that formed the western limits of the dark continent like an unfinished mosaic. Holding on and turning back, Archaon could see the distant Gatelands behind, with the wailing insanity of the collapsed polar gate roaring a hole through the cloud, revealing only the raging abyss of an existence beyond his own. A pit into which reality fell, was devoured by eternity, marinated in the impossible, before being churned up and vomited spectacularly back into the world.

Suddenly something changed and Archaon was forced to turn back around. Dorghar's fiery progress seared to whiteness. The flames intensified, becoming nothing more than an agony felt but not seen. The Wastes – that had rushed by like a bleak blur – now became a mind-scalding instant. The moment was a screaming flash, a raw elemental power coursing through Archaon's being. An unstoppable surge of blinding pain that sizzled through his plate, flowed through his paralysed limbs, stabbed his heart to a stop and blanked his mind.

When his eye fluttered open, Archaon saw only smoke. Through the slit of his

helm he saw black steam swirling through oily smoke. His nostrils stung with the burned air. His ears rang with a mighty crack that still seared through his mind. Morkar's plate felt buckled about him. Archaon patted his cursed armour down to find that whatever had hit them had not breached the damned plate of the first Everchosen. Archaon's bones hurt within flesh that was still flush with a ghostly burn.

He pushed himself unsteadily to his feet and stamped out a small fire that had taken on the bottom edge of his furs and cloak. As the steam and smoke cleared the Chaos warrior found himself in a pit. A crater. About him was black ice that had been scorched to dribble. Black water began to pool about his boots. Beneath them he found rock – shattered but unyielding. Only then did Archaon realise what had happened. They had not been hit. They had been the ones that had done the hitting. Dorghar – the beast of a thousand transformations – had turned from steed to fireball and fireball to a stream of dark lightning that had thunderbolted for the ground. The creature's elemental power had burned through Archaon. Its sky-splitting speed had smashed both of them into the Wastes. Neither the searing blaze nor the murderous impact had killed the Chaos warrior. No bones had been broken and his heart continued to beat. The steed had succeeded in unseating its rider, however. It would have escaped Archaon – denied the chosen of Chaos his prize and made him chase the monstrous wonder across the world – but for the fact that he found it stumbling to its own feet. The thing had been equally dazed by the impact and drained by its efforts to rid itself of Archaon.

Now before him it was a black stallion once more, its midnight flesh ruptured with spikes of bone and its eyes alight with infernal fire. Archaon grasped for the hilt of *Terminus*, which he found to his relief was still sitting snug in its fur scabbard. He ran at the beast as it stumbled this way and that. Slamming his pauldron into the mount's muscular side he toppled it. Dorghar went crashing back down into the inky meltwater, with the Chaos warrior on top of it. Archaon grabbed the monster by the scruff of the mane and drew his templar blade. Resting the tip of the great sword against the side of the creature's throat, Archaon watched the blessed steel sizzle and burn against daemonflesh. The steed kicked out with its hind legs and tried to right itself but Archaon leaned in with the weight of his armour – the blade ready to skewer the beast.

‘Yield!’ Archaon roared at the Steed of the Apocalypse. ‘Yield!’

The beast roared like a furnace at him through its daggered maw. It kicked. It bucked. It made ready for transformation but Archaon wouldn't let it. Turning

the sword around he smashed its horse skull into the ground again and again, causing meltwater to splash about them. He turned the blade once more to the creature. With its gleaming point worming its way dangerously through smoking flesh, Archaon bawled, 'You will yield to me, daemon. For I am to be the Everchosen of Chaos, the Harbinger of Ruin and the Lord of the End Times: by dark right, you are to be my steed, monster. A daemonic beast of burden fit to carry me into the annals of history before I see fit to send the past, present and future of this miserable world into oblivion. Yield, creature of Chaos, or I will send you on ahead.' *Terminus* rattled with Archaon's rage and rested on the creature's neck. Gradually, the steed's struggles died away. It turned, searing its black flesh against the Sigmarite blade, angling its long face towards the Chaos warrior. Oberon's face.

Suddenly it spoke. The creature had an infernal voice that burned through the furnace-roar glowing through its sharp teeth. Archaon had no idea what the beast had said. It was in an unspeakable tongue that Archaon did not know and proceeded from deep within the beast. Staring at one another, actions seemed to speak louder than hellish words, and Archaon edged his sword away and the weight of his armour off the beast. Rolling to its hoofed feet, Dorghar shook its head, passing a brawny shiver down its flanks. It snorted steam at the meltwater. Archaon still held his greatsword out, his broad blade ready to chop down through the beast's neck. The daemon steed did not move, however. It stood waiting to receive its rider. Archaon nodded slowly to the beast and himself. The fourth treasure of Chaos – the Steed of the Apocalypse – was finally his. He would have rejoiced but for the searing ache in his bones from their thunderbolting descent and impact.

Slipping *Terminus* back into its scabbard, Archaon mounted the steed, settling back into the armoured saddle that seemed as much the beast as the sharp bone and midnight flesh. Taking the reins, Archaon motioned Dorghar gently on. Stabbing spiked hooves through the slush and into the icy sides of the pit, the steed climbed out of the crater. Casting the sorcerous sight of Sheerian's Eye through the still darkness of the icy plateau, Archaon found what he was looking for. Dorghar turned its head to one side. Its eye burned with an internal blaze and the roar of the furnace poured from its daemonic maw. There were no words this time. Archaon didn't need any to understand.

'West, Dorghar,' the Chaos warrior said. 'West, beast. Just a little further. We call on my father-in-shadow tonight. Somehow I feel we shall not be well received.'



## CHAPTER V

*‘When we are not ourselves but we are no one else – who are we?’*

– Khardunn the Gloried, *Kurgan Bead-Belt*

*The Pustular Plain*  
*The Southern Wastes*  
*Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

The unrelenting blackness of ice gave way to the oily sheen of meltwater lakes and deltas of steaming slush. Here, in the western reaches of the dark continent, a miserable kind of life eked out rancid existence. Earth, rocky and ice-threaded, sat stinking and water-logged like a tundra bog. The wetlands were ancient in their corruption and ravenous for flesh. The mire was an undulating sea of bestial bones, choked with hardy brown grasses and islands of fungal growth. Things sloshed about in the foetid lakes of glassy blackness as a rash of volcanic peaks oozed steaming pus, curdling the churning tundra with its diseased filth. This was the Pustular Plain, where swarms of black flies bled beastfiends alive and the dark chuckle of the Great Lord of Decay could be heard in bubbles that



rose from the dark water depths and broke the surface in a continuous, stinking chug.

As Dorghar came in low, the beat of his gargoyle's wings created a wake in the dark waters, disturbing a miasma of feeding flies. The Steed of the Apocalypse glided in over trains of beastfiends working their way across the mire in single file columns. The creatures were horribly afflicted with growths, plagues and deformities that made movement a challenge and the thigh deep trudge through the bog-tundra an agonising trial. The bone staffs they used to traverse the freezing muck were crowned with a trio of thuribles in which burned peat. As well as lighting the creatures' way, the headpieces offered warmth and praise to their Plague Lord in the skyward mockery of the unholy symbol created in the darkness.

As Dorghar back beat its wings to bring the beast and Archaon to a halt, the Chaos warrior peered down at the mire. The monster's hooves creaked and splayed, ensuring both the steed and its master didn't sink. Slipping down out of the saddle, Archaon couldn't boast the same transformative powers and his boots oozed into the slurping freeze. The Forsaken Fortress had experienced the same problem. The architectural abomination loomed over Archaon – a palace constructed in the dread form of its monstrous master – but its wing-towers and horn-spires leant crookedly to one side where the palace was sinking. Wading through the muck, Archaon led the steed up to the smooth black stone of the fortress. Draping the reins over the razored protrusions at the base of the stonework, Archaon shouldered his shield and once again began the treacherous climb. There would be no door or gate. The palace boasted no barbican because the Forsaken Fortress did not admit visitors. The only unfortunates allowed inside the damned structure were those brought there by the daemon Be'lakor himself. Strangely, Archaon thought he qualified. Regardless, the Changeling had shown him the weakness in the palace fortifications. In the dread thing's faithful reproduction of both the Dark Master and his palace, the rival entity had revealed a breach. As he began to climb, Archaon began to wonder if a similar vulnerability existed on his father-in-shadow's own star-scorched chest.

Below him, Dorghar snorted and steamed, padding the marshy earth with its splayed hooves. Archaon reached. He jumped. He hauled himself up through the wretched wonder of the daemon prince's form. Though fraught with perverse dangers and a sloping angle of ascent, it was an easier climb second time around. Here where the volcanic peaks warmed the gelid bog and even the raging gales slowed to a stagnant stillness, it was much warmer than the continental interior

and the structure was not caked in ice.

Archaon aimed for the heart – as he did in all things. The fingertips of his gauntlets hooked into the colossal symbol of the eight-pointed star scored into the midnight stone. He dragged himself up through the Ruinous iconography – the symbol of those that damned themselves equally to all the dread powers of darkness in the world. It was his guiding star, as it had been for his father-in-shadow and the doomed creatures that followed them both, as well as many more into which Archaon had thrust his blade. The eight-pointed star knew no middle ground. When it was on the rise, the servants of Chaos – from the most infamous warlords to the lowliest spawn – followed it or died. And Archaon's star was on the rise. It was time his father-in-shadow came to know this also.

Archaon found the fracture in the stone where he had before. A cleft in the wall over the palace's daemonic heart. The Changeling's wretched mimicry had indeed been a dark wonder to behold. Passing his shield through first, the Chaos warrior slipped through the breach in the defences and entered the Forsaken Fortress.

Inside, Archaon felt immediately vulnerable. It was an alien feeling for the warlord. He had travelled the world and killed just about everything that walked, talked and breathed. It would not have been an idle boast to call himself one of the deadliest warriors in the known world. He had the patronage of Dark Gods and seemed destined for a dread greatness. Still, in the darkness of the palace, with its smooth, flowing, almost organic architecture, Archaon felt trapped. Not like he had felt in manacle and chain. Not as a captured specimen, caged for display in Lord Agrammon's sick menagerie. The Forsaken Fortress held more dread for Archaon than doors of oak, bars of steel and cells of stone. Its phantasmic walls could fade at any moment. It was there and it was not. The palace could vanish from the Pustular Plain like a ghost, to reappear somewhere else in the Southern Wastes or, for all Archaon knew, the world. The Forsaken Fortress haunted the realms of men and beasts – and the Dark Master himself haunted the halls of his own palace. If it were to disappear now, it would take him hostage.

Stalking the fortress passages and halls that wove through the palace like the cascading innards of so many of Archaon's foes, the Chaos warrior's armour jangled lightly. The palace interior was lightless, but Archaon's darksight seared through the abyssal blackness. The Forsaken Fortress blazed with the fearful ruin of its construction. Its walls and floors – in their ornate wonder and madness – bled the raw essence of Chaos. Every speck of dust in the place burned with

ancient evil and Archaon had eyes for such raging malevolence. In the darkness of the palace everything was reversed. The black oblivion burned bright with dreamy damnations and the wan brilliance of competing realities. It revealed to him a palace that was both there and not. Like a shadow, the Forsaken Fortress existed in so much as it was a semi-corporeal absence of something else. Purity. Mercy. Hope. Archaon's boots scuffed the midnight marble of the floor and his furs rippled with the ghostly breeze. He held his shield aloft – in part to be ready for anything that the fortress had to throw at him, in part to present the eight-pointed glory of the Chaos Star to potential foes. A simple sign of Archaon's allegiance to the Ruinous Powers in all their unified majesty.

Then he heard it. The single beat of a heart.

The Chaos warrior's boots scraped to stillness. He looked this way and that through the blazing darkness. About the strange, flowing architecture that represented the prince of daemon princes both inside and out, the sound was like a tiny peal of thunder in the midnight madness. Then again. And again. Archaon pulled his shield closer and slipped *Terminus* from its fur back-scabbard with a steely hiss.

The grotesque beating continued. Blinking through the radiant oblivion, Archaon thought he saw movement. The Chaos warrior suddenly realised that he had wandered into the throne chamber. At its far end he could make out the monstrous form of a daemon cast in cold stone. The infernal form of a muscular body. Clawed hands and feet. Horns and wings. It looked just like a miniature version of the palace itself. Before it Archaon saw the wisp and twirl of shadow – congealing, intensifying, solidifying into the blackness of flesh. A monstrous heart beat before the throne. It was a twisted thing of large daemonflesh – strangled by bitterness and belligerence – thundering through the contorted muscularity of its obscene form with an otherworldly will to exist that would not be denied.

Archaon licked at his lips. It was painful to even be in the presence of such a realisation. The warlord knew that he could not let this moment pass. The heart beat like a dare in the silent darkness of the throne room. Willing himself on, Archaon's gauntlet tightened about his Sigmarite sword. The blessed steel scorched the very air of the dark palace. One boot scuffed the marble floor ahead of the other. A hesitant stumble became the urgent steps of a walk. Moments later such steps became a plate-jangling run up the darkened length of the throne room. *Terminus* came up. Archaon's hand tightened. He would cleave the monstrous heart in two.

There was suddenly more movement in the shadows. Shapes emerged from behind the throne, sweeping up on either side to surround the great pulsing heart. Some slipped silkily from behind pillars while others erupted from the blackness of archways. Archaon skidded to a stop, his plate rattling to stillness and his blade up, its point aimed over the top of his shield. The Chaos warrior turned, ready for an attack or ten such attacks but the shadowy forms also grew still. Their weapons were not presented. They were simply placing themselves between Archaon and the daemonic heart.

Each was a living silhouette. A shadowy outline of a Chaos warrior. Shadow churned within each one, holding its form and giving the impression of plate, of horned helms, of furs, of aberration and weapons in scabbards or slung across backs. Archaon thought he could make out the shape of northmen, Kurgan warlords, damned kings, Kislevites in spike and fur, shadow-pledged marauders, bestial chieftains and warrior half-daemons. Men, women and monsters, long in their leaving of the world and now cast in shadow like statues of living darkness. Each seemed doomed to haunt the palace, cursed by their undying devotion to their Dark Master. Each still bore the mark of the daemon prince across their chest – centred on their black hearts. Be'lakor's Ruinous Star of darkness united and powers undivided. The sign of the Bearer. The Herald. The Harbinger. The star was scorched in a cruel light that cut through the shadowy form of each otherworldly warrior of Chaos.

Archaon turned with sword raised and shield held out before him. He was ready for the sentinels in shadow but the things merely assumed their positions about the throne and throne room. They waited as black veins sprouted from the monstrous heart in a horrific, labyrinthine network that finally began to assume a daemonic shape. Thick arteries carried the pumped ichor of the thing through a torso and long limbs. A spider web of black capillaries spread from these throughout wings and the rest of the body. The vessels' steam and smoked shadow assumed the form of spouting muscle and black bones. About the dark bloom of a brain, housing Ruinous thoughts and unimaginable power, grew a midnight skull. Horns sprouted from the nightmare, before the haze of shadowy steam around the daemon suddenly congealed about its monstrous form like an instantaneous frost. The infernal beast was now clothed in its blacker-than-black skin. Hooks, chains, skulls and scraps of hell-forged mail dribbled from its muscular flesh. The realisation was complete. Within the design of the Forsaken Fortress, sat the daemon-sculpted shape of the prince's throne – on that sat the daemon itself: the Dark Master, Be'lakor.

The abomination wore its infernal royalty like a cankered soul. Its horrific visage was an obsidian mask of the unreadable and unknowable. All at once Archaon thought he saw disdain in the thing's abyssal eyes, and pride and horror and glee. Mostly it just seemed bitter and irritated to be in his presence. Archaon stared at the loathsome creature. With his one good eye he beheld it. With his darksight gift he beheld it. With the sorcerous Eye of Sheerian he beheld it. It was there – in the infernal flesh. The Chaos warrior lowered his Sigmarite sword and his shield.

'I see you, dread thing,' Archaon told it.

*Only because I wish it, mortal,* Be'lakor told him. The daemon prince's voice was in everything. Heard. Felt. Archaon could even taste the bitter hatred coming off the thing. *You have wandered far off your course, chosen of the Chaos gods.*

'The Everchosen of Chaos,' Archaon told it.

*You have not earned that title yet, mortal,* the Dark Master reminded him. *The Everchosen of Chaos is known by his treasures and there are two yet to be found.*

'That is only a matter of time,' Archaon assured the creature. 'Is it not, daemon? Are not my moments, my months, my years – the very lives I might have lived – but playthings to a creature like you? Like skeins of wool about your claws – to cut, to let loose or to wrap about your finger?' Be'lakor glowered at Archaon with a withering intensity but said nothing. 'I look to the north, the south, the east and the west, and you are there, Shadow, hidden on the horizon. I try to remember my past and there you are, haunting my memories. I have dark hopes for the future – but you afflict even those with your potential presence.'

*Is that why you are here, mortal? To whine, carp and plead.*

'You know why I'm here, daemon-filth,' Archaon told it. 'Let's not play childish games. I have travelled far and found he who would not be found.'

*You are here for answers...*

'We will leave guesswork to idle philosophers,' Archaon said. 'I would know what you would have with me, creature. From your own faithless lips. Or I shall cut the truth out of your infernal carcass.'

*Answers?*

'Speak daemon, while you still can,' Archaon warned.

*You have the very world on its knees before you and you came to find me... for answers?*

Archaon felt the bottomless depths of the creature's scorn. Its mockery burned to hear.

‘Are you going deaf?’ Archaon shot back. ‘My demands have not changed since the last time I asked. Yes, monster – answers. To questions. I ask a question and you answer it. That’s how this works. Don’t make me ask you again.’

*What I would have with you?* Be’lakor seethed. *I would have you realise your destiny... my son-in-shadow.*

Archaon bit at his bottom lip. The sound of his daemonic father admitting as much was like icewater in his ears.

‘And who does my destiny serve?’ Archaon asked.

*We all serve those greater than ourselves.*

‘Be’lakor,’ Archaon hissed. ‘Daemon prince. Dark Master. Some say you are the crown-bearer of the Chaos gods. Nothing more than a slave. Others that you serve only yourself and your insatiable ambition.’

*A mere pastime,* Be’lakor said. *Some embroider. Some whittle. I craft the future in flesh and blood. Who does your destiny serve? It serves me, you miserable cur. You are a doll with which to be played and left abandoned on the floor. You are the piece of the game taken and placed to one side of the board. You are a living afterthought, Archaon of the North – like all my servants. Nothing more.*

‘And yet here I am,’ Archaon rumbled back. ‘I’m not on the floor. I’m here, where no man nor daemon thought I would be. I stand before the lowly Be’lakor – dung stain of the gods – in the armour of the Everchosen, carried here on the Steed of the Apocalypse, bearing the treasures of Chaos and the ever burning Mark of the Ruinous Powers in my flesh.’

*You think you are the first to bear such dark honours?* Be’lakor asked, the question like a scorpion’s sting. *You are a nothing. Born of nothing. The hollow fruit of an empty womb. All that you are I put in there. But think not that I afford you any affection for that. My half-breeds roam the world. Thousands more serve me not in flesh but in deed. They carry my mark. They live for my favour. They know their place. They do not carp and question. They serve the darkness of this world through the darkness they find in themselves. They serve their father-in-shadow – the darkness that is Be’lakor, you worthless wretch. As you should.*

‘And yet I am not without worth, it seems,’ Archaon told the abomination. ‘I am the dark hope of the Ruinous Gods. The same gods that laugh at you, my father-in-shadow, and scorn your wretched efforts. Be’lakor the Bearer. Slave to circumstance. Doomed to carry crowns but not to wear them. Doomed to choose but not be chosen. Granted eternity but denied form. You call me a nothing. You call me worthless. You are a prince without a kingdom to inherit. Nothing could

be more worthless than that.’

Archaon turned his head and angled the tip of *Terminus* at one of his father’s shadow sentinels. The silhouettes behind him had edged closer. ‘Back off, darkling,’ Archaon warned, ‘or you will see the light – and it won’t be pretty.’ After a moment’s otherworldly hesitation, the things drifted back.

‘You can bring your bastards into the world,’ Archaon continued, fixing his monstrous father with a hateful gaze. ‘You can inspire the low and the faithless. You can keep company with shadows. What you cannot do is be what you were. The Great Changer cursed you, Be’lakor. You cannot be crowned while conducting dark coronations for others. As you will do for me, daemon. With you or without you – it is my destiny. I am chosen of the Dark Gods and I will be the Everchosen of Chaos. You will meddle no further in my future. I am not yours to be manipulated or mastered. I will destroy you, creature of darkness.’

The palace boomed with the daemon’s laughter. It was a horrible sound that bounced about the strange chambers of the palace and through the twists and turns of labyrinthine passageways. It was everywhere and felt like a chorus of monsters laughing at Archaon.

*You? Destroy me? You are less than worthless if you believe that. Perhaps, Archaon of the North, you are my biggest disappointment.*

‘Surely nothing could disappoint you more than yourself, daemon?’ Archaon said. ‘Destroy you? My blade will send you back to whatever deviant plane you came from. It is my deeds that will destroy you, monster. The Everchosen of Chaos is known by his treasures, but the Lord of the End Times – he is known by his aftermath. By the oblivion that follows in his wake and the endings he brings. An end to all things. To the mortal races and their foetid beliefs. To the gods – both of law and of ruin – who are sustained by such patronage. An end to you, daemon.’

Be’lakor’s horrific features contorted further around an infernal snarl.

*You have the soul-sucking gall to talk to me of ends, Archaon of the North, the monster seethed. Let me show you what I know of ends...*

With the sibilance still on the daemon’s wretched lips, the Chaos warrior turned. The shadow behind him had barely registered its Dark Master’s instruction to act. Archaon slashed *Terminus* across the being’s throat, opening up a ragged gash of blinding light in the sentinel. The other shadows retreated as the thing blazed in its death throes, screaming away its existence in a nimbus of palace-scalding brightness. With the Sigmarite sword still held overhead, Archaon stabbed forth and plunged the blade through the chest of the second.

Expertly retracting the weapon and resting the flat of the blade on top of his shield, Archaon slowly turned. The second shadow screeched horribly as the blazing puncture wound in its chest became a vortex of light, churning the shadow of the warrior thing about like a whirlpool before devouring the entity.

*Destroy the interloper!* Be'lakor commanded, pointing one of his cruel, black claws at Archaon. The throne room was suddenly a cradle of darkness – every pillar, nook, archway and alcove became the birthplace of shadows. Warriors rushed Archaon from every direction. The living silhouettes bore the shapes of the things they had been. Some seemed to wear plate; others were shaggy shapes in fur; some were spiked like urchins while others were the muscular outlines of marauder savages and barbarians. Stained in a deeper darkness over each of their hearts was the Ruinous Star. The star of darkness united. Be'lakor's star.

Archaon was caught in a maelstrom of rushing shadow. The solidified darkness of weaponry came at him. As the Chaos warrior smashed it furiously aside with shield and sword, it felt real enough. Real enough to carve a cleft of darkness through the warlord or stab howling shadow through his chest. As *Terminus* turned axe, spear and sword aside, there was the bright flash of an impact. With every axe blade and spear-head Archaon lopped from the weapons, every head he took and gaping hole he stabbed through their shadowy forms, a blaze of light erupted from the keen edge of the Sigmarite blade. His predicament worsened because with every flash of light, the orientation of shadows in the throne room changed. Sentinels disappeared from one place only to erupt from another, forcing him to fight twice as hard.

Very quickly Archaon came to realise that these were the shadow forms of past Chaos warlords – the blackness of their hearts pledged to Be'lakor – or perhaps even the aspirant Everchosen of Chaos like Archaon himself. Their axe strikes were too murderous, the spear thrusts too assured and bladework too masterful for rank and file butchers. Be'lakor had surrounded himself with failures – like himself. The shadows of exalted champions who had led hordes to war and whose blades had been altars upon which sacrifices to the Dark Gods had been made.

Archaon brought up his shield and was almost knocked back by the impact of a spear that bled shadow across the chamber, before its flight path sent it hammering into the Chaos star adorning the shield's surface. Archaon went to slice the spear shaft away but there was nothing there but the black haze of the weapon that had been. Moving between pillars and ducking back through archways, Archaon evaded the avalanche of presented weaponry. The palace



interior was disorientating enough, but bathed as it was in a sea of shadows and punctuated by the blinding deaths of the sentinels, Archaon soon lost track of where he was. There was the silky smoothness of marble stairs – he almost broke his neck falling down them. There was also some kind of gallery, and he made a balcony-clearing hop and drop out of the path of a shadow-streaming battle axe. It was wielded by some mountainous barbarian of the Steppe with as much insane abandon in Be'lakor's dark service as it had in its former life. He was no longer in the throne room. Sentinels were already waiting for him in the large chamber into which he had dropped. Everything was the flowing architecture of the chamber and the trailing blackness of shadowy blades.

'Come on!' Archaon roared, splitting the silhouette of a northman in two before hammering a marauder aside with his shield. He brought *Terminus* back up above his helm and rotated the blade with his wrist. Suddenly accelerating the turn he sent blessed steel through the throat of a Kurgan warlord before lopping the head off the shape of a shaggy Norscan champion. As an axe half bit into his shoulder and a spear tip glanced off his armoured thigh, Archaon bellowed at the champions of shadow. Chopping down through what Archaon assumed to be an easterner, from the outline of his armour, before cleaving back and forth through a spear, Archaon slammed the darkness of an axeman into a pillar with his shield. Thrusting the Sigmarite blade through the gut of a Chaos knight with an ornately-shaped helmet, Archaon turned and smashed his fist into the featureless face of the axeman pinned to the pillar. Archaon hammered him again and again with his shadow-stained gauntlet before the warrior's axe dropped away to drifting darkness and Archaon's armoured knuckles found stone. Snatching the hilt of *Terminus* back and withdrawing the blade, Archaon unleashed a howling radiance that ate the Chaos knight alive.

*Enough...*

Be'lakor's voice echoed through the chambers and passageways of his empty palace. It wasn't enough to save the horned silhouette of a bestial chieftain that Archaon cleaved in two, or the shadow of the caped Kislevite champion in spiked plate who received the stabbing Sigmarite blade straight through the darkness of his helm's faceplate. In the blaze of their deaths, the sentinels became one with the palace shadows once more. Casting a quick glance about his surroundings, Archaon found himself in the vaulted expanse of some great feasting hall – all pillars and black tables. The Chaos warlord doubted very much that anyone had ever actually eaten in there.

Archaon saw Be'lakor. The daemon prince strode through a magnificent

archway that led into the cavernous hall. The Dark Master's talons chewed up the black marble at his feet while his wings stretched and extended in the same way a pugilist might stretch his neck before a fight. Archaon didn't need such preparation. He had already fought his way back through half the palace and an army of shadows. As the sentinels dissipated, Archaon turned to present himself to his father-in-shadow.

'Enough?' The Chaos warrior repeated, his words echoing unnaturally about the chamber. 'Not nearly enough. In fact, I was just warming up.'

Be'lakor stopped. From the darkness of the vaulted chamber roof dropped a colossal blade. Ancient. Notched. Streaming with shadow, the blade stabbed down into the black marble floor of the chamber with an impact Archaon could feel through his boots. The Chaos warrior shivered. He had been standing there mere moments before. The blade quivered before its master, its crossguard great serrated spikes that were part of the blade. The pommel was similarly a great spike, making every part of the cursed, colossal weapon a death-dealing point. Be'lakor wrenched the infernal blade from the stone. It was broad and almost as long as the monster was tall. The Dark Master passed it between his claws, turning the weapon experimentally with his wrist. The massive blade trailed smoky shadow as its weight and cleaving edge moved through the air. It was as though it had been some time since the daemon prince had personally had the pleasure of despatching a foe with the blade. The fang-filled snarl of satisfaction that afflicted the creature's face told Archaon that the expectation of such pleasure was starting to return.

*I was your beginning, Be'lakor told him... I will be your end.*

'Then you will be an end unto yourself,' Archaon spat back, gesturing his impatience with *Terminus*.

Be'lakor's daemoniac maw opened wide and the creature bent over as it released a stone trembling roar. Tables tumbled before the force of the infernal bellow, rolling across the marble floor and smashing into one another. Archaon chopped this way and that, cutting the furniture in two and bludgeoning it into splinters. Before long the Chaos warrior was buried in a mountain of long tables and benches. With its path cleared, the daemon prince stomped up the length of the hall, wings back and its great shadow sword held above it. Sweeping in, the blade was like a dark force of nature, smashing huge drifts of furnishings aside and carving stone-shattered furrows into the marble floor. Holding its colossal blade high, the daemon prince sniffed at the air. Shrugging off shattered tables, Archaon roared atop the height of wreckage and leapt through the air at the

monstrous daemon. Bringing his shadow sword up and holding it hilt and tip, Be'lakor absorbed the murderous, cleaving action that drew dark sparks from both blades. Twisting his torso and heaving immediately back, the daemon prince pushed Archaon away, using the force of his leaping attack to throw him into a pillar. The marble was unforgiving and as the Chaos warrior hit the stone, his armour jangled over the sound of a sickening thud. Half bouncing, half dropping to the floor in his buckled plate, Archaon stumbled and slipped among the shower of pulverised marble.

The daemon was suddenly there above him. Archaon pushed himself to his feet, but was forced almost immediately back to the floor as the shadow blade cleaved straight through the pillar. Archaon rolled across his shield to evade the avalanche of black stone thundering from the chamber ceiling. Be'lakor shrugged the debris from his great arched wings, swinging on with dark, daemoniac fury. Archaon rolled again. And then back again, his shield scraping through the grit. The shadow sword plunged down through the floor, cleaving the marble into craterous gashes. Archaon was up – and just in time. Like a monstrous black guillotine, the daemon's blade *whooshed* down towards him. Slipping *Terminus* across the surface of his shield, Archaon awaited the impact. He knew that the supernatural force of such a blow would sunder the shield and his arm in two. As Be'lakor brought his infernal strength down on Archaon, the Chaos warrior felt the force of his daemon might through sword, through shield, flesh and bone, and the soles of his boots that shattered marble about them.

Snarling behind the skull-fashioned faceplate of the Everchosen's helm, Archaon pushed back with all the power he could muster. Straightening his legs and arms, the Chaos warrior batted back the daemon with a thrust of his shield and drew a shower of black sparks from Be'lakor's blade as *Terminus* swept it aside. Archaon came straight in with a withering thrust of his sword – a manoeuvre that had every right to skewer a boar. Be'lakor had backed, however, and had brought his black blade around to knock the Sigmarite sword aside. Archaon spun around, his shield ready to receive the flashing glance of the shadow sword on its surface before following with another deadly thrust. This one found its mark and the tip of *Terminus* slid straight into the darkness of the daemon's midriff. Archaon felt no resistance through the shaft of the blade. The weapon had hit nothing but silky shadow. As Be'lakor stomped to one side – the thunder of his footsteps feeling real enough through the floor – he brought his blade down on Archaon. As the weight of the weapon crashed off the surface of his shield, Archaon decided that the monstrosity was once more flesh and bad

blood.

Denied permanent form by the Great Changer, the daemon prince had found a way to turn his curse into a gift. Every time Archaon's blessed blade nicked, stabbed or sliced through the abomination's flesh it was the emptiness of shadow. Whenever Be'lakor's huge blade came down at the Chaos warrior, however, the daemon prince momentarily assumed all the monstrous brawn and infernal ire of his physical form. How Archaon could defeat such a creature – that was at once everything and nothing – he did not know. While his mind reeled with the futility of the task, his father-in-shadow proceeded to press his diabolical advantage. While Archaon ducked, weaved and deflected with sword and shield, the daemon prince's shadow sword sheared through the black stone of the palace interior. The Dark Master roared as he pulled down columns at the Chaos warrior, forcing Archaon one way, only to stomp one of his mighty claws down in his path. The blade landed blows on Archaon's shield with such searing force that it sent him skidding left and then right across the marble floor.

When Archaon countered with his own blade, in readiness for a renewed attack, often *Terminus* passed straight through the shadow that was the daemon's weapon. Lurching forward, Archaon found the bludgeoning force of the blade become real once more as Be'lakor attempted to cleave the Chaos warrior through the back. Each time Archaon got his buckled shield between himself and the blade's furious judgement. Each time the shadow sword came that little bit closer to cutting him in half. Knocked to the side by one such shield-crumpling blow, Archaon felt the flat of the blade descend. The Chaos warrior brought up his Sigmarite sword but the daemon's weapon passed straight through it. The notched broadness of the black blade solidified as it smashed Archaon into the stone floor. Forced down on one knee, Archaon got his shield up to deflect the second and third merciless blows. He rode out the earth-shattering fury of each daemon strike, preparing to bring *Terminus* savagely up into Be'lakor's gut. As he came out from behind the shield, templar blade at the ready, the daemon prince's great taloned foot was waiting for him.

Grabbing Archaon by the torso like a bird of prey with a tiny, tortured mammal, Be'lakor kicked out, sending the Chaos warrior straight through the chamber wall. From toe to temple, the impact was a sickening agony. There was the rumble of collapsing architecture, the pitter-patter of falling grit and the hiss of masonry dust on the air. Archaon found himself in another chamber, buried in a small mound of shattered rock. It took a moment to get back to his senses. The Chaos warrior coughed up blood, spitting it at the inside of his helm. Morkar's

armour had saved him from the worst the wall had to offer but still, several things felt broken. Something deep inside his chest scraped at his every twist and turn. His left arm also throbbed with a dull ache that would not be ignored. At least his back had not been broken. Then, like a spooked raven flying away, Archaon felt a flutter of panic pass through him. Scanning the darkness he found his shattered shield nearby, but the Sigmarite sword *Terminus* was half buried in debris some distance away. Archaon felt the thunder of the daemon prince's steps approach.

Hooking his thumbs beneath a section of demolished wall, Archaon heaved the shattered section off him and scrambled through the grit to his feet. He was an equal distance from both his sword and the new entrance he had made in the chamber wall. He saw the shape of the approaching Be'lakor framed in the ragged opening. Archaon surged for the creature. As the monstrosity put his grotesque, horned head through the hole, Archaon grabbed a large piece of shattered masonry from the floor and heaved it up towards his chest. As Be'lakor turned his head, Archaon smashed the thing across the jaw with the stone. Not having expected such an attack, the beast retracted his horns from the ragged hole, spitting dust and ichor. Just as Archaon ran for his weaponry, the wall exploded. Be'lakor's mighty blade had demolished it in a single swing. With broken ribs shearing the flesh inside him, Archaon rolled, picking up his shield as he did so. Be'lakor stood there in the swirling dust and raining stone.

The Chaos warrior ran at Be'lakor. Archaon was without sword but the daemon was not. Lifting the shadow blade high above his head, Be'lakor brought the Ruinous weapon down on his son-in-shadow. Although it was agony to do so, Archaon leapt at the beast, meeting the cleaving action before it had time to reach its full speed and fury. Still, the strike pounded Archon and his shield straight back at the ground. As Archaon had planned. As the savage force of the blow took him back towards the floor, Archaon angled the edge of the shield. It smashed into the daemon prince's foot, shattering the bones of his taloned toes and shearing away a single, bloody claw. The creature wailed; not expecting such a swift reply to the attack it had not reached its shadow form in time. Rearing from the floor, Archaon back-slashed the ruined shield across the daemon's wailing maw. Burning with the agony of a fracture, Archaon took the daemon with a left hook, his shield smashing the monstrosity's face back the other way.

Having unbalanced the beast, Archaon ran back towards his Sigmarite blade. He skidded down through the grit and fragments of stone, his gauntlet reaching

the hilt of the buried blade. Tearing it from its scabbard of stone, Archaon pushed himself up and flew back at the injured Be'lakor. The Chaos warrior was bursting with hope against dark hope; a need for the daemon prince's pain and fury to anchor him in reality. For the monster's appetite for revenge to keep him where Archaon could kill him. Perhaps, the Chaos warrior hoped, some choice words would keep the fires of Be'lakor's fury burning bright.

'You will not destroy me!' Archaon roared at his father-in-shadow. 'You need me...' He spat as his rabid steps took him surging through the demolished architecture of the chamber – on towards the twisted creature that was the bane of his molested existence. 'I, however, have no need for you!'

Indeed, the Chaos warrior had stoked the fires of his father's daemonic fury. More than he could know – for seconds later the colossal shadow sword passed straight through him in a murderous arc of darkness and gore. The armour of the Everchosen remained untouched by the blade that had simply solidified as it had cut Archaon in two within his plate. The Chaos warrior's legs took two more stumbling steps before collapsing beneath him. In a cacophonous clatter, Archaon reached the floor, coming to a stop on his side. With his final, dust-choked breaths he watched the hulking abomination that was Be'lakor tower over him, the muscular black flesh of his chest rising and falling with effort and a father's regret.

*You think you are the first?*

*Blood of my infernal blood? Flesh of my damned flesh? You think you are the first fool to challenge me? I was slaughtering turncoats and traitors at the dawn of time, you miserable cur.*

*I am Be'lakor. First of the daemon princes. A monster given form before histories were written and the degenerate races of this world came to know their capabilities. I was a warlord like no other. Primitive. Powerful. Pure of dark purpose. Before your rat-warren cities and delusions of civilisation. Before your mongrel God-King and the fall of his hammer, the tribes of men looked to the greatest of their mortal kind to lead them. To unite the barbarian and the savage. To conquer. To kill. To create.*

*The degenerate legions of man were spoiling fruit in my claw. They erected great monuments to my majesty – primitive stone structures of insanity and slavish ambition. With numbers beyond counting, the base and bloodthirsty rallied to my banners of flayed skin. They butchered their own in my honour – the weak of mind, of faith and flesh – and brought death and destruction to the lesser races.*

*Those that hid in the great forests of the world, those that took to the depths and those who thought themselves safe in far lands beyond broad oceans. The world was mine – as it will be again. Under my leadership – nay, my sponsorship – champions rose from the raging deluge of barbaric butchery that was my horde. Swine like you, Archaon of the North. Living weapons I honed to a razor's edge. Minds to which I had introduced pride, belief and ambition. Men of traitorous heart, in whose veins treachery ran free.*

*Some say this was my own doing. My mistake alone. That I had underestimated how deep the rot ran in men's souls. That with my dark example, I had inspired a generation of chieftains and champions. Dread warriors of*

*growing skill, supremacy and influence, who came to be known to the gods.*

*Those that know better lay blame at the feet of the Changer of Ways. The foetid god, Tzeentch, all supreme in his understanding of the world, its people and princes. Patron of the ascended. Plague of the prideful.*

*The horror of mortal hope and fear. It was from him that such aspirant warlords and warriors learned of their power. From him they learned the arts of conspiracy and how to catch the eye of a god. Tzeentch, the betrayer. Tzeentch, the great wheel of the world that turns. Tzeentch, the bane of all existence – but one of many. Tzeentch, the doom of Be'lakor.*

*He saw the Dark Pantheon's faith diluted. Their trust spread between my dark champions and chieftains of their individual choosing. Soon I was a prince among many. The first among equals. I hunted down and slaughtered those that had betrayed me or intended to do so. Their appetite for power rivalled my own. So many hungered for a dominion of their own. So many followed such fools into oblivion. I was abandoned by my hordes. Robbed of my gifts. Drained of the power fed by our dread faith.*

*I see the same in you, Archaon of the North, as I see the Great Changer's hand in this. His poison drips from your ear. His lies guide your hand and the blade within it. Archaon – blood of my infernal blood, flesh of my damned flesh, living legend of my dark craft – you will not be the Great Changer's puppet. You will not be the double edged sword that wounds he who wields it. You will be Archaon, Everchosen of Chaos – blood of Be'lakor's blood and flesh of Be'lakor's flesh – or you will be destroyed. Destroyed. A thousand times, destroyed.*





## CHAPTER V

*'To swords, shields and armour blind,  
Foes to forever darkness consigned.'*

– Inscription, *The Blade of Shadows*

*The Forsaken Fortress  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

The daemon prince hobbled back through the demolished wall, snorting its otherworldly agony from the flaring slits of its nostrils. Archaon got up from the ground. Slow. Confident. He had wounded the monstrous beast. His father-in-shadow, who had come to know pain at his hand. Archaon scooped up the wretched, black claw from the marble floor. Ichor dribbled from its cleaved root. It was a foul thing to hold. A razor-sharp thing of daemoniac dread, sharpened on the souls of the faithless to a searing point. It drizzled darkness into the air. Archaon slipped it into his belt like a prize.

‘They say daemons are more than the sum of their parts,’ Archaon scorned. ‘We shall see. I’ll take you piece by piece if necessary.’

*You will know no peace, shadow-son of mine. Not so long as I live,* Be'lakor told him.

Archaon pulled *Terminus* from a mound of rubble and blew dust from its blessed blade.

'Let's see if we can do something about that,' the Chaos warrior told him.

Archaon advanced. Daemon and warrior circled one another. Be'lakor hobbled. The Dark Master worked his bruised jaw and gashed lip. Ichor dribbled down the eight-pointed star carved into the flesh of his chest. Archaon watched for a weakness. An opportunity. The daemon did the same. The shattered shield rattled ever so slightly in the warrior's grasp, as though it were an effort to hold up. He bent slightly over to one side, protecting an internal affliction.

Then it happened. Like a crack of lightning or a peel of thunder, father and son were locked in savage combat of the most desperate and merciless kind. Blades clashed in the darkness of the palace. Archaon and the daemon prince moved back and forth through the flowing chambers, sable sparks showered about them as the Sigmarite sword and shadow blade sang horribly off one another.

*Terminus* was a thing of hallowed beauty. Anathema to the foetid things of the Wastes. Its steel was cold certainty whose weight could be felt in the hand and whose keen edge could be felt passing through the flesh. Be'lakor's sword of shadow was an unearthly weapon of notched darkness that raged in and out of reality at its wielder's whim. It smashed the blessed burn of the Sigmarite sword aside and blazed shadow through the air, threatening to cleave the Chaos warrior in half. It mauled Archaon's shield and knocked the warrior skidding across chambers. In the daemon prince's grip its colossal length was a swirling and black storm of impending doom, the shadow of death mere seconds away.

Gritting his teeth and with rivulets of effort working their way down his face within the mugginess of his helm, Archaon began to feel the rhythm of his opponent's manoeuvres. He got a sense for the daemon's movements. The predictability even of its unpredictability. The tireless sweeps of the massive sword that carved up stone and demolished architecture, searing back at the Chaos warrior just that little bit faster before some feigning strike or new movement. The twitch of its wings before it lunged the great blade at him. Even the horrific blade seemed to have a pattern. A time to cut down through reality with all the weight and sundering inevitability Be'lakor could bring to bear. A time to bleed away to nothing like oil on water, allowing *Terminus* to pass straight through. Clash by titanic clash, Archaon tried to learn his father-in-shadow's preferences, the diabolical tells that gave away his intentions and the

style of the daemon's death-dealing bladework, all the while, moments from the shadow blade's decapitating path. Be'lakor clearly knew a thousand ways to kill a man but, like all warriors, favoured a certain approach. For the daemon, the length of his cursed blade was the fury of a black tempest to be visited upon its opponent. A savage style learned at the beginning of time that had remained with the daemon prince from the murderous dawn of the world. The massive blade was something to be swung with force and unrelenting devastation at a foe until the daemon's opponent lay in bludgeoned pieces scattered about the monster.

Archaon pressed the creature. Chopping. Stabbing. Countering with savagery and brute bladework. Hair's breadth evasions snapped back into furious lunges. Sparking deflections with the mauled shield rolled into pivoting slashes, the desperation of parries carried through into bellowing ripostes. Archaon drew on every murderous instinct: the technical excellence of his templar training, the exotic elegance of Hung swordsmanship and the barbarian bludgeonry of bestial slaughter. He threw all at the daemon prince, exploiting every weakness and forcing the monster into the unfamiliarity of defensive manoeuvres. Archaon's muscles ached with the relentless speed and power of his attacks while his mind seared with the split-second strategies of the choreographed assault. About the pair, the flowing chambers of the Forsaken Fortress lay in blade smashed ruin. The daemon prince's infernal weapon had carved a path of destruction through the midnight stone of the palace, leaving rubble, smashed balustrades and derelict stairwells in his ferocious wake. All the while, Archaon was pushed back through the chambers by the blade's black fury and the storm of shattered stone unfolding before him.

An inventive combination of hacks, slashes and shield-battering took the Chaos warrior within the shadow blade's arc of streaming darkness. Archaon felt his father-in-shadow's sudden caution. The conservative urgency of his movements. The great black blade was a poor weapon for close work and while *Terminus* was by no means a small sword, it gave Archaon the advantage in tight quarters. The shadow sword worked back and forth to turn aside the templar blade's onslaught. Several times in the manic blur of the battle, the sacred steel of the Sigmarite blade almost grazed the daemon prince's royal flesh. Be'lakor roared at even the suggestion of such success, and within moments Archaon and the monster were locked crossguard to crossguard. Between the thwarted blades father and son leaned in. The daemon prince roared the gargoylesque horror of his face while the muffled thunder of Archaon's bellowing rage came back through the leering skull of his faceplate.

‘No...’ Be’lakor hissed and heaved the Chaos warrior back. The blades parted and Archaon skidded back through the grit on the marble floor. As he did so, his arms came out with sword and shield to retain his balance. Be’lakor was suddenly in the air, the prince’s wings outstretched and his colossal blade bleeding darkness down towards Archaon. The Chaos warrior felt the blade’s terrible presence rip down through flesh, muscle and bone. Solidifying to a cleaving edge, the weapon had cut down through Archaon’s sword arm and passed with ghostly insistence back out through the unhallowed armour of the Everchosen. The shadow blade was real once more as it hacked straight down into the marble to the side of Archaon’s boot. *Terminus* fell from his non-existent grip and rang mournfully as it hit the marble. Heaving the shadow sword free of the cleft it had created in the stone, Be’lakor backed away, scraping the black tip of the sword along the floor with him.

Archaon stumbled back. He could taste blood and bile in the back of his throat. Time seemed to slow as shock wrestled for control of his senses. His arm had been sheared from his body at the shoulder. The dead weight of a limb hung uselessly in the plate, the armour down one side of his body dribbling with the blood gushing within. Archaon could imagine the stricken horror of his face and for a moment that became all he could think about. As his ruined shield dropped from his other arm and clattered noisily to the floor, the Chaos warrior shuffled around. He bent down with horrible difficulty, scraping at the floor with the armoured digits of his gauntlet as he tried to pick up the sword in the other hand. Turning, Archaon presented himself. He would fight on for as long as he could.

Through the eye slits of his helm he found only Be’lakor’s back. The daemon prince was leaving the destruction of his ruined palace. His thunderous steps took him through the mounds of rubble, the collapsed walls and past the demolished pillars. Archaon tried to get his taut lips around a challenge. He shook the templar blade and stood in a growing pool of his own blood. Be’lakor did not turn, however. He merely brought the bleak darkness of his massive blade up and chopped through the last of the thick marble pillars holding up the ceiling and the palace floor above. Archaon watched his father-in-shadow disappear as the creaking stonework gave and thousands of tonnes of crafted stone descended. Crushed. Pulverised. Broken like a child’s doll. Archaon waited for death. With the harsh rumble of collapsing architecture all around, the Chaos warrior did not have to wait lo—

*There is no life for you, my son-in-shadow. No existence to call your own. No flicker of hope, like the flame of a guttering candle before a storm. I brought you into wretched existence. Your flesh is mine to do with as I will. To desecrate with claw, steel or flame, if I choose. To extinguish or exalt. You can be Archaon of the North. A doom of my creation. Kill. Raze. Destroy. All in the name of shadow. Enjoy the power I have given you. Relish the corporal delights of the flesh while it is still yours. Blood. Greed. Lust. Women to carry new life. Men to suffer at your command. Men to die at your hand. Collect the dark treasures of our calling. Inspire the strong to fight at our side – for only they are worthy of the End Times to come. Thin our ranks of the weak and undeserving – let your wrath be their judge. Swell the horde and the bellies of harlots with our future. Sons on a dark path, champions in the making, loyal lieutenants to fight at my side.*

*There are others. There will always be others. Sons whose hearts beat beneath my rising star. Ruinous champions of our purpose if not our blood. They will see this done if you will not, shadow-son of mine. On with your dark quest. North, Archaon. North. The Southern Wastes have given up their treasures. For the last two – the two that will mark you as the Everchosen of the Chaos gods and Lord of the End Times to come – you must return to the top of the world. Hear me, son of shadow. Let my words be remembered. Let them guide your black heart. Let them stay with your sorry soul. To return to the top of the world you must walk in the shadow of the gods themselves, along a path with no bearing that winds through a world beyond your own. It is a mad man's path and you would have to be insane to take it – but take it you must.*

*The End Times are coming and we are their Harbinger. Go up by going down... out by going in... north by going south. As far south as south will go. There you will find the gateway to our darkest dreams. Whatever is left of you, Archaon, shall pass through a north no mortal man has known. Beyond that is*

*the north that tempered your Ruinous flesh and beyond that the north that will be no more. There you will find what you seek and in doing so you will realise both our destinies. You shall wear the Crown of Domination as I shall wear you. Your form shall become mine. Your soul will be but a dimming bauble in the howling darkness of your being. A memory of our time together. No man nor god shall stop me. The legions of hell shall answer to my call and the world will be mine to destroy once again. This you will do for me, Archaon of the North, for you have... no... choice.*



## CHAPTER V

*‘A wise man knows that he cannot escape his shadow. It is the stain he leaves on the world and it follows him everywhere. It was there at his birth and will be with him until his last breath. When a man changes, so does his shadow. It grows with him and expands to reflect the darkness of his presence. A shadow knows no fear. It cannot be reasoned with. It simply is. A wise man also knows that the only way to escape his shadow is to cast none in the first place – but to do that, a man must truly fall from the light.’*

– Al-Malik Abyssyn, *The Book of Shadows*

*The Forsaken Fortress  
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...choice.

Choice?

‘There is always a choice,’ Archaon told the daemon prince before leaping at

him. *Terminus* came down with righteous force, its sacred steel sizzling in the doomed darkness of the palace. Be'lakor turned the attack aside with an arc of raging shadow. Archaon hit the marble and rolled the rest of his momentum away, the soles of his boots the beat of a gnat's wings beneath a furious backslash of the shadow sword. Up right away, Archaon feinted and then feinted again, forcing the daemon to place the colossal length of the sword where he needed it. The creature was supernaturally swift for a monstrosity of his size, and brought the heavy blade back with the whipping insistence of a rapier. Archaon skewered, slashed and batted his way through Be'lakor's defences, forcing the beast back through an archway not quite tall enough to admit the monster's dimensions. As marble and rock dust rained down between them, Archaon dashed for an adjacent arch, skidding his way through before resuming the relentless clash of blades that filled the halls of the Forsaken Fortress.

Archaon's body burned with a desire to stop, for an end to the mind-numbing combinations and the muscle-tearing efforts to strike the monstrous daemon. As the pair moved through the collapsing stairwells, sword-smashed balconies and toppling walls, the hatred between them crackled. Their moves became bolder, the arcs grew wider and the force with which cleaving blows landed, ever more devastating. The chambers of the palace were benighted no more. The darklight of black sparks rained from the ringing blades. Father-in-shadow. Son, the doom of all. Archaon roared his need to end this abomination. Be'lakor roared the frustration of a daemon will thwarted.

Archaon swung for all he was worth, pledging with taut lips before gritted teeth everything he was to whatever foetid god or power would grant him the daemon's death. As the tip of *Terminus* grazed Be'lakor's star-scarred chest and nicked the black flesh of an arm, the Chaos warrior thought that his dark prayers had been answered. The blessed blade came into contact with Be'lakor's form; the wretched skin steamed away to shadow, drawing a stifled cry from the beast. Instead of withdrawing, the monster came back at Archaon with the full fury of his diabolical will. He, Be'lakor – first of the daemon princes – would not be bested by a mortal, a thing of mere flesh and blood, even if that blood was his own.

Be'lakor brought his huge, leathery wings in tight and spun around with all the devastating grace his dread form would allow. As the monster's blade seared around with him, it solidified to a great cleaving edge of streaming shadow. Archaon saw the manoeuvre but could do little to counter its devastating progress. Be'lakor was not of the world. He was a creature of the beyond and as



such he moved. Archaon just got his shield up in time. He felt the blade cleave across the mauled shield's breadth and the force of the blow through his whole body. With the tips of his boots scraping the marble floor, Archaon felt himself smashed into a nearby wall. He hit it, shattering the stone about his cursed plate, before dropping into a clattering pile.

Coughing up blood, Archaon smacked the cross guard of *Terminus* against his helm to bring him back to his senses. He felt the quake of the daemon's furious approach and got shakily to his feet. He held the mangled shield out before him. The metal was offering next to no protection now. Archaon could only hope the eight-pointed star that adorned it and the diabolical sponsors it represented still offered some protection. The monstrous blow came. Archaon went through the weakened wall this time, sliding across the marble floor of the adjacent chamber with chunks of stone debris. Be'lakor stepped through the opening he had made, his broad shoulders and wings tearing further stone down about them. He was the fury and fear of a midnight storm. The dazed Archaon scrabbled mindlessly to his feet. Vanquished from his thoughts were the impulses and justifications for seeking out his father-in-shadow. There was only room in the stone- and sword-smacked skull for ghostly notions of survival.

Archaon was up but Be'lakor was before him. Once again he was in the terrible path of Be'lakor's blade. The tip of the sword trailed a smear of shadow like a black comet. A bad omen for Archaon. The Chaos warrior got his weapon between him and the blur of the daemon's blade. The impact smashed *Terminus* from Archaon's gauntleted grip, sending the greatsword clanging off into the darkness. Instinctively Archaon brought up his shield but it was smacked aside by a backslash full of infernal spite. The daemon followed through on his turn, bringing the muscular weight of his tail around. The force of the blow sent Archaon straight through the body of a marble pillar, sending the Chaos warrior to the ground once more in a cloud of dust and pulverised stone.

Something had broken. Even the armour of Morkar had failed to protect him from the brute force of his father's fury. The bones of his right arm were shattered. He could feel the sharp ache grow to a burning uselessness. He groaned. He crawled. He got to his feet and put his armoured back to another thick pillar. The column exploded above him, showering the Chaos warrior with rock and grit. Be'lakor was there. Tearing the Forsaken Fortress apart. Smashing through every balcony, stairwell and pillar with his sword of shadow. The daemon's bellow shook the vaulted chamber, drawing further falling stone from the ceiling. Archaon moved from pillar to fat pillar. His arm raged. His stomach

felt sick with the cowardly necessities of survival and empty with the realities of reason: he could not realise his true destiny if he were dead. Archaon suspected that few, if any, could have lasted as long against the First Daemon Prince of Chaos. It gave him the coldest of comforts for, as the Chaos warrior worked his way through the chamber, weaving between pillars and negotiating spaces, he came to understand that he had failed. He would not learn the secrets of his father-in-shadow's black heart. He could not compel the creature to act against his own interests by leaving him alone, and he had failed in destroying the abomination.

His hand ached – not only from the torments of shattered bones – but also for his sword. It felt something less than a limb without it. As the shadow storm of his father's rage swept through the chamber, Archaon tried to concentrate. His sight was useless in the inky twilight of the palace. The darksight of his ruined eye gave him an impression of his surroundings. All about him was stone saturated with evil and, in the presence of such material, Archaon's own darkness cast less of a shadow. This made making out anything beyond his immediate surroundings all but impossible. Unencumbered by such concerns, the Eye of Sheerian – set in the faceplate of his helm – found *Terminus* for him. Like an image surfacing slowly from the dark depths, Archaon could make out the shape of the blade at the foot of a flight of black steps. With nothing to reflect in the lightless environs of the palace, all Archaon could make out was the spiritual torment of the blade, bleeding from the steel, as it lay on the cursed stone of the floor. Then he noticed it. The silence. The absence of fury and thunder.

*You cannot hide from me, shadow-son of mine, Be'lakor's voice rumbled through the darkness. Not here in my palace. The voice was everywhere, bouncing about the perverse, flowing architecture of the Forsaken Fortress. Not anywhere. There is not a place on this mortal-infested ball of rock that I will not find you, Archaon. I am Be'lakor. First prince of the...*

A shiver snaked its way down Archaon's spine. The voice was everywhere but Be'lakor was towering right behind him. Wings outstretched. Arms up. Sword of shadow ready to come down.

Archaon grunted before accelerating away. Step by step, the Chaos warrior urged himself on across the chamber, towards the steps and his sword before them. He felt the marble give way behind him as Be'lakor's downward strike stove in the floor. Leaping the hole, the daemon snarled. A beat of its colossal wings took it surging on after the Chaos warrior, each of its massive strides

effortlessly outpacing Archaon's own. Archaon jumped – a decapitating swipe of the shadow blade streaming just above his head. Hitting the floor was painful – shockwaves of agony pulsing through his broken arm. Skidding through the grit on his breastplate, Archaon slid across the marble floor, left arm outstretched for the hilt of *Terminus*. Crunching to a stop a grasping finger's length from the blade, Archaon reached out. The shattered shield was heavy on his arm and the fingertips of his gauntlet clawed desperately at the floor. Dust and grit swirled about him as he felt the daemon's wings beat above. Be'lakor had leapt also, his wings slowing his descent and the great claws of his feet anchoring into the stone floor either side of Archaon's prone form. Again the sword of shadow reared.

Rolling round to see the daemon prince, Archaon flung around his arm and sent the shattered shield spinning up at the monster's groin. Archaon had no idea what the creature kept under the loincloth of black mail and had no desire to know. The daemon grunted as the shield hit him and doubled, abandoning the swing. Archaon rolled back the other way, bringing the flat of his boot around to catch the daemon in the jaw. It was satisfying but did little to stop the furious Be'lakor who reared once more, hatred churning furiously in his eyes. Archaon rolled. There was little else he could do. The colossal length of the sword smashed down through the marble creating a crater. As the weapon descended – like a black thunderbolt tossed down from the heavens – Archaon reached desperately once more for *Terminus*. But the templar sword was gone. Rolling out of the devastating path of Be'lakor's blade, Archaon followed his sword down into the crater, only to find that the sword had smashed straight through both the floor and the ceiling of the chamber below.

It was a long drop. It seemed longer still in the tumbling darkness. With a sickening thud the Chaos warrior hit stone. He was getting used to the skull-cracking sensation. With an involuntary moan, he brought up his head and began clawing for *Terminus* in the descending debris. Stamping down through the weakened stone, Be'lakor had dropped down on outstretched wings. The floor shook as he hit it, producing a bounce and a jangle from *Terminus* that brought the metal digits of Archaon's left hand to it. Getting shakily to his feet, Archaon slouched around, holding his broken sword arm in close and offering the trembling blade of *Terminus* in the other.

*Why do you bring such torment to both of us?* Be'lakor asked, striding across the chamber and readying his huge, black blade for the killing blow. *Why not just simply stay down and end this suffering? Why not simply die?*

‘Never...’ Archaon told the daemon prince. He gestured with the Sigmarite blade in his left hand. It felt awkward and unnatural.

‘...and never.’

*Then you give me no choice,* Be’lakor thundered, his dread voice a darkness all of its own. Be’lakor brought up his blade. Archaon brought up his own, prepared to receive the full force of the strike on *Terminus* and his left arm. Suddenly Archaon was flying back through the air. The sword strike never came. Instead, the daemon’s great clawed foot kicked him in his armoured stomach. Again the sickening slam of stone passed through his body. It was uncompromising. It was agony. It was over. Archaon fell. A great deal further than a floor of the palace or a stairwell. Archaon suddenly realised that he was outside again. That Be’lakor had kicked him straight through the palace wall and back out into the chill mire of the Pustular Plain. When he hit the ground it was mercifully soft. He felt the cold, dank waters of the slush-logged tundra explore his plate for a point of entry. The stinking waters spilled in through the eyeslits of his helm as he struggled to keep his head above the rank surface. He fought to stabilise himself in the mire. As he did so, Archaon found the light from the surrounding rash of volcanic peaks almost blinding after the absolute darkness of the Forsaken Fortress. With his helm just above the surface of the ice-threaded bog, Archaon slowed his movements. He knew that thrashing about in the primordial mulch would only drag him deeper. The Chaos warrior grunted. He was in deep enough already.

Above him the towering dread of the Forsaken Fortress loomed higher than ever. The nightmare lines of its design and construction cut a diabolical shape from the volcanic haze beyond. Archaon could see the ragged hole his exit had made in the smooth black marble of the palace. From the darkness within the darkness, Archaon saw a pair of daemon eyes fixed on him. Be’lakor. His tormentor. His soul-sworn foe. His father-in-shadow.

*Archaon...*

‘Dark Master...’

*Archaon of the North...* Be’lakor’s dread words burned like a numbing cold through his mind. *It is time to return home, my son. Three Ruinous treasures, the Southern Wastes had to offer the Everchosen of Chaos. Three treasures you have claimed. You already bear the eternally burning Mark of Chaos – but now you must prove yourself worthy of it.*

‘Do not lecture me on worthiness, monster,’ Archaon snarled. ‘I will achieve what has been *eternally* denied to you – the favour of the Dark Gods.’

*The final two treasures will test you as none before have.*

‘As I will be your test, creature of darkness,’ Archaon told his father-in-shadow, ‘if you attempt to take from me what is mine by Ruinous right. A test you will lose, Be’lakor.’

The wind picked up. Sheltered within the marble confines of the infernal palace, Archaon had all but forgotten the glacial bite of the Wasteland wind. Even here it frosted the volcano sides and scorched the percolating tundra of any reed or shrub foolish enough to reach up out of the mire. Archaon sensed something strange about the building gale. It seemed heavy with the cursed power that leaked perpetually from the pole – as though it were burdened with some fell purpose. As it moaned about the contours of the Forsaken Fortress, Archaon noticed that the palace was bleeding away on the breeze. Speck by black speck of dust and darkness, the monstrous building was being carried away. Fading to nothing, Be’lakor and his palace would ride the perverse winds of the dark continent, to accrete elsewhere – appearing at random from the frozen maelstrom.

Up to his neck in the mire, with his cursed plate dragging him down, Archaon knew there was nothing he could do. Even if he could crawl his way back to the palace and begin again his doomed ascent, the Chaos warrior feared that there was little left to lay his hands on. The Forsaken Fortress and its Dark Master were now but a fading, phantasmic vision in this haunted realm. The swiftest of steeds and cold steel alone had failed to bring his father-in-shadow to account. The daemon Be’lakor would not relinquish his puppet strings. Archaon would have to find some other way of cutting himself free of destiny’s tangled web.

*The north, Archaon...*

Be’lakor’s words trailed away with the streaming shadow of his palace. The Forsaken Fortress was gone.

‘Aye, the north, you ruthless thing,’ Archaon rumbled, ‘but sooner than you think.’

As the wind died down, Archaon saw the monstrous form of Dorghar approach. The Steed of the Apocalypse trudged warily through the mire towards him, its hooves splayed like webbed feet to spread the stallion’s weight on the sinking surface of the frozen bog. The reins that Archaon had hooked over the dread architecture of the palace now hung loose from the steed’s steaming snout. Venturing as far as it dared, Dorghar whipped its head back and forth, casting the reins out across the stinking space between it and the sinking Chaos warrior. Resting *Terminus* on the bubbling surface, Archaon reached out with his

gauntlet, snatching at the rotting mulch of the marshy tundra. When he finally had the reins in his grasp, Archaon held on as the daemoniac mount stamped back through the mire, hauling him from the vice-like embrace of the bog. Dragging him to solid ground, Dorghar snorted its infernal derision as the Chaos warrior got back his breath – not only from his efforts in the swamp but also the titanic battle that had preceded it.

Tearing *Terminus* from the mire, Archaon sat up and regarded the blade. It reeked like he did and was filth-splattered like his armour. The Chaos warrior sat quietly with the dull ache of his arm and his dark thoughts for a moment. He finally turned to Dorghar, who was snorting beside him. The glassy inferno of the steed's daemon eyes fixed on the Chaos warrior. Archaon gave it back a baleful glare of his own.

‘What the hell... are you looking at?’ Archaon put to the creature, but steam simply streamed from the steed's snout. Getting up and sliding the filthy blade into its fur scabbard, Archaon mounted the steed, clutching his broken arm to his side. The monstrous mount seemed to wait for instructions. Archaon grunted. It would be a long way back.

‘On, you darknid thing,’ Archaon told it, digging gently at its flanks with the heels of his boots. ‘Back to the Gatelands. To the pole, where – darkness willing – we shall re-join the horde. Then north... as my father says, to march on fresh insanities at the top of the world.’



## CHAPTER VI

*'Agrammon – Slave-Lord and Daemon Lord of Slaanesh.  
Caged within his own menagerie – the captive of greed. One of  
the many horrors on show.'*

*– Ledger Bestiarie*

*The Gatelands  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of the Ravening*

It took Dorghar longer to reach the polar Gatelands than it had to reach the Pustular Plains. In part the daemonic creature had all but spent itself – first in its efforts to rid itself of its unwelcome rider and secondly under Archaon's insistence that they reach the Forsaken Fortress before it moved on. Broken by the Chaos warrior, the daemon steed would not subject its master to the dangers of its swiftest forms. While the agonies of bolt and flame had taken Archaon from the continental interior, it was a relatively tranquil journey back. Sitting astride the back of a huge bat-like monstrosity with a colossal wing-span, effortless beats of Dorghar's wings took Archaon for leagues across the thermals

of volcanic ranges and above the ice storms below. Using the sorcerous power of the Eye of Sheerian, Archaon guided Dorghar towards the howling vortex at the pole.

Coming in low across bleeding glaciers, horrific frost-shattered landscapes and rolling oceans of black snow, Dorghar descended. The crooked spires and fortified ruins of infernal palaces and daemonic redoubts crowded the lands about the shattered gate. Their tower tops and dereliction created a serrated horizon, beyond which the horrific radiance spewed into the world. Between the rancid structures – forming as they did skyward sigils in their layout and decorated with bones, flayed skin and rotting bodies – were battlefields both old and new. Armies of household beastfiends clashed with infernal royalty in the mulch of past massacres. Daemon princes fought flocks of furies, while spawn-warriors – blessed in their monstrosity – savaged hordes of infernal horrors. Archaon felt the gaze of gods on such conflicts, as creatures slaughtered their foes with dark oaths and the death spray of ichor.

Then Archaon saw it. His own horde of bestial savages. The army had taken to the field both in the spiked shadow of Lord Agrammon's tower palace and in advance of the orders Archaon had left with them. They were hacking their way through Slaaneshi fiends, daemonettes and all manner of liberated monstrosity – creatures of Chaos who, upon achieving their freedom, had set upon the first prey they had found outside the metal walls of the menagerie.

Beating its leathery wings as it came in to land, Dorghar cleared an area of Lord Agrammon's palace guard. Sliding down off the flea-eaten back of the monstrous bat, Archaon drew *Terminus* with his left hand. His right hung numb, shattered and painful at his side. As taper-snouted beastfiends dragged themselves back to their hooves – the low creatures having been knocked down by Dorghar's flapping descent – they experienced the dubious welcome of the Sigmarite sword's filth-encrusted steel. Like many knights, Archaon favoured his right hand for such a heavy blade. His movements betrayed a subtle awkwardness – a sluggish jarring in the shoulder and wrist that many years of practice and the comfort of unthinking preference had fashioned into a deft, fluid set of movements that almost achieved the status of reflex. The great sword still sat in the grip of a seasoned warrior, however. It was wielded with discipline, skill and a savage strength born of a knight's righteous prosecution of his duties. Such duties may have changed for Archaon, but his templar training served him well. As Archaon strode through Slaaneshi deviants, he whipped the heavy blade from side to side, cleaving beastfiends back into earth baked with the unnatural



energies pouring from the shattered gate.

Beastfiends of his own horde came at him and the monstrous Dorghar with rough axes consisting of serrated shoulder blades and tusk-embedded femurs. As the daemon mount transformed and Archaon strode towards them they recognised their warlord. The shaggy monsters lowered both their rude, blood-stained weapons and their horned heads.

‘Ograx?’ Archaon called, cutting down a pair of Slaaneshi fiends as they attempted to rush the distracted half-breeds. The beasts began to gabble in their dark tongue and jab filthy claws ahead. Leading Dorghar on through the havoc of bestial battle – the creature having reassumed its form as a nightmarish stallion – Archaon slashed at fleeing fiends and finished foes that still clutched miserably to life in the blood-soaked earth. Walking up through the ruins of a small fortress constructed from tusks, fangs and the broken bones of a daemonic behemoth, Archaon slew with wanton abandon, his heavy blade batting aside spears and thudding down through enemy bodies. Lord Agrammon’s army of bestial slaves jangled with flesh-piercing rings and the hooked chains of their captivity. Armed with barbed spears and crescent shields, their shaven flesh was muscular and oiled, while all they wore were ragged loin cloths and obscene leather masks from which their long snouts protruded. Agrammon’s creatures trumpeted their fearful delight as the soul-scorching torment of Archaon’s blessed steel passed through their flesh.

When Archaon found Ograx, the beast-prince was atop a pile of butchered Slanneshi corpses, blood-drenched in his skins and shrunken skulls. Surrounded by a mob of his hulking southern beasts, the beastfiend champion wheeled about with his skull-head axe, chopping and pounding Lord Agrammon’s slave breeds into the ground. Bipedal nightmares with whipping tongues and hook-taloned claws came at them only for Ograx and his infernal herdkin to knock skulls from snaking heads and screeching predators back into one another. Sweeping this way and that with *Terminus*, Archaon took the legs out from under one, before lopping the slashing tail from another. Burying the blade in the side of another before Ograx’s axe could reach it, the bestial prince took a moment to shake the blood lust from his horned head and recognise his master. As one of the Slaaneshi seekers tried to raise its head from a butchered mess on the ground, Ograx stepped forward and kicked the skull clean off the daemon with his hooves.

‘Your orders were not to attack until the third day,’ Archaon bawled across the din of battle, turning away just long enough to casually slash a fleeing beastfiend

across its shaven back. It trumpeted a screech as its muscular flesh parted like butter. ‘Yet I find my horde fully engaged in an attack on the palace. Why, mongrel prince?’

The hulking half-breed proceeded to wrap his thick, bovine lips around what Archaon assumed to be an explanation, breaking off only to mercilessly butcher and smash the squealing slaves of Lord Agrammon’s palace guard. While Archaon could pick up a little of what Ograx the Great was saying, between the snorting, grunting, garbled words, dark tongue and wanton murder, it was almost impossible to make out what the creature was conveying. Archaon decided to use a language that they both understood well. Bringing *Terminus* between them, the Sigmarite blade bubbling and spitting with Slaneeshi gore, Archaon rested the blade tip on the slab of one of the prince’s pectoral muscles. ‘Why attack?’ the Chaos warrior put to the creature once more, as simply as he could.

Archaon now realised the danger of having left the horde in Prince Ograx’s clawed hands for as long as he had. One of the monstrous warrior’s bestial brothers stepped forward, rumbling some kind of bare-toothed threat as a bone ring bounced about in his wet snout. A snout that Archaon broke with the pommel of *Terminus*. As the beastfiend bent over double, clutching its smashed face, Archaon drifted the blade tip of *Terminus* back down onto the wall of muscle that was Ograx’s chest. The half-breed looked down at the filthy steel and then up at Archaon with the dead eyes of a beast of burden. While Archaon and Ograx stared at one another down the length of the Chaos warrior’s blade, the southern beast with the broken face was set upon by a fiend that dragged the half-breed off to cut up with its claws in another part of the derelict bone palace. More words dribbled from Prince Ograx’s lips. Slow. Thoughtful. Measured. No more comprehensible to the Chaos warrior than those that had proceeded them. Tiring of such activity, Archaon looked about. Hordes of his beastfiends were taking the fight to Agrammon’s slave soldiers and the daemoniac horrors that flanked them. Blood and infernal ichor flew. Heads rolled. Beasts were broken.

‘Where’s Sheerian?’ Archaon demanded, looking back at Ograx. ‘Where is that sorcerous wretch?’ Archaon would much rather have the Tzeentchian ancient translate his fury for him. This time the half-breed prince favoured a simple gesture. Bringing his meaty fist up slowly, he moved Archaon’s blade away and extended a single finger, pointing towards the urchin-like outline of Lord Agrammon’s tower palace. ‘In there?’ Archaon put to the creature. Ograx the Great nodded with a barely suppressed snarl. ‘Where are my Swords of Chaos? Where is Giselle?’ Archaon pushed. Ograx kept his finger directed at the

palace before moving it down to one of the butchered slaves at the Chaos warrior's feet. Archaon jabbed his sword at the slave and then offered up his wrists. 'Prisoner?' he asked the half-breed. Ograx the Great nodded.

Archaon swore under his breath. It became clear why his horde were fighting. They had not attacked the palace. They had been attacked. A retaliatory action for a perceived assault on the menagerie. Thinking that Archaon's camped host was responsible for the chaos Archaon alone had visited upon Agrammon's foetid collection, the daemon lord had despatched his own creatures to deal with the threat. With Sheerian, the Swords and Giselle taken, Ograx was only marching on the palace in order to get them back. Archaon nodded to himself. Unfortunately, Ograx had no idea what to expect upon reaching the inside of the palace's metal outer wall – how Agrammon's daemonettes would cut the horde to pieces in the spiralling gauntlet of the menagerie. This would require a different approach, Archaon decided. He would need access to the palace faster than the days and lives it would take for the horde to slaughter its way in. With the main body of Lord Agrammon's palace guard still within the walls, Ograx and the bestial horde had their part to play in strategically drawing them out.

As the glistening muscular form of a Slaaneshi slave soldier came at them, Archaon turned, cleaving the beastfiend's head and tapering snout from its shoulders in a left-handed back swing. Sheathing the bloody blade, Archaon picked up the creature's head, the shock of its sudden death still fixed on its face. Tossing it to Ograx, Archaon pointed to the palace as the great beast had.

'So many skulls, prince,' Archaon said, allowing the words to sink in. Even in Archaon's tongue the hulking half-breed knew the word 'Skull'. 'I want them. Take them for me.'

Something approaching a brute smile pulled at the monster's thick lips. It turned, holding the Slaaneshi beastfiend's head in one claw and its skull-axe in the other. It roared Archaon's orders in dark tongue to the high heavens, the horde and the Blood God itself. Archaon felt the effect of such a rallying call. Agrammon's slave soldiers died faster, heads flew further and gore fountained higher about them.

Leading Dorghar away, Archaon heard the mount snort its derision. The entity was clearly unimpressed. The Chaos warrior patted the steed on the spiked ridge of its snout, knowing the daemon would hate such treatment.

'We are going in there,' Archaon told it, indicating the spiky outline of the palace.

The daemon mount snorted its refusal. The Steed of the Apocalypse had been

liberated from Lord Agrammon's horrific menagerie. It had no intention of returning to captivity. Archaon stroked his gauntlet down the creature's sable back. 'Show a little backbone, beast. My intention is to free captives, not become one. I have no more appetite for that than you.'

Hauling himself up into the saddle, Archaon dug his heels into the creature's flanks. Standing still, the steed would not move. 'Move, damn you,' the Chaos warrior ordered. Still the daemon remained still. Archaon felt the beast transform beneath him. Its skin hardened and creaked. Sliding off, Archaon found himself standing before a gargoylesque statue of the mount. Tall. Proud. Terrifying. Made of stone. For the first time, Archaon considered how this might look to both friend and foe. 'You are embarrassing yourself and what's more, creature, you are embarrassing me.' The statue of the steed seemed unmoved by Archaon's entreaties. 'We don't have time for this,' Archaon told the monster finally, before looking down at the bodies carpeting the crooked courtyard of the bone palace.

Spotting a stone hammer in the clutches of one of his dead beastfiends, Archaon casually knelt down and slipped the rough weapon from its owner's death grip. Archaon stood up. Still the daemon steed remained resolute, the dark stone of its construction soaking up the balelight of the demolished gate beyond. 'Last chance,' Archaon told the mount, his back to it. As a statue, Dorghar offered no kind of response. Not a snort. Not one of its furnace-like hisses. Suddenly swinging the rude hammer around with his left hand, Archaon smashed through the statue's stony teeth. Before the Chaos warrior's punishment, the mount's mouth had been a small cave of sharp stalactites and stalagmites – a daemonic maw crowded with stabbing fangs. As rock sprayed from the steed's mouth, the stone hide of the creature creaked back to daemonflesh. There was hissing and snorting now. The steed bucked and kicked, its empty mouth chomping feverishly at the air.

Archaon threw the hammer to one side but as he did, the daemon Dorghar stomped through the bodies and bloody earth at him. Stopping just before its master, it leaned in, touching the bone barbs that formed the ridge of its muzzle against Archaon's helm. Dorghar's eyes raged like a pair of hellish suns while the infernal fires within the beast hissed, spat and roared from the creature's mouth. As they did, the light of such fires glowed from the depths of both mouth and nostrils. Silhouetted against such brilliance were new fangs, growing into place and turning the monster's mouth into a nest of dagger-like teeth. Longer. Sharper. More lethal than before. With the steed's head against his own, Archaon

watched the features of the stallion grow in horror. Skin ruptured to admit bone spikes, the hairs of its mane snaked with a serpent-like ripple while the monster's brawn bulged, tearing its own black flesh with ugly scars and raw splits. Archaon's gauntlet was already clasped around *Terminus*. It would be an awkward draw but the Chaos warrior was confident that he could have the daemon's stallion-head from its thick neck. 'Just get me in,' Archaon offered. 'Me alone.'

Dorghar seemed to consider. The roar of its furnace-like fires died a little and finally the bone spikes on its head came away from the Chaos warrior's helm. Releasing his Sigmarite sword, Archaon once more mounted the Steed of the Apocalypse and once more the monster seemed to stall.

'Don't,' Archaon told it, holding his broken arm in close and sending a ripple through the reins using his left hand. Dorghar turned its head to one side and snorted its derision. As it surged away, Archaon nearly left the armoured saddle. The steed might have taken on the form of a black stallion but the power and reflexes beneath Archaon were those of a daemoniac monstrosity.

Clutching the saddle between his thighs, Archaon pulled on the reins and drew himself closer to Dorghar's steaming flesh. At such speed, it was Archaon's instinct to hold his body down close to the creature's own, breastplate to back. He had experienced enough of the daemon's speed on their journey to the Forsaken Fortress and might have punished Dorghar further, but for the fact that he had told the monster that time was a factor. Dorghar weaved in and out of murderous throngs, leaping over tusk-lined palisades and straight through the mess of bone-weave walls.

With ribs and splintered spine raining about them, Archaon and Dorghar thundered across the field of battle. As bloody pools splashed up about the steed's hoof falls, the half-breeds of Archaon's horde roared their bestial jubilation. Trampling Slaaneshi slave soldiers and braining beastfiends with its hooves as it leapt and landed, the mount was unstoppable. It batted crescent shields and beastfiends behind them out of its path and into the ranks of compatriot creatures nearby. Spears came at them with savage surprise. It was the first thing Lord Agrammon's beasts could think to do upon seeing an armoured Chaos warrior and a daemon mount where seconds before brother beasts had been standing. The slave soldiers were not much for pelting such weapons and most went wide or high. The wicked tips of several of the spears glanced off Archaon's filthy plate while those that did thud into Dorghar's daemonflesh were soon shaken loose by the creature's thunderous advance.

Moments later they were snapped and splintered beneath its raging hooves.

As Dorghar surged on through the Slaaneshi horde, beastfiends began to part for the daemon's thunderbolt progress. Trumpeting through their elongated snouts, the half-breeds clutched their crescent shields in close and stepped back behind the presented points of their cruel spears. Guiding the steed this way and that, Archaon pushed Dorghar on across the mulchlands of daemonic decay, through the hollowed nightmare of great palaces in ruin and about the colossal chunks of strange stone that littered the contested lands about the southern polar gate. The once mighty gateway to the beyond, now lying demolished in massive warp-shattered pieces, some long buried beneath the perpetual carnage that raged about the breached portal, some protruding from the twisted landscape, cracked, ancient and encrusted. Some sat in fresh craters like polished, steaming obsidian – unblemished by gore, filth or age – as if they had crashed just moments before. Weaving through the gargantuan wreckage of the Chaos gate, the pieces like standing stones that had toppled and smashed, Dorghar raced on. The steed's hooves churned up the mud, old blood and bones of the Gatelands in its midnight wake.

The palace of the daemon lord Agrammon grew before them, a towering, serrated silhouette against grim radiance bleed-streaming into the world from the ruptured gateway. The shaven beastfiends of the palace had their own predicaments here. Having freed one of Agrammon's prize exhibits, Archaon had rocketed into the north on the hunt for his father-in-shadow. The Chaos warrior had not spared a thought for the havoc he had wreaked, thinking – like the daemon Dorghar – never to return to the dread palace and its caged suffering. The stinking menagerie had been Agrammon's collection of exotic, monstrous freakery for thousands of years. Never before had the silent misery of the inmates been so afflicted by hope. The creatures that Archaon had set free had liberated other monsters. Freeing compatriot specimens from bars, chains and sorcerous charms or simply charging through cages and twisted enclosures in unbridled rage, the beasts had set in motion a chain reaction of escapes. Keeper daemonettes had failed to contain the spreading havoc and now, out on the bone-strewn Wastes upon which Agrammon's beastfiends marched, all manner of monstrosity was charging to freedom.

Here Archaon found that the beastfiends had little interest in a foe storming towards them. The slave soldiers were running for their lives from chaotic predators that pounced on their fresh flesh. Sickening spawn-things seized them from behind with tentacle, claw and scything limb. Sky-screaming horrors that

stretched their ragged wings and fell on the beast guard from great heights with talon and maw. Suddenly the throng of beastfiends parted before the galloping Dorghar's furious advance, screaming into the broiling heavens as they were swept aside in a tsunami of ichor-slick earth. Some former exhibit of the menagerie – a malformed titan whose hunchbacked torso was afflicted by a multitude of monstrous limbs – shook the ground with the panicked footfalls of its escape. Swinging clubbed fists and the warped deformity of colossal limbs before it, the giant cleared small armies of its former guards and tormentors out of its path. Broken beastfiends flew through the air this way and that before the mindless passage of the terrified brute.

Archaon hauled on the reins. The Chaos warrior had no intention of being smashed to oblivion by the small mountain of twisted flesh and bone. Dorghar would not be stopped, however. The steed increased its speed, turning a palace-storming gallop into a furrow-cutting streak through the Gatelands that left hoof prints of flame behind it. As the giant's mighty flesh clubs pulverised the shrieking beastfiends before them, Archaon resisted the urge to grab for his sword. Doing so would have taken his hand from the reins and, at this speed, the Chaos warrior thought such an action suicide. Dorghar and Archaon were suddenly hit by the physical force of the malformed giant's fearful roar. Thinking that it was being attacked, the titan swung back with the bone-spiked boulder of one of its club fists. Archaon felt himself hold onto his breath, waiting for impact. The force of the giant's fury would likely smash both him and his daemon steed into a skyward stream of gore. The Chaos warrior braced for the horrifying impact – an impact that never came.

Archaon felt the Steed of the Apocalypse change beneath him. No longer was the armoured saddle sitting on the back of a nightmare, black stallion. There was no snorting nor thunder of hooves. Archaon, sitting squarely in the saddle, sailed on a swarm of screeching imps. Dorghar had changed once more, this time assuming the form of a flock of tiny, black furies. A storm of tiny wings, lithe bodies and razored claws, the throng spread out as the giant's gargantuan fist smashed through the warp-baked earth. As the giant stormed on, grit and congealed ichor raining down about it, the monstrosity had no idea that it had failed to destroy the rider and his steed. Screeching together once more, the imps swarmed beneath the Chaos warrior. Those slave soldiers that had somehow survived the giant's destructive passage had Dorghar to look forward to. While Archaon sat astride the flock of tiny, shrieking monsters they shredded through Agrammon's Slaaneshi soldiers.

Within moments the palace gate was before them. The barbican was a smashed mess of twisted metal. Within the palace walls, a stampede of liberated monstrosities had grown and grown as it was corralled along the spiralling, concentric pathway that led through the menagerie. Great horned beasts, things of tusk and monstrous bulk tore through the bars of adjacent cages in the raging hope of escape and the terror of being recaptured. Creatures and captives from such cages were swept up in the stampede, swelling its force and number as charms were torn from their necks and the hold of Jharkill's primitive magic broken. As Dorghar swept Archaon up and over the palace walls, the Chaos warrior could see the monstrous horde of former exhibits pouring through the breached barbican with many helplessly impaled on the metal spikes that faced both inward and out from the metal wall.

Sweeping from side to side with the flock, the screeching swarm took him over the devastation of the menagerie. The broken bars of cages lined the gravel walkways. The long cavalcade that had brought Archaon in previously was now just ivory splinters stomped into the earth. Daemonettes had been stamped to death and crushed against the bars of the cages they had formerly patrolled. While many creatures had fled the palace menagerie at their first, terrified opportunity, the more savage and intelligent had remained. Predacious monsters stalked the walkways and demolished enclosures, their freedom – both from their cages and the sorcerous charms that enslaved them – allowing old instincts to return.

Creatures of claw, fang and sabre-tooth savaged their former keepers, tearing apart shrieking daemonettes between them like packs of voracious wolves and feasting on the carcasses. Long-snouted hounds ran for their lives, cowering in the demolished cages they had formerly been charged with guarding, as chimeric predators hunted them down and savaged the infernal watch dogs. Half-breeds, daemonkin and warrior spawn snatched broken bars, bones and abandoned weaponry, moving between cages to free further monsters and setting upon daemonic keepers whose slashing whips and shrill warnings did little to keep them from slaughtering Lord Agrammon's sultry servants.

Like a flock of bats, Dorghar began a circle of the tower palace. The inner enclosures had suffered the worst of the damage. Now that the daemon lord's most prized exhibits were free they visited their dangerous abilities on the tower and the structures about it. A glowing blaze danced about the ruined enclosures and scorched the spiked side of the metal tower, as a dread phoenix-like monster of feather, flame and flesh-shearing beak flapped about the structures, fanning



the destruction. A shovel-nosed dragon waddled straight through the enclosures, the mighty crystal spines that covered its body dripping with the blood and torn flesh of shredded daemons. An octopoid monstrosity tore itself into pieces as the colossal beast attempted to haul the spiked tower down at its base.

Multi-limbed spawn gibbered and climbed like tree-top mammals, desperate to find a way inside, while carnivorous splice-creatures scrambled up through the twisted forest of poison-tip spikes with grapnel-like claws. The undead colossus, the green curselight burning bright within the towering rot of its carcass, tore the twisted mess of tangled enclosures up in its great mummified hands and smashed at the side of the palace citadel. At the huge entrance to the tower was the crumpled metal of a thick door. The unleashed fury of the abominate slaughterbrute smashed at the door. Horns, crushing jaws, hooves, clawed fists, the chitinous armour of spiked shoulders: the blood-crazed monstrosity could smell prey inside the tower and would not be denied deaths and the wanton destruction that was its only reason for being. It would pound the great metal door of the palace tower down or pound itself to a messy, god-honouring death in its attempt to do so.

As the shrieking flock of imps banked and circled the tower, Archaon could see the structure shake under the assault. The huge, cloud-scraping crescent that sat atop the bell spire honouring Lord Agrammon's patron power wobbled, toppled and tumbled down the side of the building. It fell down the considerable height of the citadel before bouncing off the downward angled spikes of the tower, spinning and smashing into the flame-racked menagerie. As he circled, the Chaos warrior would have liked to have seen the tortured exhibits and former captives tear down the tower of the daemon but with Giselle, the sorcerer Sheerian and the Swords of Chaos trapped within he could not risk such wanton havoc. He needed to do what every other former exhibit of Lord Agrammon's was failing to achieve. He needed to get inside.

From within, watch-daemons were blowing their horns to call reinforcements back from the Wastes outside the palace, not knowing that Ograx the Great and Archaon's bestial horde were keeping them busy with their deaths. From the inner part, the huge and bulbous bell tower crowned the spiked shape of the citadel, and the Chaos warrior could hear the ecstatic moan of the bell there. With his slave soldiers and daemonettes trapped inside, caught up in the chaos of the menagerie or being slaughtered outside the palace walls, Agrammon had become desperate. The groaning boom of the bell could mean only one thing as its peeling madness rolled through the Gatelands and the dread palaces crowding

the ruin-spewing portal set in the bottom of the world. The daemon lord was appealing to other servants of Slaanesh, infernal royalty and infernal overlords also pledged to the Prince of Pleasure. For all Archaon knew, he was calling for assistance from the daemon lords in service to other Chaos Powers, in the perverse hope that they might assist him for their own diabolical reasons. That, Archaon could not allow.

Spiralling up and around the tower, Archaon guided the shrieking flock of tiny furies up towards the churning clouds above. The heights were featureless and devoid of windows, openings or even arrow slits. It was a barbed nightmare of black, otherworldly metal all the way to the top, glistening with all manner of deviant toxins designed to inflict pleasure, madness and death – in that order. Only the twisted columns of the metal belfry seemed to allow any admittance, with the bombastic boom of the citadel bell allowed to travel unhindered by thick metal wall or nest of spikes. Dorghar seemed to know what Archaon was planning to do and swooped straight in on the bell tower. The Chaos warrior thought he might leap to the structure but the Steed of the Apocalypse had other ideas, the flock screeching straight through the belfry. Archaon turned his helm, expecting to hit the unforgiving metal of the bell tower or even the bell itself.

As the tiny, winged monsters shrieked and streamed through the columns, Archaon found his boots reach the belfry floor. Grabbing out for the twisted metal of the structure, Archaon steadied himself. He slid down onto his knees, poked his head between the columns and stared down the serrated lethality of the citadel. With the bell tower buffeted by the perverse gales and tinged by the broiling clouds about the Southern Gate, it appeared to be one hell of a drop. To make matters worse, the monstrous assault being mounted at the base of the tower caused the structure to sway with a sickening motion. The Chaos warrior watched the swarm of furies weave, spiral and surge away. Turning, he found one of the imps clutching to a twisted metal column beside him.

‘Never,’ Archaon told it, catching his breath, ‘never, do that again.’

The imp chattered cheekily to itself before flapping its wings and swooping off after the rest of the flock. Getting once more to his feet, Archaon found himself in the presence of the tower’s great bell. Everything about its daemonic craftsmanship seemed darkly suggestive, and even the rapturous moan of its peeling was a soul-splitting sound that passed straight through the Chaos warrior and his plate in its attempt to stir him.

Looking under the bell and down through the tower interior, Archaon found it to be surprisingly devoid of structures. He had expected to fight his way through

well-guarded chambers and twisting stairwells. Instead, he found a largely open space within the metal walls of the citadel – a colossal, vaulted single throne chamber housed within the soaring monstrosity of the palace tower. Archaon flared his nostrils. The twilight within was lit with torches dribbling with the fat of skinned half-breeds while the stench of the interior smelled like a torture chamber.

As he peered down through the darkness and distance of the tower interior, Archaon had to rely not only upon the sight of his good eye but also his darksight, and the piercing visions granted to him by the Eye of Sheerian. The wretched light of the torches danced their dull radiance off the expanse of metal below. Tower-spanning blades. Spear-tipped poles. A twisted nest of razor-edge shafts, serrated beams and inward pointing spikes. There were bodies everywhere. Things that had shafts of metal straight through them. Things hanging from hooks and sharpened spines. Things in a state of perpetual disembowelment. Things suspended from spikes running through limbs, hearts and skulls. Exotic half-breeds. Daemonforms that could barely be looked upon. Monstrosities of every variety – chimeric fusions, warped titans, spawn tortured by their many godly gifts. A personal collection and private pleasure. Something Lord Agrammon reserved for himself. The throne room was a twisted cage turned inside out – one in which the captives were impaled on the very bars that imprisoned them and through some warped damnation, were never allowed to perish. Archaon listened to the doomed specimens groan their agonies and ecstasies away, reaching out for one another with hands, claws and deformed appendages that trembled with the torture of the effort.

With a snarl of distaste curling his lip, Archaon climbed through, under the booming bell and down through the twisted nest of blades and spikes. The crowded criss-crossing of black metal shafts made the descent a long but easy one – even with the use of only one arm. As he moved down through the spider's web of lethal skewers, the Chaos warrior took care to avoid the grasping bodies of the impaled and the myriad spines, hooks and spikes that seemed designed to find their way in through his armour. He did his best to negotiate shafts and poles that were slick with the never-ending drizzle of blood, sweat and tears that fell down through the twisted nest of the afflicted like rain. Some spikes glistened with painted poisons or potions that would visit upon bare flesh only the Prince of Pleasure knew what. Other shafts were supernaturally sharp blades designed to shear off hand or foot. It was a death trap like no other Archaon had encountered.

As he descended, Archaon could see the throne room proper below him. The nest of skewering death merely existed as a private exhibit to be enjoyed at any time, the falling drizzle of bodily fluids helping to feed the shallows that flooded the floor of the chamber. The cacophony of the assault drowned out even the distant peeling of the bell, which Archaon now saw was being rung by some kind of daemonic herald – a child-like daemonette wearing its horns like a twisted crown. The herald hauled on a razored chain that ran the distance between the huge ground floor chamber and the bell tower. Meanwhile outside, the slaughterbrute and a growing number of other monstrosities were fighting their way into the tower. Pounding at the metal walls and door. Tearing, scratching and biting. Bathing the tower base in flame, the glow of which could be seen even inside the chamber.

Peering down through the dungeon twilight of the chamber, the miserable drizzle and the bars, Archaon looked for Giselle and the others. It did not take him long to find them. Even below the nest of skewers and blades in which he was perched, the interior walls of the throne room were carpeted with smaller spikes and hooks. Spread out around the chamber, Archaon could see that Agrammon had ordered the newly taken prisoners cruelly hung from such adornments. He saw Eins, Zwei and Drei hanging limply from a nest of piercing spines, their impaled hands and wings spread out so that the warriors could not reach their precious bone swords. Archaon could see the ancient sorcerer Sheerian hanging from a single wicked hook by his hunch, while the misshapen Vier was suspended nearby.

Then he saw her. Giselle, still draped in skins and furs, her head drooping to one side within her shaggy hood, and her body hanging from wicked barbs embedded cleanly through her delicate hands. Sheerian and the Swords had been hooked at intervals about the wall, with Giselle situated at the rear of the throne room.

As he stared at her, Archaon didn't quite know what was happening inside him. His chest fluttered with something approaching genuine feeling. Something that wasn't anger, scorn or some dark expression of his black heart. It felt light but stung deep, like a stiletto blade so sharp that it had passed unknowingly through the flesh to stab the organs within. Archaon knew he wasn't feeling the burning need for revenge – although he understood that would come. It wasn't that the daemon lord had taken something precious from Archaon and had to pay. That notion too would come to pass.

It was the ghost of some kind of responsibility that haunted Archaon.

Something the doomed warrior thought he was long past. Something that he feared was unacceptable weakness in a champion of the Ruinous Powers, in he who would be the Everchosen of Chaos. Archaon knew it was more than just a fear. He looked about the nest of daemons he had crept into. If it were not for Giselle, he probably wouldn't have risked such a suicidal endeavour. Sheerian and the Swords had sold their souls to the Dark Gods – whatever their fate was, Archaon was confident that the Tzeentchian sorcerer and the winged warriors of Chaos had it coming. The lost and the damned that followed in Archaon's exalted footsteps only respected strength. In time they would rally to the banner of some other dark champion or worse butcher than Archaon for the Ruinous treasures he possessed. It had happened before, and the Chaos warrior had every intention of those lost souls losing their lives in his dread service long before they entertained such an inclination.

Kneeling above their bodies, their blood leaking down the walls and into the shallows, Archaon did come to wonder why he had kept the Swords and Sheerian around so long. The sorcerer certainly had his uses and the Swords had appointed themselves his bodyguards long before he knew who he really was. While damnation had cost him almost everything – a damned soul and a cold heart to go with it – he still felt some strange attachment to Giselle. Long after he had given himself to his dark fate and the necessities of his search for the treasures of Chaos, he had hardened to the afflictions of common men. He had loved the God-King and his service to Sigmar as a templar knight. Such love had been swallowed by the flames of his anger. A soul-scarring sense of betrayal so powerful that it had sent Archaon into the service of Dark Gods. In serving himself, he would destroy the cold majesty of all those foolish enough to call themselves god.

He had loved Dagobert – the priest who had raised him like a father. Frozen to an agonising numbness on the Southern Wastes, Archaon had felt little or nothing at the priest's death. A man who had loved him so much his loyalty had endured through heresy and madness, loved him so much that he had followed him on a doomed crusade to the other side of the world. Had tried to save him from his dark fate, from himself and the *Yien-Ya-Long* – and the only flame Archaon could keep stoked in the icy wilderness of the Wastes and his own heart was the burning desire to realise his dark and all-dominating destiny. Archaon could not save Dagobert from the abominate dragon, however, and although he made the monstrosity pay the price with its own life, he simply filled the emptiness Dagobert had left behind with his indomitable will to survive, to

succeed and to see the dark days of the End Times silence man and god alike.

Giselle. Giselle. Had he come to love Giselle? To truly love her? From a young and foolish Sister of the Imperial Cross – and she had barely been that when he first saved her from the forest beastmen – she had become his prisoner. Like Dagobert she had tried to save him and save the world from his fate. She had poisoned him with the pure silver of her god. She had repeatedly tried to slip steel into his flesh. She had failed, but for all Archaon knew she still intended to do so. In the cold, dark insanity of the Northern Wastes, with nought but death to keep a traveller company, they had found one another. An unspoken need – at first physical – sprung from their shared hate.

To Giselle, Archaon was an abomination. A man tainted by fate, whose bottomless detestation for all the world would be the end of it. A man who hated his sponsors as much as his enemies and would stop at nothing to realise his destiny. To Archaon, Giselle was anathema. It was an exquisite agony to press his lips to her. To touch her. To share her bed. Her professed faith in her God-King had burned impossibly bright in the darkness at the top of the world. Of all those who shared Archaon's journey, she alone seemed to have kept her sanity. The corruptive influence of the Shadowlands seemed to have no effect upon her. While all else in Archaon's horde grew uglier and more unsightly with the passing years, their ageing flesh a patchwork of scars new over old and the gifts of darkness changing them from the inside out, Giselle had remained as pure and young as the day Archaon had met her. He had thought of her as plain at first and perhaps even tedious in the blindness of her beliefs. In the hideousness of the Wastes, however, he had come to truly see her beauty. Her devotion to the God-King that had formerly been an object of sour derision and hatred had become a wonder to Archaon. A faith held with such indomitable conviction that it buried even his own in its shadow.

He knew he should have killed her long ago, for it would have been a mercy. He knew he should have cut her loose, but like *Terminus* he could not bear to be parted from his past. Saving Giselle had been the last truly noble thing Archaon had done in the world. This need was a small, toxic part of himself that he was unwilling to let go. Giselle had become part of that. Archaon had to confront the possibility that in keeping her with him, some scintilla of his soul desired saving and that deep down, under the darkness, hate and the weight of dread expectation, he reserved a kind of hope that might one day lead the way to redemption. Perhaps Giselle Dantziger might save him still. Perhaps that was the reason Archaon had kept her close. So very close. Did he love her? He didn't

know if after all the terrible things he had done and would do, he was capable of such a feeling. He knew he couldn't be without her. He knew, in dragging her to the other side of the world in the company of Ruinous and evil men, that despite her simple faith she had changed. While her skin was as soft as ever, her eyes were hard. Since coming to the bottom of the world, since the horror of the *Yien-Ya-Long*, she had changed. Her affections were not so much cold as absent. She walked through the frozen nightmare of the Wastes among beasts and daemons in a silent daze. Like her soft fingertips across his doomed flesh, Archaon had enjoyed her scorn, her challenges and their little war of words. She had said little in the months spent traversing the Southern Wastes. Like his Swords of Chaos, she had become silent.

The firebrand that Archaon had come to appreciate amongst his horde of sycophantic savagery had steamed away to nothing in the ice and snow. Her sufferings had sapped her of everything but a miserable determination to go on. Now here, in the palace of a daemon lord, at the very bottom of the known world, she suffered still. No more. No more.

In the booming cacophony of the infernal throne room, Archaon searched for threats. Foes that would come to know the Chaos warrior's cold steel. Daemonettes stood in the shallows. Armoured in spiked plate fashioned from the same strange metal as the tower, they carried the broad serrated blades of sickle swords and crescent shields bearing the sigil of their daemon lord, set within the Ruinous emblem of the Prince of Pleasure. Only parts of their chests were left exposed by curving chestplates – to honour their Lord Agrammon's infernal sponsor. The daemonettes knelt in the shallows, horned heads down, the gauntlets of the left hands extended to cover their sister's daemon breast in a formation of throne-honouring supplication. These were not keepers of the royal menagerie but Agrammon's palace guard. The elite of his daemon horde. Should the beasts outside gain entrance to the tower it would fall to them to be Lord Agrammon's last line of defence. They would have to face Archaon first – as would their monstrous master.

Lord Agrammon was a monstrous creature indeed: a gangly, serpentine thing of desirous daemonflesh and dark appetite. Up close, Archaon appreciated that Agrammon was neither a he nor a she but a towering it.

A hermaphrodite horror, the daemon's long face held an unspeakable beauty that trailed into two sweeping horns and a cranial nest of long tentacles that drooped down behind the nightmare creature. The appendages oozed and slithered about the daemon's body, keeping it sickly and slick like an eel. The

monster's upper body clicked with chitinous claws and pincers that continually nipped at the thing's smooth flesh, opening ichor-dribbling wounds that almost immediately healed in a perpetual frenzy of regenerative affliction. Its arms were slender but taut with the daemonic strength required to lift the spindly nightmare off its colossal talons. Each one presented a clawed hand, within a clawed hand, within a clawed hand. Its chest and torso bled some different kind of noxious poison or infernal potion. These ran the length of Agrammon's serpent body, the slime-exuding coils of which ran around and around the sensual suggestion of the daemon's throne. The Slaaneshi horror wore no clothes or armour but simply jangled with the studs, spikes and decorative rings that were hooked through its infernal flesh.

Shimmying along one of the poles that spanned the tower, Archaon reached the back wall of the chamber. Slowly... silently... Archaon began the careful climb down, using the filthy hooks and poison-smearred spikes that decorated it. Taking great care not to impale himself on the lethal points and even greater care not to attract the attention of Agrammon and the daemonettes in the throne room, Archaon descended through the murky twilight.

Between the obscene throne, the dungeon glow of the torches and the haze of drizzle falling from the unfortunates above, Archaon was largely hidden from view. With the thunder of the assault on the palace door drowning out the scrapes of boot and the exertions of climbing down with one arm, Archaon risked a little more speed. It was ill-advised and the Chaos warrior slipped from a curved barb and fell the rest of the way, splashing into the shallows. By the time the foetid spray of gloop had fallen about him, Archaon had already cleared *Terminus* from its fur scabbard. He expected to be set upon by Agrammon's daemonette elite but the noise had attracted little attention. The daemonette herald continued to ring the tower bell. The booming assault on the door continued. The lesser daemons that made up Lord Agrammon's personal guard kept their formation before the throne. Agrammon himself was distracted by another matter.

From the shadows nearby, Archaon heard the jangle of chains. Being careful of the spikes, Archaon backed to the wall, as though impaled there himself beside the hanging Giselle. Four long-snouts brought forth a hulking prisoner. The beastfiends each held the end of a chain attached to a single metal collar around the prisoner's fat neck. Hauling at the chains, the long-snouts dragged the stumbling creature until he was presented before the throne. With the throne's back to him, Archaon couldn't see Agrammon's reaction to the prisoner but



noted that the nest of tentacles snaking down the throne's back became twitchy and aggravated as though the daemon were displeased.

Looking back to the prisoner, Archaon instantly recognised him. He was looking at Jharkill, Agrammon's hunter of rare and freakish specimens for its caged collection. The long-snouts – former members of Jharkill's own team of handlers – pulled on the chains to bring the malformed ogre crashing down onto his knees in the shallows. One long-snout held the shaman's crossbar staff, jangling the useless charms that dangled from it. Another held Jharkill's great ivory bow. Both were tossed into the stinking slime before Agrammon's throne. Jharkill's skins were ragged and torn, his flesh a criss-cross of ribbons where he had suffered the barbed lash for his failures. Archaon pursed his cracked lips. He had brought the mighty Jharkill to this. He had slipped into the menagerie. He had started liberating exhibits. He had stolen one of Agrammon's prized specimens and escaped with the Steed of the Apocalypse. Now the menagerie was in chaos and the daemon lord's palace besieged by things that had been for so long imprisoned at Agrammon's pleasure – to feed the daemon's bottomless need to possess the rare, the abominable and the monstrous.

The daemon lord spoke. Its voice was the sound of a thousand souls in rapture. It was both chilling and thrilling to hear. Agrammon spoke in a damned language that Archaon did not understand. It was like crushed glass in the ear, but all the Chaos warrior needed to do was watch them speak with their bodies. Agrammon was demanding some kind of explanation for Jharkill's failure – that much was clear. The monstrous daemon moved between the indulgent excess of slick fury, spoken with the voices of its thousand swallowed souls, to sultry invitations and encouragements that drew delight from the gathered audience of supplicating daemonettes. It seemed that even in the midst of calamity, enduring the sting of disappointment, the Prince of Pleasure's daemon would still find something to enjoy. There were the myriad pleasures of new alliances to consider, with bell-drawn servants of darkness from nearby daemon palaces; a menagerie and collection to re-build – bigger, more exotic and ever more miserable than the first; delicious punishments to be issued among Agrammon's own wretched servants for their disastrous failure.

The long-snouts hauled at the chains, bringing Jharkill's head up before his daemon master. It seemed to Archaon that the monstrous ogre wasn't much for begging or supplication and looked on Agrammon's obscene form with eyes shimmering with pain and dull hatred. The creature knew it was dead. Daemon lords did not make forgiving masters. The Slaaneshi abomination would find all

manner of deviant uses for the monster's flesh, however, before it allowed him to perish in its dark god's honour.

Archaon watched as Jharkill's silence was rewarded with sorcerous words spoken from Agrammon's wet lips. Jharkill thrashed to one side as a malicious word from the daemon lord sliced his flesh across his belly and face in a single invisible stroke. The ogre's blubbery hide gaped where the daemon had cut him. Jharkill remained silent. Again and again, Lord Agrammon spoke the words, slashing the monster once more across his mangled face and across the hunch of his back. Thrusting his chest forward, the hulk's form rose and fell with the exertion of breathing and the relief of the unseen assault's respite. Still he would not speak, simply glowering up at the perverse form of his former master.

New words issued forth from the throne and Jharkill bent over, clutching his barrel chest as though he was suffering some kind of internal torment. The ogre huntsman's face contorted about his agony and the throne room echoed with a single, wretched scream. Once more the monster was allowed the Prince of Pleasure's blessing and could not help a crooked smile of relief crack his contorted features. The pain was over. The smile died on Jharkill's ugly face. Pulling his ragged skins and furs aside, Archaon could see a death mask of agony fixed in the flesh of the ogre's chest. With a single fell word, Lord Agrammon had murdered Jharkill's malformed twin – his brother abomination and sharer of his flesh. Jharkill's roar shook the throne room, sending ripples through the murky shallows of sweat and blood.

Archaon knew that he had to make the most of the distraction. Grabbing Giselle by the chin he lifted her head level with his own. The girl's face was strangely serene for someone who had hung for hours – perhaps days – from spikes erupting from the palms of her hands. Her eyelids fluttered before the blank white of her eyes.

'Giselle,' the Chaos warrior said softly. 'Giselle, it's me.'

The girl's thin eyebrows rose for a moment in recognition before her face screwed up in a moment of pain. Archaon felt her head fall as she lapsed back into unconsciousness. Lowering it he took the first of her hands and eased it as gently as he could off the filthy spike. There was blood. It leaked down the wall and dripped into the shallows, clouding the already murky water red. The metal at the spike point seemed discoloured, as though something had been smeared on it. As her hand juddered along the shaft of the spike, the girl stirred. Drawing his left hand back he smothered the scream of pain about to erupt from her mouth with his gauntlet. 'Giselle, listen to me,' Archaon told her, leaning the skull

faceplate of his helm in close. ‘We’re in danger. No sound.’

The girl’s head suddenly came up as though woken from a dream. Her eyes opened and while bleary were still blank white. Her dirty face and the mask of agony into which it had tightened suddenly relaxed. She smiled even, which Archaon thought strange, until he remembered the variety of potions and poisons dribbled, painted and smeared onto every blade, point and surface in the palace. Giselle groaned. It was a warm intimate sound. The kind that she had made with him before.

‘Giselle, wake up.’

As he got the first hand off the spike and leant her body against his, he told her: ‘Listen girl, wake up. I need you on your feet if we’re going to make it out of here.’ Giselle moaned again, reaching out for Archaon with her mess of a hand. ‘No,’ Archaon said, holding her with difficulty and trying to get her other hand off the spike. There was more blood. The Chaos warrior assumed that the movement must have been agony but the girl let out a half-stifled whoop of delight. Whatever monstrous concoction was smeared on the spike was poisoning the girl’s mind, clouding it with reversals. In the palace of the Slaaneshi daemon lord, Giselle was experiencing pain as pleasure. With the girl leaning against his plate, Archaon could only hope such chemical enchantments worked the other way. Grabbing his helm by one of its great horns, Archaon pulled the helmet from his face and leaned in to kiss Giselle. The Chaos warrior knew instantly that he was right as the dreamy look was driven from the girl’s face. She reacted as though her lips had touched molten metal and drew her head back. Her expression fluttered through the tautness of pain, through wide-eyed shock and confusion. Her eyes were no longer the blank white of euphoria. She saw him and whimpered.

‘Archaon...’ she managed, bringing her exhausted arms limply up and wiping the ghostly burn from her lips. All she managed to do, however, was smear blood across the bottom half of her face. The Chaos warrior allowed her to look upon the dread fortitude of his face. His pale skin, shot through with networks of blue veins that coursed with unnatural power. His hairless head, scarred with marks from a thousand battles. His cracked lips, broken nose and the patch he wore over his ruined eye – in the socket of which was still the shard of wyrdstone that had given him his darksight and allowed him to see the monstrous truth of the world. He allowed the helm of Morkar to fall once more. He had to get her out of here. With any good fortune he might be able to recover the sorcerer Sheerian, Eins, Drei, Zwei and Vier from a similar fate. Giselle held

on to him. He needed her to walk but she remained frozen to the spot. ‘Archaon,’ she said again, her voice a strangled whisper.

The Chaos warrior rotated. He had no good fortune and it seemed never would have. Holding Giselle to him in her furs, Archaon turned. With the cacophony at the thick metal door to the palace filling the throne room, Archaon had not noticed that the child-herald had stopped ringing the tower bell. That Jharkill was no longer roaring his fraternal fury. That the daemon lord Agrammon had stopped parting flesh with cutting words from his lips. He found Agrammon and his daemon court there, watching them both. The herald wore a deranged smile in expectation of the horror to come. The daemonettes were still in formation but had come forth, serrated swords presented, giving the Chaos warrior stabbing glares of predacious intent. The daemon Agrammon had simply heaved on the serpentine coils circling the dais and turned the metal obscenity of the throne around to face Archaon and Giselle.

Archaon decided that there was really only one thing to do and drew *Terminus* from its scabbard. The Sigmarite sword hissed as it cleared the fur. Holding the blade out in front of him, Archaon moved in front of Giselle, who was now standing bolt upright. Archaon was furious. Mostly at himself. The Slaaneshi daemon lord and its attendant monstrosities might not have heard the slip of his boot or the splash of his descent, but their unnatural senses were keenly sensitive to even the slightest moan of pleasure. That was undoubtedly why the holding spikes were coated with foul unguents and concoctions.

Agrammon said nothing at first. It merely watched him. His presence seemed to give the creature some sense of unearthly satisfaction. Once again, the daemon seemed unconcerned by the threat presented by such developments, instead reacting with the perversity of a ghastly smile. Perhaps it was impressed that the Chaos warrior had managed to breach the palace walls to rescue the prisoners. Perhaps it was looking forward to the rapture of old torments visited upon fresh victims. Perhaps the creature was ecstatic that the being responsible for the delight of its current woes had delivered himself before the daemon lord.

Archaon backed through the shallows and moved to the side, his footsteps sloshing through the bodily fluids. Daemonettes hissed at him. They licked their lips with forked tongues and stomped through the waters about him.

Agrammon nodded. Two of the daemonettes came at him. Archaon snarled. He was to be tested. The daemonettes’ movements were fast. They moved with a slick lethality – like predators striking. Their swordplay was exotic and the serrated sickle swords were wielded with a combination of diabolical

confidence, skill and strength. The Chaos warrior did not have time for such games, however. He could not afford to be separated from Giselle – who was his, once again – or manoeuvred around into a more vulnerable position. He saw no point in concealing his own lethality, however, and despite being bereft of his shield and fighting with his left hand, put the daemonettes down brutally. Within moments, one creature's head had been cleaved in two, while another lost a leg and was casually stabbed through both its hell-forged plate and its ample chest as it thrashed about uselessly in the shallows.

Another nod from Agrammon and three of its daemoniac elite splashed through the waters at him. Archaon decided that if they were going to play the daemon lord's game, he would at least try to work his way around to the door. The three daemonettes died faster and easier than their infernal sisters, the blessed steel of *Terminus* sizzling through the throat of the first, then after side-stepping the serrated bite of a sickle sword, the second, before messily braining the third with the broad flat of the templar blade. Keeping their backs to the spiked wall of the chamber, Archaon worked his way around to the door, despatching a group of four daemonettes with little more trouble than the corpses in the shallows, already bearing witness to his brute skill.

By the time Agrammon sent five of its lesser daemon elite to slaughter him for its entertainment and insanity, there were black hell-forged blades everywhere, sparking off *Terminus*, threatening to sink their teeth through his plate, open his throat with arcs of curved death or cut him clean in half with the otherworldly strength behind the weapons. Archaon had begun to tire. Whereas the daemonettes could expect their sisters' blades to parry and block for them, Archaon only had a single sword. A sword that more often than not was being turned aside by the crescent shields of the infernal elite and needed to be whipped back to turn away the exotic stabs and sweeps of other daemons. With its length and heavy blade, the greatsword was simply not designed for such lightning work – even in the gauntlet of one such as Archaon.

The Chaos warrior half hacked the first and stove in the head of a second, but they were desperate manoeuvres and less than satisfactory kills. He paid for such clumsiness by allowing a serrated blade through and having the hooked teeth of the murderous weapon find its way between his helm and breastplate to slice at his neck. Without a shield of his own and his broken arm aching uselessly at his side, Archaon had no choice but to work around with glancing parries and darting deflections. Exhausted, and with Giselle squealing and moving about his armoured form to avoid the spiteful swipes and thrusts of daemonettes behind

them, Archaon knew that it was only a matter of time before he was bested.

A tired lunge, combined with the fervour of frustration, sent the length of *Terminus* searing through the daemon-crafted plate of another creature. As the daemonette crashed into the shallows, her corpse refused to surrender the templar blade. Letting go and retracting his arm, Archaon narrowly avoided losing it to a murderous downward swing that ended up sending bodily fluids from the shallows fountaining upwards. Stumbling back but trying to keep the shrieking Giselle behind him and out of the path of blades swung with venomous force, Archaon was without weapon. With a daemonette either side of him, this was an intolerable position to remain in. Trying to rush one lesser daemon to reach *Terminus*, lodged in the corpse behind, only resulted in a serrated blade clanging off the side of his helm, cleaving a groove in the workmanship. An attempt to lurch forward and snatch a sickle sword from the claw-gauntlet of a dead daemonette was partially successful, but without the hilt of the unfamiliar weapon firmly in his grasp, the blade was struck from his grip by the whipping slash of one of his cornering tormentors.

Stamping a wall of water at one as a distraction, Archaon feigned going for the lost blade again. He knew he had to leave Giselle's side – it was the only way to save them both. Instead of actually going for the blade, Archaon lowered the horns on his helmet and charged. Crashing into the unprepared daemonette, he smashed her back, burying the pauldron of his broken arm in the plate of her belly. He could feel the lesser daemon smashing the pommel of her sickle sword into his back but Archaon charged on like a deranged rhinox, slamming the horrific creature into the chamber wall and impaling her on a set of wicked spikes. Tearing the sickle sword from her dying grasp, Archaon spun around, the gag-inducing waters splashing up about him. Hurling the lighter curved sword, blade over pommel, he buried it in the form of the final daemonette, who had been racing through the shallows at the unarmed Giselle. The wretched creature would have sliced the girl in two if it were not for the flying blade that thudded into her back. The daemon crashed down into the waters before the Sister of Sigmar, who simply stared, stunned, at Archaon. Tearing *Terminus* from the carcass of the Slaaneshi daemon, Archaon put himself between Giselle and Agrammon's horrific horde.

Infernal plate clattered as daemonettes clawed at each other to get to the Chaos warrior and his prize. The daemon Agrammon spoke. Its words sizzled on the air. Archaon didn't understand them but they sounded like a command. The daemonettes parted as their overlord slithered off its throne and wound its way

between the creatures. Archaon held out *Terminus* before him. He ached to wield the weapon with his right arm but the hot agony of the broken limb wouldn't answer.

'Come and get it, thing of darkness,' Archaon told the daemon. 'I'll tear through you as I have your wretched handmaidens.'

Agrammon did something horrible with its face that the Chaos warrior took for a smile. Shaking its horns and sending a ripple through its twitching, tentacular appendages, Agrammon reared. Archaon prepared himself for some kind of serpentine attack. He felt Giselle's slender body against the back of his plate. He flicked his gaze from the horrific daemon lord slithering to full height before him to the waiting horde of daemonettes – monstrosities he knew could destroy both him and Giselle if they abandoned the perversity of their games and rushed them in one go. From the flesh-hungry horde of daemonettes he risked a glance at Jharkill. Jharkill the huntsman. Jharkill the shaman. Jharkill, former keeper of Lord Agrammon's infernal menagerie. The malformed ogre was now on his knees, held down by chains that had formerly been his to shackle, by long-snout beastfiends that had formerly been his to command. The monster's hunched back rose and fell with his suffering. As Agrammon towered over him, Archaon grunted. He would have to fight. Only steel would settle this.

Archaon heard a hiss. Fat droplets splattered against his plate. They were not the sticky drizzle that coated everything in the throne room. The armour of Morkar smoked and sizzled at their acidic impact. Archaon took a step back but the daemon Agrammon had spurted a stream of unholy filth from its rearing serpentine form. Archaon was not the intended target of the disgusting attack. The liquid coursed down the blade of the offered *Terminus*. The liquid spat and steamed as it rolled down the blessed steel of the Sigmarite sword.

'No...' Archaon found himself cry out. In a life long forgotten, the blade had belonged to his templar master, Sieur Kastner. It had secured Archaon's own false future in the hallowed ranks of the Knight of the Twin-Tailed Orb. Through the horror and adventure of his dark quests, the blade had stayed with him – ever faithful to its original calling. In the damned Archaon's hands, it had destroyed more evil than it could ever have hoped by sitting in Sieur Kastner's rusty scabbard. Its blessed steel had been a boon in Archaon's battles against fell warriors, beasts and daemoniac monstrosities pledged to the same dark path. Its edge had remained keen and the twin-tailed comet carved into its blade had burned bright as Archaon had fought his way across the globe. It should have been the blade's honour to cut through the flesh of daemons like Agrammon.

Instead the metal of the blade began to dribble and run.

The acidic unguent that Agrammon had sprayed down on the steel was melting it in Archaon's very grip. As the length of the greatsword dribbled down to a silver stump in the Chaos warrior's hand, Archaon could hear the daemon lord's sickly laughter. The daemonettes joined in about their infernal overlord, followed by the unliving exhibits skewered on the bars above. Before long the vaulted throne chamber was filled with the infectious scorn of the diabolical creatures. The silver of liquefied steel swirled in the sickly waters about Archaon's boots. The Chaos warrior held onto his sword, the sword he had wielded for so long in the service of different gods: so long that it almost felt like a part of him. With a snarl that threatened to break his face, Archaon allowed the sizzling cross guard, hilt and pommel to tumble into the steely waters. It splashed and hissed to its wretched end. So much of a life lived long ago was gone. Oberon. Dagobert. The Sigmarite sword *Terminus*. Archaon felt furiously compelled to defend what little remained.

He backed through the grim waters. Through the stinking drizzle. Through the laughter of daemons. Giselle stumbled and grabbed out for him, drawing further diabolical mirth from the monsters. Archaon looked around. Agrammon. The daemonettes. The defeated Jharkill. The thick metal of the hell-forged palace door that would see the monstrosities outside smash themselves to death before it admitted them.

'Want to make these wretched things pay for what they have done?' Archaon called across to the ogre huntsman. The daemons laughed harder about them, amused by the prospect of Jharkill, sagging in his shredded flesh, and the unarmed Archaon posing any kind of threat. 'Monster!' Archaon roared across at Jharkill, finally drawing the corner of an eye from the defeated creature. 'This is only over if you want it to be.' Archaon cast a glance at the huge, metal door that was the entrance to the palace and the thunder behind it.

Agrammon slithered down at Archaon. The daemon was done with the interloper and his delusions. Sharp words slipped from the daemon lord's lips and a shower of sparks lit the thick gloom of the chamber. An unseen force had slashed up across Archaon's breastplate and right pauldron, drawing a fountain of light from the metal. Archaon stumbled back and Giselle with him as the girl let out a sudden scream. Archaon held up his good arm and a further blinding flash flared from it. Another sparking surge rained fire from an invisible backslash across Archaon's chest. Giselle went down in the water and Archaon skidded back through the shallows. The armour of Morkar – First Everchosen of



Chaos – would not be breached by the daemon lord’s sorceries.

Agrammon’s face clouded over like the sudden and perverse storms of the Southern Wastes that seemed to come from nowhere. Archaon instinctively knew that the monstrous daemon had finished playing with them. That within dark moments they would be dead. Jharkill, Sheerian and his Swords of Chaos too. In desperation, Archaon used the only weapon he had left. He turned to Giselle and grabbed her arm to help her up.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said as he turned and launched the girl at the daemon Agrammon. The infernal creature caught Giselle in its arms. There was an immediate hiss. Daemonflesh steamed from Agrammon’s disgusting form. Like a hand pulling a piece of steel fresh from the furnace, the daemon burned at the girl’s touch. Giselle, who still stung with belief. Who, impossibly, in this benighted place, had hung onto her faith. Whose soul belonged to the God-King and whose flesh was a sacred vessel. Agrammon screamed. The daemon had not known such exquisite torture in this doomed place. The sound of the daemon’s torment howled up through the palace tower. Its coils contracted in agony and then bliss. It dropped Giselle and once more the girl found herself in the water.

Agrammon hissed its frenzied delight at Giselle as her head broke the surface of the shallows. Like an angry snake that had been tormented with a lit torch, Agrammon turned its serpentine horror on Archaon. But Archaon was gone. The Chaos warrior had turned and was running through the shallows, his steps spraying fountains of liquid skyward. The daemonettes between him and the mighty palace door had been as surprised as their infernal master. Many had rushed to their daemon lord’s aid, drawn to the vision of pleasure and pain as Agrammon’s soul came to know the anathema of a believer’s touch. Several nightmarish swordmaidens in their spiked plate tried to check the Chaos warrior’s advance. Archaon ran at them, smashing through their crescent shields. Ducking and weaving between the singing death of their sickle swords, Archaon wrangled with one monstrous maiden, only to grab her wrist and force her blade into turning aside another. An armoured elbow to the fanged face of the creature allowed Archaon the remaining steps he needed to reach the door.

Jharkill, meanwhile, had responded to the Chaos warrior’s cue. Rearing from the shallows and raining the foetid waters from his hulking form, the malformed ogre dragged his neck chains with him, tearing beastfiends from their hooves. Gargantuan steps sent the crests of waves at the startled daemons, drenching their spiked plate. Several swordmaidens attempted to stop the rampaging ogre but found their armoured forms smashed across the throne room or stamped into

the shallows.

The palace was suddenly a place of shrieking havoc. Between the sweet agony that was Giselle, the unstoppable force that was Jharkill and Archaon's slippery escape, the daemon Agrammon was seething. Spitting curses from its black lips, Agrammon slashed deep wounds across the mountainous hunch of Jharkill's already shredded back. Jharkill roared and fell against the colossal doors. The metal rang with the impact. Archaon felt it through the structure. He got his arm and pauldron under the massive bar sitting across the width of the entrance. Heaving. Pushing. Straining. Archaon fought gravity and the weight of the massive bar. With a final effort – a roar escaping the Chaos warrior's lungs – Archaon pushed the great bar from its brackets and sent it crashing into the water behind. The booming assault beyond the door had stopped. The monstrosities behind it had felt the impact and had heard the watery clang. With a bellow of pain rather than effort, Jharkill heaved at the metal doors. Falling to his knees, the ogre pushed them open.

A moment passed where nothing seemed to happen. It was almost as though the powerful forces screaming from the breach of the Southern Gate had sunk their claws into reality and dragged time to a stop. The daemonettes gasped in dread and expectation of the horror yet to come. Giselle gagged and whimpered as she knelt in the foul waters, with the swirling maelstrom of the daemon Agrammon's serpentine body slithering to a stop about her. Dread curses dropped from the creature's lips in languages dark and ancient. The daemon knew what was going to happen and yet still could not resist breathing in the sweet sting of relief that rolled in through the palace doors. Monstrosities, freaks and prisoners who had spent an eternity suffering the lash at Agrammon's command and caged for the daemon lord's pleasure now had the palace in their grasp. The expectation of violence and suffering to come was like a silent storm that rushed in through the open doors. The Slaaneshi daemons groaned and sank down into the water.

Archaon stumbled through the shallows. The horde of creatures outside were as shocked at the door's opening as the daemons inside. It took a moment for even the most mindless and savage of them to process what was happening. Like Agrammon and its savage kind, Archaon knew what was coming. Running across the entrance, the Chaos warrior leapt at Jharkill, using the momentum of his landing to turn the ogre onto its knees so that the hunched monster collapsed to one side of the entrance, its back against the barbed wall. Archaon was just in time. While the Prince of Pleasure's daemons were drunk on the sweet wine of

retribution, the Blood God's eye had been drawn to the base, animal fury that drove such creatures to enact such revenge. Feeding the horde of monstrous creatures with mind-splitting ire, it had been the Blood God who had driven such creatures to throw themselves, broken and bloody, at the thick metal of the palace doors. They would not be stopped now. The fury had to find expression in the roaring that followed. In the pulse of violent intent through sinew and muscle and in the coppery taste of blood at the back of the throat.

Archaon ran through the shallows. Through the daemonettes, who stood there like a spiked forest of enraptured statues. Like an avalanche of black rage the monstrosities charged. Things of claw. Predacious fusions of beast and daemon. Spawn, raging with transformative power. Armoured titans of tusk and elemental ferocity. It was mayhem. Archaon dare not spend the seconds to look back. The unstoppable force of the escaped exhibits pushed the draining waters of the throne room before them, driving a stinking surge that caught Archaon in its rolling power.

There were terrible screams. Daemonettes and long-snouts were dying in the most brutal and horrific ways. While the Slaaneshi deviants had enjoyed the expectation, the storm of monstrosities, fired by the presence of the Blood God in their hearts and burning through their veins, had no intention of drawing out their revenge. The beasts found satisfaction only in death – as other escapees had done in the spiralling thoroughfares of the menagerie, savaging their lash-wielding keepers and the trumpeting beastfiends that patrolled their cages. Rank indulgence was soon replaced with the raw richness of blood and death. Behind him Archaon could hear the frenzied tearing of flesh, the snap of backs and bones, skulls crunching and the bellow of monsters raging their way through the butchered ranks. Above, the monstrous exhibits skewered on their bars had stopped moaning. Infested by the rush of retaliatory violence that had swept into the throne room like a crimson deluge, the unliving things were roaring, screeching and hissing their jubilation. As Archaon half waded, half stumbled through waters that were rapidly clouding black and red, his ears burned with the suddenly silenced screams of daemons ended brutally about him.

Skidding down through the blood, sweat and slime, Archaon snatched a sickle sword from a dead daemonette. The vanguard of the furious invasion had caught him. A splashing stampede rolled over him like a force of unnatural nature. Bony limbs and monstrous hooves trampled him down into the waters. As his head came up he felt an infernal radiance pass overhead, like a fireball, and Archaon had to duck back down under the foetid surface to avoid the flames of the dark

phoenix that flapped about the throne room, seemingly setting fire to everything.

When Archaon pushed himself up out of the water he found some savage chimeric creature on his armoured back, snapping, clawing and stabbing at him with blade-bone appendages. Another leapt on him from the side, almost knocking him over. The Chaos warrior would have fallen if it wasn't for some great crested rhinox charging by with its array of twisted horns, knocking him back. One of the beasts was torn away, having been skewered on the rhinox's horns, while a third suddenly emerged from the shallows, surging at the Chaos warrior's groin with its skin-flayed maw.

The sickle sword was no replacement for *Terminus*. While its razored curve had been hell-forged and its twisted serrations designed to inflict horrific damage, it lacked the weight of a truly devastating weapon. Lifting it above his head, Archaon brought his left arm down with all the power he could manage – forced to compensate brute strength for the lacking weight of the blade. The chimera died messily enough, the barbed sickle dragging the creature's entrails from it as Archaon laid into the beast with a second mulching strike.

Archaon didn't have to worry about the remaining creature. Agrammon had finally come to its diabolical senses and was slithering its coiled length about its throne and spitting the venom of sorcerous words. A water-whipping maelstrom of laceration circled the daemon lord like a whirlwind of unseen blades. Warped predators bounding through the shallows were torn to shreds by the invisible wall, while ungainly titans were skinned alive and had flesh sheared from their bones. The dark phoenix was shredded in a steaming blaze of unnatural flame. The chimera was ripped from Archaon's back, where it had been savaging his armoured neck. The Chaos warrior, meanwhile, became a staggering fountain of sparks as the flesh-raking force clashed once more with Archaon's cursed plate.

Through the sparks and the wall of gore circling the daemon Agrammon, Archaon saw Giselle. Agrammon had her inside the fat coils of its serpentine form, while the whip-like tip of its serpentine tail was actually snaked around the girl. The daemon's flesh was black and steaming where it was in contact with Giselle, but despite the delicious torture of the soul-scorching experience, the monstrous daemon would not be denied its prize.

Forcing himself on, step after desperate step, the armour of Morkar suffering the wrath of the daemon's powers, Archaon sizzled with the sparks raining from his plate and down into the waters below. Punching through, Archaon ran up out of the shallows, stomping his way up the dais upon which Agrammon and its throne was supported. Swinging down with furious force, Archaon opened up

one of the daemon's fat coils with the sickle sword, tearing through daemonflesh and spraying himself with ichor.

'Agrammon!' Archaon roared at the monstrous being. 'Your tower will fall. Your twisted palace will howl empty with the southern winds. The cages of your legendary menagerie will rust – legend no more. While so many have served you, you will now serve me: the chosen of the Chaos gods.'

Archaon had hoped to draw the daemon lord's attention with his bold taunts. Agrammon – ever the slave to temptation – fell this time for the Chaos warrior's trap.

'I serve only at the pleasure of my god, mortal,' the daemon seethed, its words like barbed ecstasies exploding in Archaon's mind. 'The Prince of such Pleasures.'

Agrammon, overcome with an infernal desire to see the architect of its woes ended, swept forwards with its gigantic, spindly claws.

'Then you can serve him in oblivion,' Archaon promised the daemon lord.

Ducking and weaving, Archaon evaded the daemon's talons, turning them away with savage flourishes of his sickle sword. At every opportunity, between the grasping and stabbing of the giant finger-blades, Archaon sank the serrated blade into the meaty daemonflesh of the creature's coils. All the while, Archaon felt the quake of a monstrosity approach. The abominate creature of chitinous plate, fang-fiend face and colossal horns that Archaon had seen both raging in its enclosure and furiously beating dents into the thick metal of the palace doors was storming its way through the throne room. The slaughterbrute was an unthinking monster already blessed by the Blood God with an appetite for decimation. It lived to crush with its colossal claws, stamp with its mighty hooves and gore with its freakish arrangement of blood-stained horns. Its torso and arms rippled with the muscular fortitude of a thing that never stopped killing, while its maw was a deathtrap designed for tearing heads from prey.

The abomination thundered through the vaulted throne room, mindlessly crushing, smashing and killing anything in its path. Daemonettes became twisted mounds of spiked scrap through which the ichor leaked into the stinking waters of the palace. Monsters who, like the slaughterbrute, had suffered in Agrammon's royal menagerie, became showers of gore and ragged limbs that rained in the abomination's bloody wake.

Distracted by Archaon, the daemon lord was no longer protected by its flesh-shearing maelstrom. As soon as the abomination saw the daemon, it thundered towards it, stamping a fleeing long-snout into the shallows and beating a winged

nightmare out of its path and into the spiked wall with bone-shattering force. Perhaps it was Agrammon's size or a daemonic threat the serpentine thing so obviously posed. Perhaps the abomination remembered and knew its captor when it saw it. As the abominate monster charged, Agrammon's coils tightened about the slaughterbrute, bleeding a powerful mixture of potions and poisons from it into the monster's flesh. Agrammon brought up a colossal claw to back slice the creature to ribbons, but Archaon knew that such defences would not be enough. Clambering over the clamminess of sickly-sweet flesh, Archaon almost became trapped in the moving coils of the creature.

'Giselle!' Archaon called out, but the girl didn't seem to hear him. Giselle was no damsel in a tale of old to be saved. She would not call out for help. She stared coldly into space, oblivious to the havoc about her. 'Giselle!'

As he got to her the Chaos warrior tore at the steaming tail of the daemon. The thing resisted his efforts and coiled tighter about the Sister of the Imperial Cross. Flashing a glance at the oncoming slaughterbrute, Archaon brought his sickle sword down on the tail. Again. Again. The sword's serrated edge sheared flesh from the thrashing horror but wasn't heavy enough to cleave through bone. He roared, cutting at the daemon. Finally, the bone shattered under the frenzied onslaught, caught between one of the sword's many barbs and the stone of the throne dais. Seconds later the thick coils slithering tighter about them suddenly unravelled. The bloody stump that Archaon had left was whipped away, trailing black gore. As the slaughterbrute and the daemon Agrammon collided, Archaon grabbed Giselle and ran for the wall.

The abominate beast knocked Agrammon from its throne. As the daemon's snake-like body wrapped itself around the monstrous force of the slaughterbrute, the pair of them smashed through the chamber. The creature alternated between the unrelenting force of its fist and the gouging slash of its thick claws. It savaged Agrammon with its dagger-toothed maw and gored it with its monstrous horns. Purple lightning enveloped them both, streaming from the spindly claws of the daemon, setting the slaughterbrute alight.

Archaon dragged the dumbfounded Giselle after him. The daemon's dead tail fell away in scorched cinders as the pair of them ran. The titanic battle crashed through the throne room with the daemon screeching its life away as the abominable monster mauled and smashed it into the floor of its own palace.

'Help me,' Archaon said to the stunned Giselle, as he tried to help Sheerian and the Swords of Chaos from where they had been hooked into the wall. Like Giselle, they all moaned the pure pleasure of their agonies as Archaon and the

girl tried to prise them from the spikes on the wall. As the thunder from the other side of the chamber subsided, Archaon turned to present his sickle sword. If the slaughterbrute had finished with the daemon lord, the Chaos warrior knew that it wouldn't stop. The thing existed to bludgeon lesser creatures into oblivion, mindlessly honouring the Blood God that fuelled its fury and monstrous power. It knew only killing and Archaon and his people would look as good a murderous prospect as any.

'Get them up,' Archaon told Giselle as Vier's knees buckled underneath him, sending the winged marauder into the shallows. As the girl helped the warped warrior back to its unsteady feet, Archaon readied himself for the abominate monster that had turned from the lifeless tremblings and slitherings of Agrammon. The monster roared, shaking the very foundations of the tower, and levelled its nest of colossal horns at Archaon. The beast flared its armoured nostrils. It was as if the thing could smell a threat: Archaon.

'What's happening?' Archaon heard a disorientated Sheerian say.

An unsteady Eins appeared next to its master, its wings a punctured mess and one of its freshly drawn bone swords held in a hand dribbling with blood.

'Get them out of here,' Archaon commanded. The Sword of Chaos hesitated its protestation. 'Do it...' Archaon said, his voice sharp and grim.

As the Swords gathered their wits and shook off the Slaaneshi potion smeared on the spikes, they led Giselle and Sheerian towards the door. As the colossal slaughterbrute sniffed in the direction of the sorcerer and the girl, Archaon waved his sickle sword above him. 'Here, monster,' he called across the throne room. 'Here.'

With the Swords of Chaos cutting their way through chimeric beasts, spawn creatures and wild-eyed beastfiends, Archaon felt the floor shake and the foetid waters about his boots slosh and recede. The abominate monster was charging down on him. Turning the sickle sword about with his wrist, Archaon readied himself, although he knew not what for. An undercut to some softer part on the creature's belly? Did the monster have any softer parts? Perhaps he could get his blade past an armoured eyelid and into the beast's brain. The thing was monstrous brawn beneath thick chitinous plates that served the beast as a kind of natural armour. Beyond that there was the skewering forest of horn, fang and claw to worry about. The abomination roared. Archaon stood his ground but beneath his plate the sound shook his very bones. With the monster all but on top of him, Archaon still didn't know what he was going to do.

Something shot past Archaon, through the murk and drizzle. It thudded into

the brawn of the creature's neck. It was the size of a spear but Archaon recognised it as an arrow. One of Jharkill's arrows. The slaughterbrute took several more thunderous steps before crashing to one side. Archaon winced but stood his ground as the beast collapsed about him, scraping its way to a stop along the spiked wall of the palace. Opening his eye, Archaon turned to see that the malformed ogre was standing nearby. He was a mess, blood leaking from gaping slashes in his deformed flesh. His twin was dead, the thing's mouth gaping open and leaking the horrible substance Jharkill used to poison his arrows. He had recovered his ivory tusk bow and quiver from before the throne and, selecting another arrow, smeared it in the blood and poison dripping down his belly before putting it in the abomination – ensuring that the uncontrollable thing had been put to sleep. Archaon nodded with obvious approval. The ogre's marksmanship and knowledge of his quarry's vulnerabilities were impressive – and these were the least impressive of the monster's capabilities. He had indeed made Agrammon a fine servant and in time might do the same for Archaon.

Padding through the shallows and across the throne room while Jharkill picked off the menagerie's escaped monstrosities one by one, Archaon found the mess that the Blood God's abomination had made of the daemon lord Agrammon. The serpentine daemon had been smashed. It had been broken. It had been torn into colossal, twitching pieces. Archaon found the daemon lord's torso separated from the nightmare lengths of its body. The slaughterbrute had splattered Agrammon into the palace floor. Dragging its daemon entrails through the shallows, one of its spindly claws a broken mess, Archaon discovered that half of its chest had been crushed. Its array of horns were a shattered remnant and its tentacular appendages reached out for a body that was no longer there.

Archaon stepped across the creature, its back to him, and grabbed the shattered stump of a horn. Hauling the daemon lord's head up out of the shallows, where it had been gagging and spuming, Archaon brought the blade of the sickle sword to Agrammon's throat. Decimated though it was, he couldn't risk the daemon using its regenerative powers or spoken sorceries. Holding it there, Archaon only found the dreamy smile of a Slaaneshi deviant enjoying the agonies of its last moments. Archaon grunted.

'Your monsters,' Archaon hissed in the daemon's ear, 'are now my monsters. Do you hear that daemon? This is for *Terminus*. An end for an end.' Archaon drew the serrated sword edge across the daemon lord's throat, the barbed teeth of the weapon tearing it out. Dropping the infernal creature's heavy head into the ichor-clouding shallows, Archaon spat at the daemon. 'Welcome to oblivion...'



he told it, before walking away.



## CHAPTER VII

*'Daemons rise and daemons fall – and in their falling, come ever to rise again. It is both our gift and our curse.'*

– Necromagne the Dark Muse

*The Gatelands  
The Southern Wastes  
Horns Harrowing: Season of the Ravening*

Archaon left the palace of the daemon lord Agrammon behind. The barbed tower and twisted metal walls of the nightmare writhed with unnatural flame, fanned by the winds of the continental interior. As the palace raged behind them, lighting up the broiling black skies, the Chaos warlord ordered his horde assembled for a march on the palaces closer to the howling radiance of warping realities that spewed into the world from the demolished Chaos gate. Ograx the Great had led Archaon's savage warherd to victory out on the bone-tangled Wastes and had arrived outside the palace as Archaon was leaving. The beastfiends had stripped the daemonic stronghold of anything useful – weapons, armour and wagons. Archaon allowed a few hours for the creatures of his horde

to quench their thirst with Slaaneshi blood and quell the rumble of their bellies with the flesh of the fallen. The Swords of Chaos took their place once more at the warlord's side. At Archaon's insistence the savage shamans of his bestial army looked to Sheerian and Giselle's wounds.

Archaon sat on the back of a bone-cage wagon that he had ordered covered in the skins of their foes. The Chaos warlord had the wagon furnished with a mound of furs for a bed. He had the lowly creatures of his horde attend with the freshest water they could find and cooked meat stripped from beasts of magnificent burden who had been found still in their menagerie cages. This he reserved for Giselle, with two more of the incredible beasts hauling the wagon and the twisted Vier at the reins. Giselle just crawled into the furs, holding herself like a child, staring deep into nothingness.

'Giselle, I...' Archaon began, but the words wouldn't come. Once again, he had failed to protect her. Once again, some monstrosity of the Southern Wastes had visited torments upon her precious flesh. Once more, Archaon had made such things pay with their existence – but that was little consolation to those who had already paid for Archaon's mistakes.

He wanted to tell her that he was sorry. That he had failed in his confrontation with his father-in-shadow and that he should have been at the head of the horde instead. The daemon Agrammon wouldn't have got its spindly claws on Giselle, on his Swords of Chaos and even ancient Sheerian if Archaon had been there. The Chaos warrior was sure of that. At one time he had found it easier to talk to Giselle. They fought, they spat their threats and even found their way to laughing the woes of the world away. Their lips craved the taste of each other's damnation. Their fingers burned across the purity and pollution of each other's flesh. Now Giselle pulled away from Archaon like every other dread thing in this benighted world. He had once again become a thing feared, untrusted and unloved.

As Giselle's lips parted, Archaon's heart – that sat heavy like a shard of obsidian in his chest – leapt. He leant in. His gauntlet moved for the mound of her body beneath the furs. Giselle's bloodshot eyes were dry and distant with tears that would not come. Her bandage-bound hand reached out for the cold metal of the gauntlet. A mumble became a forlorn hiss. Archaon leant in closer.

'Why... won't... you... die?' the Sigmarite sister said, her words stinging with the blank-face bitterness of betrayal. She pushed the gauntlet from her trembling body. Archaon felt cracks creep deep through the obsidian agony in his chest and bit back a snarl. The anger was not directed at the girl but at himself. The

contortions behind the faceplate of his horned helm fell away to a slow nod.

‘Aye,’ he told Giselle. ‘That’s the question.’

Turning away, Archaon found Sheerian and the twisted shaman that had been tending to both the sorcerer and Giselle’s wounds. Across the bonfire of bones that warmed the warlord through his cursed plate, Archaon saw the small mountain range that was the silhouettes of Ograx the Great and the huntsman, Jharkill. The beastfiend champion and the malformed ogre waited on the edge of the fearful distance left clear about Archaon’s wagon. The stinking shaman approached but Archaon angled his helm at the thing, the warlord’s silent gaze enough to stop it in its hoof tracks. The shaman had been busy in the camp with its filthy dressings, its wound-cleansing flame and the curved bone-shard of its wound-closing needle. Several times the shaman had tried to tend to its warlord’s wounds and afflictions but every time Archaon had shaken the beastfiend’s clawed fingers from his plate.

‘My lord,’ Sheerian said, risking Archaon’s ire, ‘if I may be so bold. If you ever want to swing a sword with that arm again, you need to have it bound in place. So it will heal, my lord.’

Archaon had all but forgotten the dull agony of his broken arm. He had grown accustomed to visiting savage butchery with his left, while the arm that his father-in-shadow had shattered dangled armoured and helpless at his side.

‘My sword is gone...’ Archaon said, his words taken by the doom-laden breeze.

‘There will be other swords, master,’ the ancient told him. ‘Let there be the strength of an arm, the turn of a wrist and the belief of a clenched fist to guide their death-dealing path.’

Archaon hated the Tzeentchian sorcerer but he knew he was right. While Archaon was no ordinary man, with his fate-cursed bones and flesh blessed of ruin, he could not allow the unnatural healing of his body to fix the mangled limb in place. Such a limb would be next to useless and a liability in the monstrous battles the Chaos warlord was sure were yet to come. Archaon nodded and Sheerian pushed the shaman to approach with its splint and the black fur of a sling.

As the beastfiend went to work on the shattered limb, fresh agonies arcing through the warlord’s being, Archaon instructed Sheerian to have Ograx and Jharkill come before him. As the beastfiend champion and the monstrous ogre stepped forth, Archaon felt Eins, Zwei and Drei close in slightly. Like gargoyles protecting some cathedral from evil spirits, the Swords of Chaos stood sentinel

and silent about the wagon, their wings in tatters, but their bone swords intact and but a swift hand grasp away.

Archaon regarded Ograx the Great. The beastfiend was a blood-drenched vision of horn and muscle. The creature had its brain-splattered skull-axe by its side and about its waist the champion wore so many skulls dangling from its fur belts that the clinking arrangement almost constituted a skirt or kilt.

‘Sorcerer,’ Archaon commanded, ‘ask this creature why he moved my horde into battle before my order to do so.’

Sheerian translated Archaon’s words into the dark tongue of the Southern Wastes and Ograx replied dangerously in kind, the infernal beastliness of its jaws going to work at a snarling explanation.

‘He says that he camped near the palace as you instructed, but that this monster,’ the ancient said, indicating the malformed ogre, ‘captured and caged those that the herdmaster would keep close.’

‘Perhaps Ograx the Great might have lived up to its name,’ Archaon replied, ‘and kept those the herdmaster would keep close, close to himself.’ When Sheerian hesitated, Archaon urged, ‘Tell him.’

‘Has there not been enough blood spilled, my dark lord?’ the Tzeentchian wheezed.

‘There certainly won’t have been if you don’t issue my wishes, my instructions, nay my *commands* to this brute.’

At Sheerian’s words, Ograx roared his protestations. Beyond the fire, horns turned and the ears of beastfiends twitched at the confrontation. The hands of the Swords of Chaos edged closer to the wing-sheathes of their weapons. Sheerian held out his skeletal hands to calm the beast.

‘He, he,’ the sorcerer stammered, ‘he says he attacked the palace to reclaim what belonged to Archaon, chosen of the Chaos gods but that if Archaon, chosen of the Chaos gods, had not wandered into the Wastes, hordeless and without words, then perhaps his harlot and her attendants would have been safe.’

Archaon savagely shrugged off the shaman, his broken arm splinted across the plate of his chest, the black fur of a tight sling holding it in place.

‘Harlot?’ Archaon barked at the Blood God’s champion. ‘I should have left her in charge. I think you are right, Great One. They were not safe with you at the head of this horde, your heifer’s mind addled with the lust for blood.’

As Sheerian translated his master’s fury, Ograx stepped forward, its hooves scratching at the frozen dirt. The beast could barely wrap its thick tongue about its ire.

‘Or yours,’ the aged sorcerer told Archaon, translating the best he could, ‘buried in the fell flesh of that heretic woman.’

Ograx the Great spat at Archaon’s feet. The warlord watched the head of the skull-axe come up. The strain of daemongut and the creak of ivory cut through the confrontation. Beside Ograx, the huntsman Jharkill had drawn its colossal tusk bow and held the spear-like length of an arrow to the bestial champion’s horned head. The whisper of bone blades being torn from wing-sheathes followed.

‘If he does that again,’ Archaon commanded darkly, ‘shoot him.’

Ograx quaked. The beaten plate strapped across his chest rose and fell with the exertion of keeping the creature’s fury in check. About it, the ogre’s arrow trembled, the Swords of Chaos closed with their blades of bone and Archaon glowered – injured, unarmed and uncaring, confident that he could kill the beastfiend champion with a single bare hand, if required. Worst of all, the warlord’s cutting words had lit wildfires of doubt that would spread through the horde. Hulking beastfiends and warrior half-breeds who had brought dark honour to the Ruinous Powers in battle under Ograx’s savage command now reared to full height. Where before such monsters would have fought for the Great One, now they smelled blood and the chance to lead Archaon’s horde for themselves. The bestial prince lowered his horned head. It was as much of an acknowledgement or apology as Archaon was going to get.

‘Great One,’ Archaon said, his words translated into dark tongue by Sheerian, ‘you lead the horde in my name still.’ Archaon grunted; with the fires of possibility and greed stoked in the savage hearts of the beastfiend horde, he knew not for how long. Ograx nodded his brute understanding and lowered his horned head further in furious appreciation. As he turned to leave, Archaon’s barbed words stopped the creature. ‘However, beastling prince, think not to be left in sole command of my dread army again.’

Ograx the Great fought back his fury and with difficulty turned, as though Archaon’s words were holding him there. He looked up the colossal shaft of the arrow at Jharkill, who with some hesitation of his own, began to lower his weapon. With that the beastfiend champion’s hooves stomped away. Away from the burn of remonstrations and through the barging shoulders and silent, standing hostility of a warherd that, moments before, he had commanded without question.

Archaon turned his attention to the monstrous ogre, who lowered his brute bow and unstrung his arrow. The thing’s dead twin still sat in his chest, its face

fixed in a mask of death and the oily, black poison that Jharkill used on his arrowheads still leaking down the ogre's huge belly. Archaon snapped the tinny fingers of his gauntlet and Sheerian brought forth the heavy shaman's staff that the huntsman used to control the monsters of the menagerie. It jangled with the charms hanging from its cross bar as the sorcerer laid it down on the ground before Archaon. Jharkill came forth, holding his tusk bow in the hand of his huge, muscle-bound arm while its atrophied opposite stroked the face of the dead twin. Kneeling before Archaon, Jharkill lowered his head.

'I am Archaon,' the Chaos warlord told the malformed ogre. As he spoke, Sheerian translated his words into another dialect of dark tongue. Something still savage but more sophisticated than the beastspeak of Ograx the Great and his half-breeds. 'Chosen of the Ruinous Gods, bearer of their gifts and taker of their treasures. Darkness willing, I shall be the Everchosen of Chaos. Lord of the End Times. Herald of the Apocalypse. In my expanding horde the weak are sacrificed and the strong are spared – to sacrifice themselves to my will. That is why the beastlord you had in your sights still lives. His strength is my strength. His talents enhance my own. I would ask no less of you, Jharkill of the Gatelands. Serve me as you served your last master.'

Jharkill's words rumbled up from inside him like an earthquake and Sheerian translated them.

'I am yours, Chosen one,' Jharkill said. 'For I have seen with my own eyes the favour bestowed on you by the Dark Gods of this land. How may I serve your dreadship?'

Archaon nodded slowly.

'I would ask of you no more than your previous daemon lord,' Archaon said simply.

'You wish to collect beasts?'

'I do.'

'But you freed the monsters of my lord's menagerie,' Jharkill said, confused. He was a skilled hunter and gifted in the primitive arts of charmongery. He was not much of a thinker. Archaon forgave him this failing. The warlord didn't need thinkers. Warriors who spent their time in thought rather than in slaughterous service were not to be trusted. Archaon had fallen foul of such dangers before.

'You mistake me, huntsman,' Archaon told him. 'Your master was a despicable tyrant who revelled in the suffering of his caged slaves. I have no such ambitions. I require no palace or menagerie to encircle it. I am no liberator either. The monstrous things of the world should not be kept in cages and

captives should have their freedom. Freedom has its price, master huntsman, as you yourself know; these monstrosities you catch and enslave to your will should be free to serve me. They should be free to exercise their devastating talents – to butcher and destroy as they were born to do – and they should do it as part of my growing horde of beasts.’

‘You wish me to catch the creatures you set free?’ the malformed ogre rumbled.

‘And bind them to your will, as you charmed them before,’ Archaon told him, ‘so that such monsters can rain down destruction on my enemies at my command. Can you do this for me, huntsman?’

Jharkill shouldered his huge bow and picked up his shaman’s staff, rearing to his full hunchbacked height.

‘As I am,’ the creature said, ‘they shall be. Yours, my master.’

Archaon smiled behind the leering skull of his horned helm.

‘Good...’ he hissed.

‘It will take some time, my master,’ Jharkill warned him. With Lord Agrammon’s palace aflame and the menagerie a twisted ruin, the monsters of the daemon’s collection had fled across the Gatelands to their freedom.

‘I want only the strongest,’ Archaon instructed, ‘the most savage and talented of their kind. My horde is no place for the weak – even if they are born to monstrosity. I need things that can march with my bestial army, fly above it or range ahead of it to report dangers to come. I need giants, the scaled serpents of the sky, things fleet of foot that track and savage, daemonbreeds and destroyers, like the abominate thing that did for your former master.’

‘They shall be yours to command,’ Jharkill assured him.

‘Hand pick prisoner long-snouts and half-breeds from my horde for your work,’ Archaon told it, ‘and take as many wagons as you need. I tire of this dread place. My army marches once more for the top of the world.’

‘We are heading north, my lord?’ Sheerian asked as Jharkill backed respectfully away from his new master. The sorcerer’s cracked voice betrayed a relief that was difficult to mask. Archaon knew that the Tzeentchian longed for the complexity and sophistication of more civilised lands. Compared to the frozen, barbarian darkness of the southern continent, storm-racked and swarming with beastfiends, daemons and monsters, the Northern Wastes were positively urbane. The Shadowlands at the top of the world were ruled by men and their weak-minded desires. Warring tribes. God-pledged marauders. Soul-selling sorcerers. Warbands without number, fighting for Chaos warriors – the greatest



of which led vast armies of the lost and damned at the pleasure of the Ruinous Powers. It was a place of possibility, where the servants of the Great Changer could fully deploy their talents.

‘We are heading south,’ Archaon told the sorcerer.

‘But, my lord—’ Sheerian began.

‘The horde will march on the Gatelands and the daemons who built their palaces on the rim of their great master’s otherworldly realm. We shall take the fight to these infernal princes and swell our ranks with recruits from the unslain. Jharkill will bring me monsters and you will be our guide as we pass through what is left of the Great Gate.’

Archaon felt the heads turn across the camp, ears prick and hearts leap. A shocked Sheerian tried to find the words.

‘My lord, I—’

‘Serve at the pleasure of Archaon, Chosen of the gods?’ the Chaos warlord said.

‘Of course, but the Gate—’

‘It is open, this Gate, is it not?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the sorcerer said. ‘It floods the world with madness and power, spilling unchecked and unfiltered from the monstrous beyond.’

‘And I mean to take my horde through that gate and into—’ Archaon began.

‘You mean to enter the Realm of Chaos?’ Sheerian marvelled with horror.

‘I do, sorcerer,’ Archaon said. ‘And you shall guide me.’

‘To where, master?’ Sheerian asked.

‘To the top of the world,’ Archaon said. ‘There was a Great Gate here. There was a Great Gate there. Would it not be madness for two such gateways – the only ones of their demolished kind – not to be connected?’

‘It would be madness, master,’ Khezula Sheerian said, but the sorcerer was no longer talking about dark realms and the portals that led to them. ‘My lord, I’m not sure I can be of service to you in this matter.’

‘You have been to this place, sorcerer,’ Archaon put to him, ‘this realm, this otherworldly plane where dreams are reality, the Dark Gods cower and monstrous forces shape the madness about them. Before you were summoned to this wretched flesh, you knew this nightmare realm.’

‘I did, my lord,’ Sheerian said, ‘and I would not recommend a return. This place you speak of is less a place than a feeling, a knowing – fear, if fear had a shape. It is a stormy silence or the darkness of the depths. A thing to be experienced. A horror to be lived. A hell of ever-changing torments. A

claustrophobic vastness. An endless intimacy, shared with your nightmares. Great intelligences exist in this void, things that came into being at the heart of soul-driven storms. Things born of dreads and desires. Things that long for a form of flesh in which to experience this world beyond their own.'

'Things like you,' Archaon accused.

'Things like the *Yien-Ya-Long*,' Sheerian warned, 'like Agrammon and Be'lakor – the shadow that haunts you here already. Like the Powers of ruin you scorn and serve.'

'When these things,' Archaon pressed the sorcerer, 'things like *you*, enter my world – the world that is mine to destroy – you assume the mortality and weakness of flesh. Does it not stand to reason...'

'The Realm of Chaos is no place to demand of reason, my lord,' Sheerian said fearfully.

'...that our mortality and the fell souls that drive us will assume a similar form on this benighted plane? Something temporary. Something else.'

'The place you speak of is a thing beyond words – beyond expectations. Your pledges and promises will have no meaning in an existence beyond your own,' Sheerian said.

'I am the cold fire that burns about my soul,' Archaon said. 'I suspect the dark radiance of such dark need will light our path – whatever form it might take – in this dread realm. The fires of my ambition will light our way, sorcerer, and you will guide us by that light.'

'My lord, I implore you,' Sheerian begged, 'I do not know the way. I know not if such a way exists. There are no *ways* through the Realm of Chaos. No one has ever done this before.'

'Then we shall be both the first,' Archaon told the sorcerer, 'and the last. This Realm of Chaos and the monstrous things that inhabit it – fed by the otherworldly presence of our hopes, dreams and fears – will be no more. I am Archaon, Lord of the End Times. An end to all. An end to everything that deigns to exist – in this world or any other. You will guide me and my horde through this inconstant realm, sorcerer, to the remains of the Great Gate at the top of the world, or you will find us wretched beings from that plane of damnations who can. Do you understand?'

'I do, my lord,' Sheerian told his master, and the sorcerer slunk away to dwell on their doom.

As he left, Archaon noticed another miserable creature. Gorst had finally caught up with the horde. The flagellant jangled in his chains, his charms and his

head-cage, edging towards the nearby fire and the raucous beastfiends gathered about it like some emaciated scavenger, hoping to snatch some scrap of roasted meat or the marrow from an abandoned bone. Archaon grunted. Gorst would have, indeed had followed him to the ends of the world. He wondered if the mad man would be so ready to do so if he had any conception of where they were going.

Archaon got up from the wagon, leaving Giselle to horrors relived in the darkness both beneath her furs and behind the closing of her eyes. The daemon Dorghar trotted forth and Archaon climbed up into the armoured saddle. Eins came forward to receive his master's instructions.

'Have Prince Ograx get the horde on the move,' Archaon told the Sword of Chaos. 'Our doom awaits beyond the infernal palaces of the mighty.' Archaon turned Dorghar about. The Chaos warlord intended to lead the monstrous army from the front. He pointed at Gorst. 'And make sure that wretch eats his fill before we move on.' Eins nodded in silent obedience and Dorghar raced off to the south. South towards the Gatelands. Towards the crowded ring of crooked towers, palaces and daemonic fortresses that the bottom of the world wore like a crown about the amaranthine blaze of the collapsed Chaos gate. Towards the Chaos warlord's destiny and doom.



## CHAPTER VIII

*'This is the first of the tellings. The first narrative. It was the time of before. Before the plagues of vermin and the warm-bloods. When the world was young and the creators held the realms in order. It was an age of promise and great works. The creators drew their power from a realm impossible. A spiritual plane in defiance of reason. A darkling sea through which they walked, a path unknown in a beyond not of their making. This realm was troubled by malign beings and the creators' passage through that realm became troubled also. The pathways crumbled, and the gateways connecting this existence and that collapsed. The known and the unknown merged. The true paths became poisoned by the presence of things undreamed of. Abyssal forces. False creators. New-born calamities. Fears given shape.'*

– Astromancer Tempac-Zhul, *The Annal-Inscriptions of the Great Catastrophe*

*The Gatelands*

*The Southern Wastes*  
*Horns Harrowing: Season of the Ravening*

Archaon could not claim to have brought war to the Gatelands. There daemonic armies clashed, slaughters were undertaken and things died for their rancid masters with perpetual fervour. The palaces of infernal royalty were in a constant state of being ransacked and rebuilt. Fortresses had been under siege for centuries, while towers toppled only for others to rise like colossal stone weeds from the churning earth. Every kind of infernal aberration possible seemed to hold a miserable patch of aethyr-baked ground. Greater daemons of the Chaos Powers had been questionably rewarded for their eternal service. Daemon lords kept mad court in palatial grandeur, while dark princes fought from dread fortresses, forever pledged to destruction to earn their infernal heritage. Creatures of every description and perversity haunted the smoking ruins of the Gatelands, while otherworldly beasts, half-breeds and armies of lesser daemons fought battles without end in efforts to earn their masters' attentions.

So close to the collapsed gate and the roaring torrent of unreality blasting forth from the existential breach, the very nature of normality was under constant threat. The land beneath the boot, the stone and metal of infernal palaces and the maelstrom of the heavens was in a state of monstrous flux. What could be seen, heard, smelt, tasted and touched could not be trusted. The warped landscape about the polar rift, and the nightmarish architectural achievements sprouting busily about it, smeared into one another. Daemons, their fortresses and the spawn hordes that fought for them dreamed away to spectral shades. Ghostly palaces overlapped, existing over one another in the crowded madness of the Gateland interior. Daemon lords and hellbound princes existing in the same place at different times, the wraith-like lambency of their presence like an infernal afterthought. Bathed in the perpetual blaze of the beyond, fires of flux and flame whipped through the competing canopy of roofs, domes and towers. Warpquakes shook the lands about the dread gate, opening up glowing fissures, swallowing armies, shaking fortresses to their crumbling foundations and collapsing towers in sky-rocketing plumes of dust.

Archaon rode into the insanity of the Gatelands at the head of his growing horde. His bestial ranks had been swelled by Lord Agrammon's surrendering Slaaneshi long-snouts, while Jharkill was as good as his barbarian word in rapidly recapturing many savage Chaos creatures and monsters formerly housed in the daemonic menagerie. Tracking them through the tumultuous Gatelands,

shooting them, drugging them with his evil unguents and enslaving them to his will with primitive charms and shamanic bindings, Jharkill had freakish titans, monstrous spawn, winged and warped serpents, chimeric predators and exotic abominations obediently fall into line.

Before the rotting wreck of Papa Gallows's palace of suffering, the stonework squirming with monstrous maggots and larval daemons, Archaon and Jharkill the huntsman happened upon one of their escaped monstrosities. It was a predatory fusion of beasts standing over the carcass of some bloated fury it had snatched out of the sky. The stubs of its wings flapped with the pure joy of the kill, while its ragged mane and sabred jaws dripped with the blue-black ichor of the downed fury.

Archaon heard the creak of Jharkill's tusk bow as the ogre hooked the string and the colossal shaft of the poison-smearred arrow with his atrophied limb, while heaving the bow away from his barrel chest. Archaon marvelled as the huntsman aimed up at the broiling sky and the distance from which the malformed ogre was attempting the shot. As Archaon watched the predator tear its daemonic prey apart, he recognised the beast. It was a manticore. It was Mange, the creature that had so effectively provided the havoc in Lord Agrammon's menagerie that enabled Archaon's escape. Archaon liked the idea of having such a savage creature as part of his host, but as he remembered the creature's misery in the cage and soaked up the flesh-tearing abandon of the wild beast, he felt an intervention creep down one arm. The barbed blade of Archaon's sickle sword came down to rest on the arrow shaft reaching out from the bow. Pushing on the arrow, Archaon motioned Jharkill's bow down. The ogre wrapped the contorted ugliness of his face around a squint of confusion.

'This one roams free,' Archaon said. The decision hadn't been prompted by sympathy or even a sense of loyalty born of the creature's original sacrifice. It was dark whim. The same whim that warped the landscape about them. The same whim that had created the Chaos creature in the first place. Or at least that is what Archaon told himself. Jharkill grunted his understanding and unstrung his arrow before the huntsman stomped on in search of further targets.

Digging his heels into Dorghar, Archaon motioned the daemon steed on. With his horde of tribal half-breeds united behind the flayed flesh of his banner, a growing mob of abominate monstrosities and a cavalcade of beast-hauled wagons and bone-crafted siege engines trailing the colossal host, Archaon slaughtered his way through the lands and palaces of the infernal mighty.

At the Brass Citadel Archaon led his army to a bloodbath of a victory against

Kruor'gor of the Brazen Horde – a greater daemon in the service of mighty Khorne. Forced to kill the daemon's bloodletter battlehost to the very last infernal berserker, the assault on the Brass Citadel trapped Kruor'gor in his own palace. Archaon frustrated the Blood God's abominate servant. Unusually for the Chaos warlord, he would not meet the Skulltaker in single combat. Pummeling the greater daemon with monstrous attacks from his own horde and siege fire from his bone engines of war, Archaon stoked the greater daemon's bottomless ire to such a degree that the dread creature raged into the form of a hell-fed inferno: a titan of fury and flame. The Brass Citadel melted about the creature, drowning the great Kruor'gor in an insolent lake of liquid metal.

Before the cloud-piercing tower of the Roost, Archaon's horde was set upon by the Cerulean Brood – a flock of savage Tzeentchian daemons whose colossal wings rode the currents of raw magical power bleeding from the polar portal and into the world. Skewering and snapping up beastfiends from the ground with their twisted, snaggle-toothed beaks, the daemons dropped egg-like orbs of dark and explosive enchantment on Archaon's horde, the effect of each being whimsically different. Sometimes victims in the vicinity of the sorcerous orb's impact would erupt in the blossoming horror of spawndom, while at others violaceous flames tore through the ranks of the half-breeds. Archaon himself would have succumbed to a heaven-plummeting orb that turned the ground at Dorghar's feet into a tentacled maw of abyssal appetite, but the daemon steed's reflexes were faster than the appendages shooting out for the stallion's nightmare form.

While Archaon had his own winged monstrosities take to the sky and torch the feathered daemons, he charged a ghoulish giant of withered flesh, protruding bones and ancient animations laying its great, withered back against the foot of the Roost and toppling the Tzeentchian tower. Archaon let Ograx and his beastfiends do the rest, mobbing downed daemons and butchering the sorcerer infernals that worked the libraries of the Roost and fought with the cowardly craft of the witchbreed.

The Filth Fortress of Mortiphidus the Cankered slowed Archaon's horde down considerably. The colossal rotting carcass of the Cankered One sat atop its fat, pyramidal palace like a throne. The booming laugh of the daemon was everywhere and sickened Archaon's half-breeds to the bottom of their stomachs, producing in the creatures of the herd a phased biliousness and vomiting that did not make for ideal, vanguard warriors. Oozing, spilling, leaking and excreting from every orifice and stomach-gaping sore, the stinking essence of Mortiphidus

made its way slowly down the palace tiers like lava from a volcano. Disease-ridden daemons bathed, played, splashed and frolicked in the seeping terrace shallows and rivers of rotten muck that proceeded from the great unclean daemon of Nurgle. The tiers seemed to indicate some kind of hierarchy, with infestations of miniature Cankered Ones evolving out of the rolling detritus.

Archaon's bestial horde found fighting in the palace gardens – a sickly swamp that had grown up out of the faecal flood plain surrounding the fortress – all but impossible. Noxious gases rising from the rotting marsh asphyxiated, poisoned and infected Archaon's half-breeds in equal measure, those returning from Mortiphidus's gardens carrying all manner of diseases and horrific afflictions. Others were overcome by the swarms of tiny, fat imps that rose from the swamp like bubbles in churning maelstroms of disgust.

Archaon and his Swords were forced to lead an attack on the Filth Fortress after successive assaults by Ograx the Great failed. In the sinking gardens at the foot of the palace – lost in a stunted forest of petrified fungi and the mind-splitting stench – Archaon was confronted with daemoniac knights emerging from the depths. As the Chaos warlord and his horde pushed on, up to their waists in rancid muck, the swamp spewed forth long-lost warriors, clad in rust-encrusted armour that hundreds of years before might have seen the inside of some hellish forge. The knights advanced slowly in their bloat-bent plate and emitted a horrible, droning shriek.

As Archaon crashed his sickle sword through the infernal warriors and took encrusted helms from shoulders in showers of red particles, he was surprised to find no daemons inside. Instead, the rusted knights were writhing with maggots, fat on daemonflesh and black swarms of bloated infernal flies. It became suddenly clear where the droning shriek proceeded from as Archaon, his Swords of Chaos and beastfiends of the horde not only had to battle the enduring, sorcerous spirits of the daemoniac knights but also a plague of flies intent on eating them alive. Between the haunted suits of hell-forged armour, the blood-sucking hurricane of flies and the swamp vomiting forth a never-ending garrison of rusted warriors, even Archaon ordered a retreat. Slurping back through the unbreathable stench, Archaon waded past the sinking bodies of blood-drained beastfiends sprouting the fruits of a fast-acting plague. Upon returning to his camp in an obsidian keep he had captured from a pantheon-honouring daemon prince, Archaon only had two words for his horde.

‘Burn it...’

Wielding bone torches taken from serpent-lit bonfires of plague-ridden bodies,



Archaon's half-breeds spread out about the Filth Fortress and its gardens. They didn't have to advance far before marsh gases from the rising rot – the same gases that had made it almost impossible to breath – spectacularly caught light. From the obsidian keep, Archaon watched as the oily discharge floating on the swamp surface spread the inferno through the gardens and fungal forest, before spreading through the tiers of the palace, up the rivers of rich muck and putrefaction. Archaon soaked up the suffering as the fires spread through the army of daemon followers flailing and screaming on the pyramidal palace terraces. Finally the flames spread to Mortiphidus itself, the colossal carcass of the great unclean beast giving the fires plenty of fuel. The flame writhed up about the great daemon of Nurgle. Lighting up the sky, the monstrosity's booming laughter still filled the air – riding on the crackle and hiss of the daemon's roasting rot. It was still there hours later, making his half-breeds feel sick, as Archaon ordered the horde on from the obsidian keep.

The further Archaon's army pushed into the Gateland interior, the more insanity they encountered. Warped daemoniac furies swarmed through the cloudless blackness of a sky in which the moiling heavens had been burned dry by the elation roaring up through the collapse of the mighty Chaos gate. The creatures circled endlessly about the blaze of otherworldly energies spewing into the world. The spaces between the palaces grew tighter, making moving the horde, its accompanying monsters and the cavalcade of wagons and siege engines difficult. The fortress walls of the infernal palaces grew taller and grander in their obscene veneration of the Ruinous Powers. Colossal, crafted symbols reached into the silent madness of the skies, casting shadows down on enemy courtyards, honouring the most powerful of Chaos gods, as well as pantheon-praising eight-point stars of ruin and the rarer sigils of lesser known powers and daemon princes.

Archaon and his army found continual slaughter and butchery in the killing fields and thoroughfares that twisted between vaulting palaces, monstrous citadels and smoking fortress ruins. Bones crunched beneath boots everywhere they went, like an ivory gravel squelching in a bloody mire. Corpses swung from the razored crenellations of walls. Body parts and horned heads sat on forests of decorative spikes. Thoroughfares, that were almost rivers of gore, dammed by corpse walls and massacres.

Fighting his way over the concentric, polygonal walls of a star-shaped fort that through its eight-point layout revered the glory of the Ruinous Powers united, Archaon and his monstrous mob of mongrels laid siege to Kastaghar the

Adulant. Kastaghar was a newly ascended prince, worshipped by daemoniac disciples who were worshipped by other infernal creatures who, in turn, were worshipped by hundreds of other hell-born servants. The daemons of the Adulant indulged a monastic existence and lived as masons, castle custodians and worshippers of their fellow dark kindred, with only the dread Kastaghar allowed to venerate the gods of Chaos directly. With their pallid daemonflesh, and dressed identically in their midnight skull helms, black foil skirts, urchin-spiked pauldrons and hook-knuckled gauntlets, the dark brotherhood of the Adulant left their scarred chests and backs on show. Archaon found the fraternity to be staid and disciplined warriors, holding their fort and their own against the wild butchery of his half-breeds.

Face to face, Archaon found Kastaghar to be much like himself. The Chaos gods had been subtle in their gifts, with neither the warlord nor the daemon prince monstrous in appearance. They were intelligent, potent warriors who, unlike many savage creatures of Chaos, were not without dark humour or civility.

Even the multiple walls of the black fort could not stand up to the decimation wreaked upon their stone surfaces by Archaon's abominates. Giants and monsters smashed through, allowing Ograx and his beastfiends to flood the fort. Archaon was impressed with the reverence and discipline of Kastaghar's brotherhood, each daemoniac acolyte fighting expertly for the leading disciple they worshipped. Though Archaon's losses were grievous, the brotherhood were simply driven back before the deluge of horn and muscle that streamed in through the fort wall breaches.

Even as the Adulant and Archaon circled one another within the star-shaped walls of the inner temple ward, the pair shared some dark pleasantries.

'What happened to your arm?' Kastaghar asked.

Archaon saw no point in lying. His right arm was strapped across his chest.

'It's broken,' the warlord said, 'so I will be destroying you with my left today. Forgive me – I hope you are not insulted.'

'On the contrary,' the Adulant said. 'In conscience, I cannot kill a warrior sporting such an injury.' Kastaghar stretched the pale flesh of his brawny neck from side to side before straining his back and bare chest. His face was handsome for an infernal prince but screwed up with exertion and sickening pain. Finally something popped horribly in his chest and his right arm fell uselessly by his side. Archaon found that he had laughed, his mirth echoing about the walls of the fort. Kastaghar the Adulant had dislocated his shoulder for

the battle.

‘Now we can both fight with honour,’ he told Archaon. A member of the brotherhood threw his master a staff bearing leaf-shaped blades of black on both ends. Kastaghar twirled the weapon expertly in the fingers of his left hand for show. Archaon nodded.

‘I find honour overrated, dark prince,’ Archaon told him. ‘But I thank you for both the gesture and the amusement I did not think to find in this place.’

‘Perhaps I can entertain you further with a wager?’

‘I like you, prince,’ Archaon told him. It was refreshing to find a creature of regard and wit in the mindless violence and horror of the Southern Wastes.

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘A trial by blade, of course,’ Kastaghar said.

‘What else?’ Archaon agreed. ‘This is the Gatelands – the Dark Gods are watching.’

Now it was the Adulant’s turn to laugh.

‘I like you too, interloper,’ Kastaghar said. ‘Despite what you have done to the walls of my temple, a temple to honour all Dark Gods. You think little of honour, but you could have had your monsters level this unhallowed place and yet you have not. Your creatures met my brotherhood blade to blade – as you have met me.’

‘Is there a point coming soon?’ Archaon teased.

‘Indeed, my dark brother,’ Kastaghar said, laughing once more. ‘Single combat: you and I – no champions. If I succeed in offering your soul to our gods, then your champion shall lead your host from this unholy place and leave my brotherhood to continue in their dark prayers.’

‘You care for these underling wretches?’ Archaon marvelled.

‘I care for their devotions,’ the daemon prince told him, ‘and the devotions they will inspire in others. For without such dread faith and the spreading of dark truths, the Ruinous Powers would be no more.’

‘I see your point,’ Archaon said, once more smiling beneath his helm. He imagined himself riding through a world of cinder and bone, with no one left to worship gods dark or otherwise. He imagined the faith-starved gods of Chaos, their emaciate energies sustained only by the atrocities of one fell warrior: Archaon, Lord of the End Times. Everchosen of Chaos. Destroyer of the Dark Gods. In the glorious taking of his own life – the last mortal to walk the apocalyptic ruin of the world – he would snuff out the dread Powers like guttering candles in the breeze. He would need more than bestial savages and

monsters to achieve such a feat. Perhaps it was plain perversity. Perhaps he truly had come to like the dark prince – but in that moment Archaon decided not to kill Kastaghar the Adulant.

‘I counter your offer,’ Archaon said, drawing the barbed blade of his sickle sword. ‘First blood settles the victor. If the blood is mine, you keep your fortress-temple and the creatures who would carry out their devotions within it.’

‘And if the blood is mine, interloper?’ Kastaghar said.

‘Then you abandon this damned place,’ Archaon said.

‘To you?’ the Adulant asked.

‘To the elements,’ Archaon told him, ‘unnatural though they may be. You and your brotherhood join me and my horde. You can bring your devotions with you. I could once more use a man of faith at my side.’

Kastaghar the Adulant cast a gaze across the ranks of his surviving brotherhood, corralled as they were by Archaon’s horde, within the walls of the inner temple ward.

‘I choose life over death,’ the dark prince announced, walking forth. ‘Belief over oblivion. A brother’s love over loss. Let’s fight.’

Kastaghar came forth with his bladed spear, turning it with his wrist. Archaon tapped the cracked, black stone of the temple ward with the toothed tip of his sickle sword and advanced to meet the daemon prince. Kastaghar’s spear spun at Archaon with sudden speed and savagery, the rotating blades threatening to cut the warlord in two. Archaon side-stepped the display, but Kastaghar countered immediately by spinning the spear before him like a wheel. Archaon used his sickle sword to turn the weapon aside. Then again. And again. The rotating blur of the spear stopped suddenly and became a thrusting menace, stabbing forth with murderous force and discipline. Archaon lurched back, swiping the spear-point from its path towards his chest, his groin and his skull faceplate.

Archaon was impressed with the dark prince’s technique. He seemed fluid and graceful, backed up by infernal strength and fearlessness. The weapon too was a lightweight thing of craft and killing ability. Even in Kastaghar’s left hand, the dark prince turned it, back-slashed and jabbed with it as though it were barely there. Its twin blades were leaf-shaped and equal to the tasks of cutting with their curved edge or piercing with their black points. The brotherhood had gathered around to show their support. They prayed for their master and sported further weaponry for him in the event that his spear should fail. As Archaon whipped about, turned and smashed the relentless spin of the spear he saw the blur of his own gathered half-breeds, who were roaring, snorting and calling thick-tongued

obscenities, insults and threats at Kastaghar.

He saw Ograx the Great bellowing his fury, great streams of drool whipping from his shaking jaws. The Swords of Chaos waited obediently as part of the forming circle, anticipating further orders. Ready with hands on the hilts of bone swords, ready to be pulled from the sheaths of folded wings. Khezula Sheerian watched nearby, an almost perpetual concern etched into the ancient's features. Then – with great surprise – he saw the misshapen Vier, standing with Giselle. The girl had left the solitude of her wagon and furs. She had walked through the wreckage of the fortress walls and had joined the circle to watch Archaon fight. Her face was a sour void of blank disappointment.

Such surprise almost cost Archaon as the spear seared down at him once more. Archaon turned around, allowing the toothed curvature of the sickle sword to glance round, absorbing the clash of the spearheads. Archaon whipped his cloak and furs about him but by the time he had turned, ready to wheel the sickle sword at Kastaghar, the dark prince was once again thrusting for him. Leaning out of a throat jabbing stroke, Archaon lurched immediately at Kastaghar. As the Adulant brought the spear in close, twirling it over his head and then about his twisting body, Archaon dived into a heavy roll beneath it. With his plate jangling about him, Archaon swept the barbed blade of the sickle sword through Kastaghar's knees, but the dark prince had jumped up out of its path. As Archaon's sickle sword came up, Kastaghar's spinning spear smashed into the toothed weapon, tearing it from Archaon's grip. Archaon grunted as the hell-forged weapon, inferior in weight and craftsmanship, skittered across the stone floor of the fortress-temple nearby.

Kastaghar seemed to hesitate. He brought the spear blade down with all the force his left arm could muster. Archaon wasn't there by the time the blade sparked off the stone and was racing across the circle. Ducking beneath an opportunistic backslash of the spear, Archaon slid down onto his armoured side and snatched up the sickle sword as he skidded by across the smooth stone. Kastaghar was there almost immediately – the daemon prince not only moving with infernal grace and speed but also unencumbered by a full suit of plate. Again, Archaon felt the Adulant hesitate. This time Kastaghar didn't thrust or spin his spear at all but waited honourably while Archaon got to his feet. The dark prince wouldn't blood his opponent as he scabbled about on his temple floor.

Shaking out his plate and turning the sickle sword in his own wrist, Archaon nodded his appreciation to the Adulant, who nodded back. The blistering attack

that followed was nothing short of a sword storm, fuelled by Archaon's scorched pride. Bringing the serrated blade back and forth, around and surging up in a curved, gut-punching thrust, Archaon followed with a rhythmic succession of hacks and slashes, each manoeuvre sending the lighter blade at Kastaghar with all the belligerent force his arm and inner turmoil could draw upon. Kastaghar's defences were no less graceful than his attacks, using his twisting wrist and single arm to negate Archaon's furious assault.

Clutching the spear shaft along his forearm to turn aside the cleaving motion of Archaon's blade, the daemon prince twirled the spear around and about, the bladed ends clashing the sickle sword's relentless attentions away. Archaon fought on. As the Chaos warlord lurched forward with attack after murderous attack, Kastaghar was forced to weave, retreat, flip back acrobatically and twirl the spear before him in a whirling circle of death. Archaon's blade simply would not be stopped, however, and with a force that drew a roar from the warlord, Archaon chopped the spear in half.

Startled by the ferocity of the counter attack and the splintering crack of the spear, Kastaghar took several swift steps back. Archaon did not follow, however, allowing the daemon prince a moment to catch his breath. Dropping the demolished weapon, Kastaghar called for another and caught the chain of a flail that had been cast to him across the circle by one of the brotherhood. He clutched the handle and allowed the black chain of the flail to fall. Archaon could see that it sported a modest metal ball with eight spiked points, forming the shape of the Ruinous Star of their calling. Kastaghar nodded, returning his appreciation, before stepping forward.

As Archaon closed once more, moving about the dark prince, he worked the serrated blade around with slow turns of the wrist – like a scorpion ready to strike. Kastaghar had started to work his flail with his left hand, expertly sending the spiked ball about him, occasionally swinging the length of the weapon out at Archaon's head or sword. The two warriors of Chaos seemed to have the same idea at the same time. Closing suddenly, Archaon's serrated sword came up. Kastaghar's flail shot out. There was the excruciating sound of metal being tangled as the teeth of Archaon's sickle sword caught in the links of the black chain and both spiked ball and the curved edge of the serrated blade became a knotted mess.

Both Archaon and Kastaghar abandoned their weapons simultaneously, surging for one another with their gauntlets. The brotherhood and Archaon's Swords stood by to throw their masters fresh weaponry, but the pair did not seem

interested. Latching onto one another with their armoured fists, the warlord and the daemon prince dragged each other in close. As they did so, their helms almost clashed. With a grunt, and still holding his enemy close, Archaon brought up his leg and rested the sole of his boot on the Adulant's chest. Archaon kicked Kastaghar away with such force that the dark prince went stumbling back at the ranks of Archaon's own followers.

Then the warlord realised his mistake.

While Kastaghar had held Archaon with his gauntlets, he had snagged him with one of his knuckle-hooks, the sharpened point of one hook finding its way between the plates of his cursed armour and pinching at Archaon's flesh. As Archaon kicked him away, he felt the hook tear away and the warmth of blood dribble down his chest. It was the most minor of wounds but the daemon prince had indeed drawn first blood on Archaon.

Archaon stood there and lowered his gauntlets, while Kastaghar tumbled through the inner ranks of the circle. He regained his balance at the edge of the ring, his chest rising and falling. He looked to Archaon. The dark prince knew that he had blooded Archaon but with the scratch hidden from view beneath the armour of Morkar, no one else but Archaon knew this to be the case. The two champions regarded one another. Archaon's lips formed about a concession but then he saw Giselle. The girl was standing in the circle immediately behind Kastaghar. Archaon's heart leapt at the danger the girl was in, standing so close to the Adulant with his clawed gauntlets – especially if Archaon failed to honour the wound the daemon prince had inflicted. Without a muscle on her face moving, Giselle reached to one side and pulled a bone dagger from a sheath in one of Vier's broken wings. The misshapen Sword of Chaos was as surprised at the movement as Archaon and tried to reach for the girl's arm, but failed. Grabbing the oblivious Kastaghar from behind, the girl drew the razored edge of the bone blade across the Adulant's throat.

With a single slice, Archaon's hope of assimilating Kastaghar and his brotherhood into the ranks of the horde died. They died with Kastaghar the Adulant himself. As the dark prince fell slowly to his knees and the bone blade tumbled from Giselle's bloody red hand, the circle was silent. Kastaghar's knees hit the floor of the fortress-temple before the daemon prince crashed face forward into the stone. Behind him, Giselle had a withering gaze of blank venom for Archaon before turning into the ranks of his horde.

Archaon knew he had to act fast. He bit back a snarl. Whether it was madness, some kind of petty revenge or some love-spawned hatred, it didn't matter! The

girl had cost him. There would be violence. The brotherhood would attack, intending to avenge their beloved master of the deadly gods in the world. Archaon's own horde might tear Giselle to pieces in shocked fury, knowing that the girl defied their master, and her own, in such a cowardly action. Archaon raised an armoured finger and aimed it at the brotherhood who were beginning to break ranks with weapons and tears.

'Destroy them!' he roared.

Any enmity among the half-breed horde for Giselle evaporated as Ograx the Great and the vanguard of the bestial mob bellowed and ran at the acolytes of the fortress-temple. Within moments every beastfiend at Archaon's command was surging through the demolished walls, intent on blood-eyed butchery. As Archaon stood unarmed in the centre of both the fortress and the havoc of battle, he watched Giselle walk away. Shadowed by an uncertain Vier, the girl left the inner ward and climbed up through the rubble of the smashed wall, intent on returning to her wagon. Archaon stood motionless as the massacre unfolded. The remaining brotherhood fought with skill, discipline and dark love for their fallen master – who had fought with the same himself – but they were no match for the unleashed savagery of Archaon's barbarian horde.

With Eins, Zwei and Drei forming a triangle about him with their bone blades drawn, Archaon felt the death about him. Lifeblood gushed at the sky. Heads rolled across black stone. Soon the inner ward was puddled in red, with body parts, scraps of flesh and shredded armour littering the floor. Archaon looked at the purple blaze that roared up at the heavens from the breached polar portal, the dread radiance in which they were all bathed. A stone cold inferno that hid an open gateway to the gods. He turned to see Khezula Sheerian looking at him. The sorcerer's face was unreadable but Archaon had no doubt that Sheerian's twisted patron would have found the grim spectacle that had unfolded in the fort amusing.





## CHAPTER IX

*'There is beyond this eternity another. An existence all of its own. It is dark as the mortal mind is dark, deep as the mortal heart is deep. This realm is sustained by the self. It is a spiritual plane made up of the thoughts and feelings, needs and beliefs of all the knowing races – the highborn and the low things that walk the world, with aims of it being their own. It gives back in the form of energies that leak into our world and are harnessed by the gifted in the form of magic and its many refractions. Entities beyond understanding inhabit this dark realm of spiritual energy, this sea of soulfire. They are the behemoths and great monsters of the depths, although our seven seas together are but a teardrop in the dry, dark ocean of the beyond. There they endure, drunk on power, bitter with impotence – curdling in the malefic nightmare of their own existence.'*

– Caledor Dragontamer, *Prophecies of Despair*

*The Gatelands*

*The Southern Wastes*  
*Horns Harrowing: Season of the Raw*

Although Archaon's army was only blazing a single trail of destruction through the crowded citadels and infernal palaces surrounding the collapsed Chaos gate, daemon lords and princes throughout the Gatelands knew of his presence. It had been many hundreds of years since a half-breed host had unified in such numbers in the darkness of the Wastes to attack the dread palaces of the mighty, in the Gatelands of infernal royalty, where some of the greatest daemons of the Chaos gods ruled. When they learned that it was a man-thing from the north at the head of the bestial horde, rather than one of their own savage kind, this interested the denizens of the Gatelands even more. Not an immortal, an infernal or diabolical being crafted of the gods – but a weakling mortal; nothing more than a plaything of the gods.

First came challenges. Territorial warnings. Assassination attempts by creatures that had been dreamcrafted of murderous desire, singular of lethal purpose. The unleashing of titans that strode across walls and stomped their monstrous way through the castle courtyards and palace grounds of their daemoniac foes. The mobilisation of infernal hosts, swarming through the wretched narrows and bone-jutting trails weaving between the vaulting walls of infernal palaces. Lank-limbed horrors and fountains of warping flesh that filled cramped walkways with lurid flame. Great fanged slugs that rotted their way through fortress walls on carpets of plague-ridden slime. Soul-thirsty slayers of red flesh and twisted horn. Packs of flightless shrikes, hunting, tearing and savaging on all fours, wearing spiked collars in the fashion of eight-pointed stars.

When Archaon and his horde weren't fighting their way through monstrosities between the royal residences of daemon princes and hellish dukes, they were mounting assaults on the palaces themselves. The palace of Sybarith the Forgotten had walls that seemed never-ending. When Archaon ordered an assault on the palace he almost lost half of his host to the endless debaucheries inside. Forgetting themselves, and the Chaos warlord they fought for, half-breeds – intoxicated by what they saw – had to be dragged away. Sybarith seemed unaware of Archaon as he stood over the profane creature and even as it was slain would not abandon the delights of daemonflesh.

Its sibling, Cybriss, ruled from the palace beyond. The palace architecture flowed with the curve and suggestion of beautiful bodies, while the walls had

been mortared with the undying bodies of the daemon's victims. Limbs reaching out suggestively stroked the stone surface of the wall while faces stared out from their rocky prisons in horror. Mouths were contorted about shrill screams but what proceeded from the slave chorus was so horrifically beautiful that even Archaon felt compelled to enter the open gates of the lip-lined barbican. Just as he was about to step inside, the Chaos warlord – having no desire to battle his own bodily needs to slay another daemoniac hedonist – brought his infernal mount to a stop and directed his curious horde around the monstrous palace instead.

Their journey took them into forge-forts of iron that glowed with furnace-light and cloaked the area with the smoke of infernal production. These were the daemon smithies of Hak'gorfane of the Black Flame – crafter of monstrous weaponry for his brother thirsters of blood. Lumbering juggers proceeded forth from the forges in which they had been created: hulks of black brass and spike on two legs, bearing mighty blade-horns on their armoured snouts and chimneys that belched smoke from the daemoniac fires driving the metal monsters. When enough of Archaon's beastfiends had been trampled before the juggers' implacable advance and brutal forge hammers, the Chaos warlord unleashed his other monsters, who smashed the creations of Hak'gorfane and his infernal smithies to smoking scrap. Archaon found Hak'gorfane itself – a many-armed beast of metal horns, chain and forge-scorched flesh – to be lacking in the death-dealing arts of his brother daemons. It seemed that the Blood God had bestowed favour on the mighty fiend not for the skulls taken by Hak'gorfane personally but for those taken collectively by the brute craftsmanship of his hell-crafted weaponry.

After a gargantuan battle in which Archaon's sickle sword broke and Hak'gorfane wielded every weapon the daemon could lay its many clawed hands upon, Archaon fought him all the way back to the edge of the smith's hellish forge pit. Ducking beneath the swinging onslaught of a number of blades in a number of clenched claws, Archaon managed to unbalance the raging hellsmith and knock it into the liquid metal of its own forge. While the daemon still thrashed, roared and reached up out of the glowing, black steel, Archaon ransacked the smashed forge, taking for himself a selection of swords, axes, spears and hell-crafted daggers, which he draped from Dorghar's saddle in armoured scabbards and sheaths. The rest he left to the pillaging claws of his half-breed horde as they moved through the forge-forts and on towards the blazing rift roaring up from the collapsed polar warp gate.

Beyond forts filled with riches and reptilian temptresses of golden scale were palace-labyrinths that led to nothing. Fat, tower-crowded citadels floated above the serrated skyline on colossal ray-like behemoths that drifted through the Gateland skies. Beneath, there were monstrous fortresses that seemed alive, shaking the warp-infused ground with their demolishing movements and cannibalising the surrounding palaces with gate-shaped maws and portcullis teeth. Similarly to be avoided, even by Archaon's great bestial horde, were the black towers of the daemon Mardagg, the shadows of which drained years from the lives of beastfiends falling beneath them, turning some into white-furred withered husks, others into browned bones and others still into dust on the wind.

Archaon found, upon mounting a determined assault on a mirror-plated palace near the rim of the polar rift, that his horde had been fighting themselves for days – and winning. Beyond the illusory nightmares of Tzeentchian prince-fiends, Archaon discovered that the palaces of infernal royalty could not be touched – let alone conquered. The inner citadels and fortresses were but ghostly mirages of warped castles and towers that existed in neither one place nor another. They belonged to the world of flesh and stone. They belonged to warp-tortured oblivion. They belonged to the nothingness of nowhere.

As Dorghar cantered on, with Archaon riding high in the saddle, the Chosen of the Chaos gods became suddenly aware that there were no daemoniac palaces and fortifications – ethereal or otherwise – before them. There were only the eternal fires of ruin, blazing high into the sky, all but blinding the eye and warping the flesh. What had been a brilliant radiance, up close had an indescribable absence of colour. It was not mind-scalding white, nor soul-devouring black. It refused to be any colour inbetween.

Archaon tried to hold its gaze but failed, for as the Chaos warlord stared into the fierce depths of the beyond, a thousand beyonds stared back. His eye stung with its woeful inability. His darksight was next to useless – the malevolence and smouldering doom that was Archaon was nothing in the presence of the raw effervescent abomination of Chaos spilling unfiltered and unstoppable into the victim world. Only the Eye of Sheerian gave Archaon any sense of a bearing – the sorcerous jewel's abilities being more powerful than ever, fed by the unnatural energies that bathed all who stood before the blazing flux of oblivion. Overwhelmed by such Ruinous brilliance, its sorcerous gaze seared to a narrow beam through the tumultuous clash of realities beyond. Even with the powerful artefact – one of the treasures of Chaos, no less – Archaon still felt as if he were standing in a midnight desert, trying to light a starless sky with a single candle.

Archaon didn't know how long he had stared into the dread depths of loathsome eternity. His plate felt warm on his skin, despite the fact that the warping radiance gave off no heat. Similarly, his blood ran hot in his veins and his mind felt slow, as if he were drunk on what he had seen and bottomless with curiosity for what he had not. Shaking his horned helm and some sense through the melting thoughts of his mind, Archaon willed Dorghar around.

It seemed as though he must have been standing before the rupture gateway for some time, since he found the horned multitudes of his half-breed horde stretching back towards the palaces of hellish royalty. They too were unnaturally calm. There was no roaring, butting or the shaking of primitive weaponry at the skies. The beastfiends stared as their warlord had, with thunderstruck horror and heart-pounding possibility at the unnatural wonder before them. Ograx the Great was no different. Jharkill the monstrous huntsman – who had lived several lifetimes in the light of the world's doom – had never been this close and he too was glazed of eye. The abominations that he had hunted and enslaved to Archaon's will had grown to a stillness, towering above the horde and watching from their cages.

The Swords of Chaos stood before their master, the punctured mess of their wings held in close, while the sorcerer, Khezula Sheerian – the only one of them to have experienced the soul-shattering realm beyond – looked fearfully on at the prospect of what his master was about to say. Only Giselle was missing, but Archaon saw the twisted Vier sitting at the reins of her bone wagon, pulled as it was by a pair of monstrous elkbeasts, midnight of hairless flesh and warped of antler. Reaching out with the beating storm in his chest, he felt her terror – felt the girl hiding from the silent expectation of some terrible thing beneath her furs, the stabbing flutter of her own heart like rolling thunder in his ears. It would not stop him. Not the coward beasts of his horde. Not the uneasiness of the sorcerer. Not the dread of a pure soul he was about to plunge into the raging depths of abominate corruption. Nothing would. Nothing could.

'We stand at the precipice of possibility,' Archaon called across the horde. As he did so, Sheerian turned and obediently squawked the beastspeak of his words at the half-breeds. Archaon could see the fear and uncertainty cutting into their bestial faces. The Chaos warlord prompted Dorghar into a spirited trot up and down the front line of half-breeds, allowing the unspeakable fires of damnation to cast him in a shimmering silhouette. Such words did not come easily to the Chaos warlord. He led by example. He held the horde together with fear. He was not given to speeches – especially delivered to wretched half-breeds, the

monstrous issue of beast and daemon. For the first time in their dread union, the creatures of the horde were confronted by something that filled them with more fear than their dread warlord and master. Before them blazed the beyond. A colossal wall of warping flame raging up through the broiling heavens, scalding away the clouds, the sky and stars. A rift that blasted its way out through the bottom of the world and threatened to drag them screaming their miserable lives away to any number of hellish eternities. Their mongrel hearts might have pumped the blood of daemons about their bodies but their half-souls were a cowardly afterthought, filled with animal panic and sensory suspicion. Archaon understood that they needed a little more than idle threats, and they were idle, since once he was through the collapsed gateway and had become one with the howling infinitude, beyond there was no guarantee that he would ever return. This was not a possibility he shared with the horde.

‘Our destiny awaits,’ he roared at them. ‘Many of you dread things have followed me across the frozen Wastes of your homeland. A homeland vast – carried on the backs of mountains, racked by storm and honed to a razor’s edge by the frozen winds that carve through its wildness. You are part of that wildness – but like all savage things you cannot be kept prisoner...’

Archaon turned Dorghar about and cantered in the other direction. He thought of the creatures he had freed from Lord Agrammon’s menagerie and the irony of his own position as slave-master of such monstrosities.

‘You cannot be held hostage – not even by this great, daemon-haunted land. Not by the frozen expanse of its mighty glaciers nor its raging ranges of frost-shattered peaks and volcanoes. Certainly not by the deep darkness of the ocean that surrounds it, washing up on its icy shores. An ocean I crossed to be here with you, to face the trials of the Dark Gods together and earn their Ruinous rewards. For I come from a land made up of many lands. A place far, far away. Forests, villages, cities that you could barely imagine, all begging for the flame. Kingdoms ripe for destruction. Empires unworthy of their existence, awaiting our savage dominion. Weakling races – of succulent, soft flesh – who think themselves safe in their civilisation.

‘They will learn they are not safe. They will learn of suffering. They will learn of death. You will teach them and I will lead us all into the embrace of doom. A time of ending, a place of ash and darkness. There your Dark Gods will be waiting – to receive and reward you. To reach such a place – such a time – you must follow me across another dark ocean. Through a realm undreamed of far beyond the limits of blood and bone. Where only the thunder of the heart and the

monstrous thoughts of the mind hold sway.

‘In truth, I cannot tell you what to expect on this journey. Some experiences defy description. I can only tell you that it must be done, that I will venture first and lead us through this darkness and uncertainty, but I expect every single one of you to be at my back – as you have been thus far. It is a trial that must be endured – like the endless expanse of the land beneath your hooves or the frost that bites the flesh and numbs the spirit.

‘Before the dawn there is the long darkness of night. Before the sweetness of victory there is the bitterness of battle, long fought.’ Archaon hauled at the reins and leaned back in the saddle, drawing Dorghar’s spiked hooves up as the creature reared before the horde. ‘I will be watching you,’ Archaon told his half-breeds. ‘Your Dark Gods will be watching you, as they have never before. Disappoint us not and follow your master into eternity. For he is the Lord of the End Times and Everchosen of the Chaos gods. He cannot fail...’

Archaon turned Dorghar about and dug his heels into the daemon steed’s flanks. The mount thunderbolted away from the horde, accelerating into a gallop at the Ruinous inferno roaring up from the collapsed polar warp gate. Behind him Archaon could hear the roar of the horde. He could hear the stampede of hooves, the bone-creak of wagon wheels and the ground-shaking trudge of enslaved monsters.

As he closed on the screaming oblivion of phantasmic flame, Archaon felt the world flux and warp about him. He too, from his bones, from the flutter of doubt in his chest to the indomitable will that saturated his entire being, all bent about the ferocious, unnatural force of raging unreality. The path Dorghar was hammering out with its hooves stretched before them, reaching out for eternity. The world of before smeared into a new form of existence. What Archaon knew bled away. His arm knew no pain. His flesh no cold. His lungs no air. His heart no fear. All he knew was that he was screaming. The shrieking soulfire of the Gate had him.

Oblivion had swallowed him whole. The flames of white-hot nothing writhed about him, purging him of doubt. The tempest howled up through him, the Ruinous force of the beyond stripping plate from his body. It dragged his bones free of his flesh before shattering what was left of his corporal presence into dust and cinders. Only the raw darkness that was Archaon remained – streaming, warping and fluxing like a shadow caught in an otherworldly hurricane. Colossal fragments of stone, the black of soul-eating darkness, rocketed skyward with him. Grit, shards and rubble seared up through the absent flame in an eternal

experience of the Great Gate's explosive demise: the warp-saturated dereliction of the abominate architecture caught in the calamitous moment of its destruction.

Up became down and nothing became everything as Archaon's monstrous essence – the curdled umbra of the soul, shot through with the liquid obsidian of apocalyptic ambition – was suddenly engulfed by the unknowing agony of the rift. Like the plummeting fragments of the Gate, reliving the horror of its reality-rending collapse. Swallowed by one of a million maelstrom-swirling maws through which the beyond screamed into the certainties of other realms, Archaon knew that the world was no more. The Gate was no more. He was no more.

Then... thought that... ended... When... experienced... as... he could experience... reduced... nothing more... dark smear... underbelly of existence... realms... horror... eternal... Why... hurts, the gods it...! No... no...





# CHAPTER X

VOLUME TWO  
PRINCE OF CHAOS

*'Roads. Lives. Tales. To all things an end and a beginning.'*

– Anonymous

*'Riding hard through eternity,  
the doom of all the world came forth.  
Bloodthirsty and armed to the teeth,  
his monstrous host, ready for war.*

*At the frozen top of the world  
he found men of fate like himself –  
for whom life was a bloody blur:  
an unthinking, murderous hell.*

*Foe. Barbarian. Invader.  
He came at the kingdoms of men –  
from north, south, east and west: danger.  
Testing resolve, gathering strength.*

*With the treasures of Chaos found –  
their infernal promise assumed,  
he was to be chosen and crowned –  
and all hell to be broken loose.*

*'Twas the dark daemon Be'lakor's  
damnable calling to perform –  
a dread obligation abhorred –  
a despised duty nevermore.'*

– Necrodomo the Insane, *The Liber Caelestior*  
(*The Celestine Book of Divination*)



## CHAPTER XI

*'Taste of oblivion, Everchosen of the Ruinous Gods. Experience your doom through daemon eyes and come to know the limitless light of the darkness you would extinguish.'*

– Be'lakor – the Dark Master, First Daemon of Chaos,  
*The Liber Caelestior*, margin inscription

*The Long, Dark Night of the All Souls*  
*The Realms of Chaos*  
*Eternitude*

A dream. Just like a dream. Archaon found himself walking. He could hear the soft clatter of his plate. The jangle of Dorghar's halter chains as he led the daemon steed on. He reached for a weapon and found the hilts of several hell-forged blades in his belt, as well as the shaft of a hand axe and a sheathed dagger. He brought his right arm up before him. The tatters of a sling still hung about his neck. His arm seemed as new. He extended the fingers of his gauntlet and then clenched them in a fist. How long had he been in this place?

The dull agony of broken bones was gone. In fact, he felt nothing. His legs,

striding through the darkness – perhaps for an eternity – were insensible to strain or fatigue. He pulled at a finger. Twisted it. Bent it back. Nothing. No pain. No discomfort. This truly was a dream, Archaon decided. A nightmare in which he knew he was trapped but could not, through will alone, wake from.

He remembered the Southern Wastes. The Gatelands. The horde. Then nothing. The warping, fluxing, roaring perversities of this realm had passed through him. Stripped him of bodily afflictions, his weakness of the flesh. Reducing him down to his essence: a streaming darkness, passing like an undercurrent through an ocean of others. A boundless sea within a sea within a sea within a sea. A bottomless abyss as wide as it was deep, dark with the energies that swirled, spumed and crashed through it. A spiritual storm through which schools of savage entities swam, predatory consciousnesses lay in wait and the colossal intensities of intelligences ancient trawled, drawn down on desperate souls. Archaon came to understand himself as part of such a maelstrom, a primordial darkness that was to the mortal world as the glassy facet of a pool. It reflected the world in dark imperfection but remained suggestive of something unknown but ever present beneath. The surface separated two different elements. Two different experiences of the same world – one the distorted mirror image of the other. It rippled at the insistence of both, those above and below. It invited those souls and entities so inclined to pass through the reflective illusion of a barrier between such realms, drawing the monstrous from the depths and the doomed to sink into the darkness.

Archaon knew he was nothing more than streaming shadow, coursing through darkness. At the mercy of prevailing tides. Surging before stormy fronts. Dragged along with rapidities. Whirled into the gyres and miniature maelstroms of raging tempests. Twisting and soaring through the streaming presence of other beings – aethyric evils, exalted essences and the searing passage of pure daemonic will – Archaon found the dark fire of his soul mauled. It had been torn this way and that by currents of raw knowing, streams of suffering, the downwellings of doom and the countercurrents of crackling ambition and false hope. Rings, eddies, traps, vortices and roiling embodiments – all threatening to put him from his endless course. His passage through the formlessness of the chaotic abyss.

Archaon felt familiar horrors in the swirling shadow. Things drawn down on him, following the rising star of the Chaos warlord's soul. Infernal creatures he had crossed. Daemons he had slain. Depraved intelligences like the beast Agrammon that slithered and streamed about the crowded constellation of souls

that was Archaon and his horde. Monstrous forces of warping, elemental destruction, like the dread presence of the *Yien-Ya-Long*, that stalked the soulfire trail of Archaon and his army through oblivion like a great predator might hunt a migrating herd. These seething entities, who wanted nothing more than to avenge themselves from the beyond, ultimately kept their distance. They seemed cautious, as though other great forces in the hellish stormscape of the aethyr had already laid claim to Archaon's soul and were keeping watch over their property. Archaon felt the warp-scorching presence of such primordial and Ruinous entities. Of things impossible. Of dread power. Of myriad malevolence. Of promises eternal. Of fears indescribable. Like oblivions all of their very own, the Ruinous Powers burned like great dark stars, exerting an influence on every damned presence and victim-soul about them. Drawing them in. Sometimes they would stabilise the paths of the mighty. They would hold the exalted on their course to greatness and damnation, extending their monstrous reach and infinite influence to establish a temporary equilibrium between the irresistible forces of their realm-warping presence. Sometimes they would tear lives apart between them and, like behemoths of the deep, filter the soul-carnage left in the wake of slaughter, suffering and the meteoric rise of servant champions.

Several times, Archaon felt the blaze of their direct attentions. To be beheld by such beings through the looking glass stillness of storm centres all but scorched Archaon out of existence. He felt his fate flux and warp at their gaze. It was simultaneously the most wonderful and the most dreadful thing Archaon had ever experienced. He burned in the incomprehension of their interest. In the existential chill of their ignorance, Archaon felt predatory entities close back in. Even there he was not alone. Ever present in the havoc, in the dread and the darkness, Archaon felt the calamitous force of his father. The First Daemon of Chaos. Watching. Waiting. Wanting. The bitter vortex of his otherworldly presence was a warp-curdled and crushing darkness of his own making and Archaon could feel the distant pull of his aeonian desires.

Although Archaon knew from the scorching fleshlessness of his soul that he was not walking through the empty blackness in his plate, with weapons heavy on his belt and Dorghar snorting alongside him, it felt hauntingly real. He understood that it was simply the way his being could experience the impossibilities of the beyond – the mind-stabbing, flesh-shearing unrealities of this monstrous realm.

As he looked about, all Archaon could see was the darkness of his soul reflected back at him. It was a gaze-devouring nothingness. The lethality of the

place saturated him. Looking up was the horror of a never-ending tumble into an abyss. Looking down was the deepest of dreads – like treading water in an ocean of predatory creatures that could bite you in half at any moment or drag you to oblivion to tear you flesh from chunk of flesh. Looking behind him carried with it the same spine-twisting, sickening expectation of some horrid thing waiting for him to turn before it struck. Everywhere else was moment by moment, heart-hammering horror and the dread of seeing something that could not be unseen – visions of mindless terror that could not be blinked from the eye. Fearful aspects that were ever present, even when they were not.

Archaon's tongue sizzled with the cold bitterness of the void while his nostrils stung with the coppery rawness of his flesh – wherever it was – being freshly flayed, over and over again. His ears bled with Ruinous whispers of dark things bargaining for his soul. Their temptations burned to resist. Their eternal entreaties tore at him like hooks and lines disappearing into the benightment. The shrieking. The screaming. The befriending and the begging. He listened to every word, his nerves the strings of some fearfully abused instrument. He fought their lies and the fragilities of his own soul, unruly parts of himself that desired acquiescence and an end to all torments.

There were those daemoniac entities prowling the blackness that did not cog, whisper and deceive but attacked like ambush predators – frenziedly seizing upon the soulfire of the unclaimed, that burned like a beacon in the void. Things that punched through Archaon like an unstoppable evil, and wrestled him for his soul. Entities that struck with fang and force, to paralyse the spirit and poison the present. Abyssal creatures that feasted on the indomitability of his will, spreading rancid corruptions of the spirit through his resolve, infecting him with the plague of doubt. Infernal enigmas that forced Archaon back through the labyrinthine madness of choices yet to be made as they roasted his resolutions in the warpflame of their unbearable presence. Other horrors simply launched themselves from the darkness, goring without horn, tearing without claw and snapping without jaw. Such battles for the soul lasted a castle-crumbling age – and like a castle under siege, Archaon's defences began to crack and tremble under constant onslaught. He could not know that he had been fighting such ravenous beings for a lifetime. In the slave-pit of the soul, Archaon had fought for the survival of everything that he was and ever would be. Such infernal battles shook the very fabric of his being. Approaching it like any other form of combat or martial discipline, he had grown adept at such inner conflicts. He drove daemoniac essences, who fought to inhabit his own, before him. Sending



one after another back to the darkness and the dread, enjoying the solitude of several more lonely steps before some other monstrous aberration surged forth with infernal optimism and bottomless greed.

Archaon risked a glance behind him. He narrowed the gaze of an eye he knew wasn't there. He blinked the mind-scalding glare of the realm's tumultuous blackness from his darksight. Concentrating through the cacophony of distractions and the sense that not one, but a hundred different dread intelligences were in turn watching him through the darkness, Archaon saw his horde. The Eye of Sheerian, glowing with the intensity of the otherworldly energies all about it, helped Archaon see through the infernal void.

Casting a gaze down the spiked flanks of the daemon steed Dorghar, Archaon could see Khezula Sheerian, his furs gathered about him and eyes cloudy with a Ruinous glaze. The Swords of Chaos marched beside him, the scarred membranes of their wings long healed. The still figure of Vier held the reins of the bone wagon behind them, the vehicle dragged along by a pair of monstrous black elks. Within the wagon, Archaon could only guess the torments or invulnerabilities being endured by Giselle – her faith making her either an anathema to the spirit stalkers of the realm or a soulprize over which to be fought. Ograx the Great led the colossal, winding cavalcade of beastfiends that made up Archaon's half-breed horde, as well as wagons and beast-dragged siege engines crafted from bone.

Beyond the bestial multitudes, Archaon saw Jharkill the huntsman, the hunchbacked ogre still clutching his shaman's staff that jangled with his primitive charms. Following obediently in line were the caged chimeric predators that Archaon favoured releasing as a first wave attack, and the twisted titans and lumbering abominates that he saved as shock troops to break opposing armies. Peering further still, alone in the darkness some way behind the last of Jharkill's miserable monsters, Archaon could see Gorst, stumbling through the oblivion. The flagellant dragged his chains behind him and stared like a wide-eyed lunatic out through the bars of his head-cage. All in the train were silent as the grave, from beastfiend to monstrosity to madman. No one wanted to attract any more attention from the abyssal murk than the light from their wretched half-souls was already doing. The sorcerer was quietest of all. Slowing – or at least what Archaon thought was slowing – the Chaos warlord and his steed drifted in line with the mottled ancient. How many times before he had done the self same thing asking the same questions, Archaon could not know. Something felt hauntingly familiar about the impulse and it occurred to Archaon, as it had

occurred to him the thousands of times before, that the pair were routinely carrying out the same insanity over and over again.

‘Sorcerer,’ Archaon said, drawing the twitch of a response from the daemon. ‘Where are we? Your master speaks.’

Sheerian didn’t answer at first, the sorcerer seeming to overcome – like Archaon – some monstrous attempt to steal his soul.

‘My master never stops speaking,’ the Tzeentchian cackled cryptically. ‘Where are we? Where your damned path has taken us, my lord. The invisible empire. To the depths of hells everlasting. To the cradle of darkness – the birthplace of daemons and the storm-racked sovereignty of the Dark Gods. Everywhere. Nowhere. Anywhere.’

‘Speak sanity, sorcerer,’ Archaon said. He was barely holding onto his own.

‘You seek sanity,’ Sheerian marvelled maniacally, ‘...in... this... place?’

‘I seek the Great Northern Gate,’ Archaon told him, his bold words sounding hollow as they were swallowed by the dark, abyssal emptiness about them. ‘I seek the mortal realm to which we belong. I seek a way out of this infernal place. You are a thing of this darkness. Guide us.’

‘Here,’ babbled the ancient, ‘there, nowhere. How can a daemon of this world or the next claim to have been anywhere in a place with no landmarks or features? Can a man who has stood on the sandy shore know his way across the deserts of the ocean bottom? Does feeling the breeze on his face equip him to find his way through all storms? We are lost and we are damned, my lord. We are slaves to the darkness. Accept it and allow yourself to become one with the madness of this place. Eternity will find some use for you – eventually – as it did me.’

The sorcerer’s uselessness appalled Archaon and the Chaos warlord found himself reaching for the hilt of his sword. Khezula Sheerian heard the hiss of a weapon being drawn but the sorcerer didn’t even turn to face his lord.

‘Steel is not steel, in this place,’ the sorcerer told him.

Archaon found himself looking down at the blade he had drawn. Sheerian was right. Killing him would not achieve anything – even if he could. He looked at his reflection in the dull steel of the hell-forged blade. He wasn’t even surprised when he found none. Instead the blade saw straight through him to show Archaon the ghastly entities that had emerged from the oblivion behind him. Angling the blade around, Archaon saw that by slowing and calling out demands of his sorcerer he had drawn hundreds, perhaps thousands of soul-famished entities down on himself. As he turned the blade, his heart thudded at the

monstrous abominations emerging from the darkness. Things of indescribable horror and abyssal appetite.

Archaon thought on the madness the sorcerer had spoken. His inability to guide them and his insistence that Archaon allow himself to become one with the madness of the realm. The Chosen of the Chaos gods knew that he had to do something. For all he knew they had been wandering the aethyric expanse of oblivion forever. The damned cycle had to be broken. He had to escape this limitless prison and cast off the chains of eternal damnation. He knew he could not do it alone but to call upon assistance from his Ruinous sponsors would prove his unsuitability to be their champion. He would be the Everchosen of Chaos exactly because he hadn't ever begged of their mercy. Archaon would still need a guide to find his way free of their diabolical realm.

Lifting up his gauntlet and sword, Archaon presented himself to the horde of daemoniac entities swirling and swarming about him in the darkness.

'A share of my soul,' Archaon roared at them, the passion and fury of his announcement blazing like a distant city aflame through the daemon-haunted inferny, 'to the fell thing that can show me – and those that belong to me – the hell out of this dread place.'

'Master, no...' Sheerian said. Eins, Zwei and Drei surged forward, reaching for bone blades.

Archaon braced himself but some horrid thing shot out of the swarming shadows with such violent force that it surprised even him. Like a comet of churning hatred, the entity trailed a bloody miasma as it blasted into the Chaos warlord. This time Archaon didn't fight it. He didn't resist. He allowed the thing to be one with him.

For a moment he felt paralysed. His gauntlet opened and his sword dropped from his hand, falling through the darkness at his feet. He remained in that position for a few moments more, with his arms outstretched and chest braced, as though lightning were passing down his spine. Archaon's plate burned across his chest where the monstrous entity had hit him. Finally, looking down, he found Morkar's armour frosted with otherworldly crystals. As he relaxed he scraped at the sizzling residue with an armoured finger.

'My lord?' Sheerian asked fearfully. The Swords of Chaos had surrounded him, their weapons facing inwards. No one knew quite what to do.

Archaon slid down onto his knees and hunched over. It was the most awful sensation. An existence that was not all his own. A wretched intimacy of thought. A heart beat horribly, filling Archaon with darkness and desires not just

of his own but also of those belonging to a denizen of the deep. The core of his being was suddenly flooded with violence. A fury, hot and pure filled him. A primordial need to inflict harm. Other entities were flying at him. The daemon that had beaten them to his soul was fighting the monstrous evils to protect its prize. Beings that hungered for him tried to tear the entity from Archaon's living essence but the savage being that had him in its talons would not give up its infernal territory. Like a pack of wild dogs over a carcass, the daemons fought, roaring, hissing and spitting until one by one the monstrosities relented and sunk back into the darkness.

Finally alone with the entity that now wore his soul like a mantle, Archaon tried to slow the hammering of his heart. The beast that breathed with him was a storm that would not be calmed. Archaon roared as he had never done before. His pain was beyond the flesh. The creature tore at his very soul. His existential agony echoed through the raging void, taking with it flocks of scavenger daemons who fed on the rich honesty of his torment. He felt the withering corruption of the thing spread through what was left of his being. The daemon's maleficence twisted through him, turning his veins to ragged black roots and filling them with a liquid obsidian filth that passed for blood. As it reached his chest, the ichor strangled his heart with constricting rage. It scorched to blackness within his body, searing and spitting with the furious heat of the daemon inside him.

Archaon's roar narrowed to a scream.

Monstrous claws grew through his boots, while the black bone of stabbing dagger-like talons thrust out of the tips of his gauntlets. Spikes erupted from his spine, tearing up through his plate, furs and cloak like the dorsal fins of an ocean predator. Red spines ruptured up out of his armour, the cracks working their way between them filled with molten brass bled from beneath. The cooling metal steamed, forming the damned sigils of the Blood God. Legs snapped horribly beneath him as his knees assumed the digitigrade orientation of a daemon monstrosity. Pushing his helm from his head, Archaon's shrieking trailed off. Screaming didn't seem enough to express the agony afflicting his imagined body and soul. Since he was no longer solely in control of the lungs that had been filling the void with his suffering, there was little he could do.

The Swords of Chaos brought up their weapons in unison, while the sorcerer Sheerian came forward and picked up Archaon's helmet. Sheerian and Eins exchanged a glance of helpless alarm.

'My lord?' Sheerian asked, but the transformation was not complete.

Throwing his head forward, Archaon endured the bone-cracking agony of a skull growing out of the back of his own. As his head elongated, two monstrous horns erupted from his temples, willowing to blackness. When Archaon brought his face up it was a mess. Spikes puncturing through the flesh had carved his face up into an infernal mask. Blood from the wounds had stained it a Ruinous red and a nest of fangs had worked their way out of his jaw to create a monstrous maw. Above it his eyes burned to cruel brilliance.

‘Archaon!’ the sorcerer Sheerian called, fearing that he had lost his master to some hideous daemon of the abyss. Archaon tried to stand on his new legs, but heaved. Vomiting forth a stream of gore into the darkness at his clawed feet, the torrent was followed by a black, blood-slick tongue that flopped out of the daggered maw like a dead serpent. The malign presence looked out from the Chaos warlord’s afflicted flesh. It stared at the Swords of Chaos with their bone swords ready, and the sorcerer clutching the helm of his master.

*Archaon?* the thing seethed through the oblivion. *There is no one of that name here.*

‘Do you have a name, monster? Thing that corrupts my flesh and pollutes my soul with its bloody darkness.’

*I... am... Z’guhl.*

‘Z’guhl?’

*Z’guhl, the Skullreaper. Z’guhl of the Brazen Brethren. Z’guhl, the Left Fist of Khorne. Z’guhl, Blessed of Blood. Z’guhl, the Crimson Doom. Z’guhl the Deathbringer. Z’guhl, the Herald of All Hate.*

‘You have altogether too many titles, daemon.’

*And you none at all, man-thing.*

‘Not for long, daemon.’

*An eternity, if I so choose – slave-soul of mine.*

‘The Blood God’s servants prize the present moment. They have not the patience for eternities. I promised you a share of my soul, you double-dealing fiend. I’ll torment you from what I have left, blood beast of the void. How do you feel about sharing eternity with me, Z’guhl of the Hesitant Heart? Z’guhl of the Mortal Stain? Z’guhl the Soul Plagued? Ask yourself this, monster, are you in possession of my soul or am I in possession of yours?’

*Enough...*

‘Enough?’

*Enough.*

‘Like I said – no patience.’

*Watch your words, mortal.*

‘My name is Archaon and I am Chosen of the Dark Gods – your Almighty Lord of Wrath included.’

*I know what you are. You are he who would be Everchosen. You wear his plate and his treasures. You ride his steed and bear his Mark. You do not, however, carry the Everchosen’s blade.*

‘His blade... You know of this blade?’

*Intimately, weakling mortal. Intimately.*

‘Tell me warpling, on the blood that ever drips from your dark lord’s axe, where can I find such a blade?’

*Not here, Archaon. Archaon the Lost. Archaon, the Everbroken. Archaon, Lord of Nothing.*

‘Tell me, Crimson Doom, or I will be yours. I shall tear you apart, from the inside out. Your spine shall be my sceptre, your black heart shall be my orb and I shall wear your monstrous skull as my crown. Hear me, goremonger. Hear me!’

*Hear you... or help you?*

‘Help me break free of this place. This doom of everlastings. This otherworldly night of the soul. This prison eternity. The havoc. The pain. The possibility. Help me or be destroyed, wretched thing of a thousand deaths. The choice is that simple.’

*...Perhaps. Perhaps we could help each other. I have sought you out, Archaon. I have stalked your soul across eternity’s expanse and through storms of damnation’s ire. I claim your soul in so much as I might set it free.*

‘What do you mean, daemon?’

*I mean to guide you from this dread realm, Archaon. I mean to take you to the Gate you seek, where mortals butcher one another for our pleasure in the Battle Everlasting.*

‘The Great Northern Gate, at the top of the world...’

*Top. Bottom. Up. Down. North. South. These terms have no meaning here. The Gate glows with a lightshow of souls. That is all I know. Mortals gloriously bringing darkness to their fellow doomed. The brief spark of their passing and the insignificance of their offering attracting the Powers of darkness, who feed both off the faith of the fallen and the act of the offering.*

‘How can I trust the mercy of a blood-slaked fiend, freely given?’

*Nothing is freely given, Archaon. All indulgences have their cost. I ask for a return in iron.*

‘In iron? You want me to slay for your fell god?’

*All men do, although they know it not. No, Archaon. I would put the sword you seek in your hand, as my Ruinous lord's bloody blessing on your endeavour. The blade is called the Slayer of Kings and shares its name with the dread entity bound within its daemonic steel.*

*'An acquaintance of yours, creature?'*

*U'zuhl the Skulltaker. U'zuhl the Blooded Wanderer. U'zuhl the Right Fist of Khorne...*

*'Aye, a brother infernal.'*

*I am bound by blood covenants, lies exchanged in the Blood God's name and oaths black and ancient, to see my brass-borne brother free. Sorceries hold him, his infernal insanity and his fury in a prison of hell-forged steel. Bound there by the coward Vangel – Vangel the Everchosen – the second to bear such a name. Assume the same blood-sworn oaths and covenants as I, Archaon. I shall send you to the Slayer of Kings and you shall send back my brother. You shall promise to free U'zuhl the Slayer from madness and his steel thralldom. So that he might kill for the mighty Khorne once more. To taste the blood he spills rather than watch it drip tauntingly down the walls of his steel prison. To wield and not be wielded. To take skulls and not be the mere instrument of their taking. Agree to this on blood that will once more be yours and I will take you to the gate of your choosing.*

*'You will teach me the daemonic bindings of such a weapon?'*

*I will teach you the sorcery that binds daemon to blade, so that you might undo it and set U'zuhl the Skulltaker free.*

*'Then I swear on the darkness in my blood, to set your infernal brother at liberty. So, Z'guhl the Skullreaper, the Crimson Doom, the Herald of all Hate and sharer of my soul... lead on.'*



## CHAPTER XII

*'Doomed pilgrims conquer both foes and their fears Fighting  
north, hearts cursed with unhallowed joy –*

*'Til they hear the Battle Eternal near and for Dark Gods kill,  
butcher and destroy.'*

– Xortan Freg, *Liber Malefic*

*The Battle Eternal  
The Northern Wastes  
Date Unknown*

The fiery flux of damnation reached up around Archaon. The tongues of warp-fuelled flame licked at his plate and the flanks of the daemon steed Dorghar. As the mount trudged through the hellish inferno of the Northern Gate, Archaon turned in the saddle. What once had been tortured thoughts and the dark desire to be free of the daemon-haunted hellstorm was once again flesh. Archaon felt the contraction of muscle as he turned. He felt the strength of his bones and the steady thud of an indomitable heart in his chest, pumping doom-laden blood



through his veins. Even the shard of wyrdstone still remained in the socket of his ruined eye with the curse of darksight that went with it. His skin felt the cold of his plate and his once shattered arm now pulsed with the dark need to draw a weapon. Archaon didn't know whether it had been the warping energies of damnation or simply the length of time they had spent in the Realm of Chaos, but his arm felt long healed. Scooping up the tattered remains of the sling from about his body, the Chaos warlord tossed the shredded material away.

Behind him he found the horde emerging from the hellfires that raged between one dark plane and another. The Swords of Chaos walked closely behind, with the ancient sorcerer Sheerian hobbling nearby. Vier and Giselle's wagon heralded a train of others, as well as the bone nightmares of siege engines. Beyond them, through the otherworldly inferno, the Eye of Sheerian allowed Archaon to see Ograx the Great and the half-breed horde of southern beastfiends marching behind their chieftain. Jharkill and the great shadows of his charm-slaved beasts, giants and monstrosities could be seen striding through the gate behind them. It was hard to believe that before passing through the maelstrom-racked portal, Archaon and the trailing multitudes of his bestial army were merely a torrent of darkness, weaving, flowing and streaming through the abominate wraithscape of Chaos and through energies of the world unknown.

Turning back, Archaon caught sight of the monstrous Z'guhl. The thing was all horn, red daemonflesh and hate-dripping maw. Its eyes burned with lust for the blood that had started to flow through the creatures passing it. It was indeed an abominate thing and Archaon's reclaimed flesh crawled at the thought of how such a murderous, malevolent force had been ensnared in his soul. As the fiery pits of its eyes met Archaon, the Chaos warlord felt the ghostly intrusion of the daemon's thoughts once more.

*Keep your dark word, manprey – as I have kept mine – or the legions of hell will not be able to save you from the Blood God's fury.*

The promise burned on the surface of Archaon's tongue like the touch of a daemoniac brand. Archaon gave Z'guhl a slow nod of his horned helm, before seeing the blood-letting daemon spit and stamp its claws at the passing sorcerer Sheerian. The ancient hurried on, unwilling to be the walking slab of meat that the daemon chose to sate its blood-hunger on. In reality, Z'guhl the Skullreaper had no dread desire to leave the Ruinous realm he haunted and ventured no further out of the gateway than he had already reached. Sending Archaon to achieve the almost impossible had been enough for Z'guhl to honour his own blood oaths and covenants to U'zuhl the Skulltaker, gore-favoured Herald of

Khorne.

Like the hellish grandeur of its southern counterpart, the Great Northern Gate wasn't in fact a gate at all. Demolished in the same cataclysmic event, the black stone and structure of both colossal edifices had been blasted to oblivion. Instead, there was only the open, gaping wound of a rift between the two realms. The flames of oblivion roared at the northern skies, which about the Shadowlands of the Wastes were no less seething, roiling and storm-shot than those at the bottom of the world. The impossible colours that danced about Archaon and his emerging horde combined to form a violacious inferno that lit up the Shadowland and cast the silhouette of the frozen landscapes beyond in an amaranthine gloom.

Archaon felt the land flux, warp and tremble about the insane power pouring out of the demolished gate. The Chaos warlord had dreamed his way from flesh to the streaming shadow of soulfire and back to flesh again. The Northern and Southern Wastes had been long bathed in the intense radiance of ruin and were heavily polluted with warpdust and tainted debris from the devastated gates. Travel through them carried the constant danger of contamination and mutation. With strange similarity, the lands and even the abyssal realm beyond the gates maintained an equilibrium all of their own. Archaon found that it was the tumultuous instability inbetween that carried the most danger of reward; the shimmering mutability of one existence intruding upon another unleashed warping potential and the dark blessings of the Chaos gods on Archaon and his horde. Passing from the Gatelands and into the gate, there had been no time to comprehend the changes wrought on both body and mind. Marching out of the warping flux of the Great Northern Gate and into the Shadowlands, the Chaos warlord and his army of bestial creatures came to acknowledge the price of their passage through the Realm of Chaos.

There were many minor mutations and betrayals of the flesh across the horde that went largely unnoticed. Growths that blossomed across the skin, some becoming the buds of isolated spikes and spines of bone. Rampancies that spread through the body, blooms of gristle about bones and harmless corruptions that reached through the innards. Some limbs withered while others received grotesque enhancements, like arms that ruptured with the chitinous blades of new claws or crippled fists that sprouted bludgeoning nodules of bone. Other arms fell off entirely or spawned new appendages like shoulder-snapping jaws and nests of slithering tentacles. Muscular third and sometimes fourth arms now reached from globed shoulders to hold extra weaponry. Backs grew hunched and

patches of skin erupted with all manner of affliction: scales, spines, chitinous shell, false eyes, bark-like encrustations and seeping sores.

Other changes inflicted by the horde's time in the Realm of Chaos were more dramatic. The perverse, warping effects of their immersion had stripped the half-breeds of their bestial natures. Snouts had receded, horns had willowed and thick fur had fallen out. While they were still daemon-sired fiends, their animal appetites, thick tongues and the dullness of their brute minds were gone. These were beasts who had transformed into men. Manfiends, who while still small mountains of barbaric muscle, were now things of human cunning and infernal spite – quick of mind and fleet of hoof. Ograx the Great was still an imposing wall of brawn, wielding his fearful skull-axe, but like the horde he led, the creature had forgotten the foetid savagery of a former life in the Southern Wastes. While the lower half of his body was living brass, his powerful legs were engraved with Ruinous symbols, fretwork and decoration. His infernal features and crown of horns might now have been described as darkly handsome and were truly those of a prince.

It was sometimes difficult to tell how the chimeric fusions and monstrosities of the horde had changed, since they were already warped carcasses of abominate affliction. Jharkill the huntsman, however, no longer carried his shaman's staff, with its cross bar and dangling charms. A huge rack of black antlers had sprouted from the ogre's head, proud and twisted like those that might belong to a monstrous stag. The charms and tokens that held the titans, predatory creatures and chaotic abominations of Archaon's horde in check now swung from the forest of snags on the ogre's antlers.

The Swords of Chaos had changed also. Their ragged wings had long healed but the darkness of the realm through which they had travelled had blessed them with a horrifying mutuality. While still flesh and blood, Eins, Zwei, Drei and even the misshapen Vier, were now terrifying wraiths of flickering shadow, both gangling and ghastly. Khezula Sheerian's transformation had been simultaneously striking and yet the most subtle. While still dragging his bird's foot and bearing the burden of a hunch, the ancient had bled away the years. His features were sharp, his eyes crackled with sorcerous power and lustrous lengths of straight, black hair cascaded from his formerly threadbare scalp.

Archaon's own blessings were not as physically obvious as those belonging to his horde or his henchmen. Even rolling in the armoured saddle of the daemon steed Dorghar – whose own afflictions were masked by the natural horror of its existing transformative powers – Archaon felt heavier. While blood roared

through his veins and his heart thundered within the cursed plate of Morkar, Archaon felt a resilience and solidity beneath the flesh that was new. The shard of wyrdstone that was lodged in the socket of his ruined eye had spread while bathed in the warping influence of oblivion. The warpstone had threaded its darkness and endurance through Archaon's skull and bones.

Archaon found that the affliction also had a secondary effect. Like some kind of ancient menhir or a standing stone at the centre of some dread stone circle, Archaon's mere presence seemed to affect the environment about him. Wherever he went, the skies darkened. Thunder rolled and cloud broiled. Lighting storms flashed within the apocalyptic oppression of a storm ever breaking and bathed the land with an infernal glow. Indeed, Archaon had brought a little of hell back with him from the brink of oblivion. The wind streamed dust and ice about him. As the gloom darkened, the heavens rumbled and forks of hellish lightning stabbed down from the sky, Archaon nodded to himself. He was a living announcement of his own doom – a fitting misfortune for the Everchosen of Chaos and the Lord of the End Times to come.

There was suddenly commotion behind him. Turning Dorghar, Archaon found that Giselle's wagon had stopped. The girl had jumped down from the vehicle and was running this way and that. Vier had heaved the monstrous beasts of burden that hauled the wagon to a stop and had climbed down to assist the girl. At first Archaon thought that the Sigmarite sister was trying to escape. Now that they had returned to the north, perhaps she had delusions of fleeing and making her way home. Her movements seemed panicked, however, as she silently ran from half-breed to half-breed in the horde's front rank and even clawed at the chest of Ograx the Great.

The manfiends laughed with the cruelty of their new-found sensibilities, while Ograx tried to push the girl away. She tore at the fur straps of his small breastplate – a horned daemonic skull that sat strapped in the centre of the prince's chest. Archaon watched with interest as the girl collapsed before the hooves of Ograx the Great, clawing away his breastplate. Pulling the straps and skull back, Ograx lifted his hand to backslap the girl, who seemed to be lost in a mad fever. Lowering his meaty hand as a mounted Archaon approached, he simply shrugged Giselle off, who got up and half collapsed again while careening straight into the flickering, black arms of the wraith-like Vier.

As Archaon slid down out of the saddle he found Ograx laughing with his manfiend kindred and strapping the skull back across his broad chest. As Giselle pushed away from the misshapen Vier, she stumbled, her fingers scratching at

her face. She fell into Archaon's arms and the Chaos warlord turned her around.

Giselle's face was a stricken mask of panic. Her eyes were rolling back white. She was as young and beautiful as Archaon had ever found her but she had awoken in her wagon to discover that the Realm of Chaos had left her with a gift also. Her faith could not protect her from the Ruinous Power of hell. Where once there had been thin but inviting lips – that at one time or another had been employed in the whisper of prayer, curled in sadness and disappointment, tenderly kissing Archaon's own or even wrapped around the rarity of an occasional smile – now there was only flesh. While narrow nostrils flared and closed with panic and horror of discovery, the girl's jaw went to work opening a mouth that simply wasn't there any more. There would be no more prayer uttered in praise of the God-King. There would be no more smiles, sadness or the forlorn burn of meeting lips for Archaon. The curse seemed cruel, even for the Dark Gods, and Archaon heard their otherworldly mirth in the laughter of Ograx and his brute manfiends.

Archaon slid down onto his knees and held Giselle to him. The girl had awoken, terrified at the change. She had clawed at her face, running from the wagon and begging for help that she could not articulate and would not come. She had panicked and, thinking that she could not breathe, had all but blacked out. Archaon slipped his horned helm from his head and looked down upon her.

He tried to calm Giselle, soothing her and holding her. With the whisper of dark steel, Archaon drew the curved blade of a kris from his belt. He allowed the point of the blade to drift across Giselle's body and up to her face. Archaon didn't know what he was going to do. Use the knife like a butcher on her face, to give her back what was taken from her? Archaon's own lips fixed in a snarl. What kind of mutilated existence would that be? If he didn't, then Giselle would almost certainly starve to death. Archaon cursed the Dark Gods – the monstrous Powers who had not only taken from the Sister of the Imperial Cross the comfort of her uttered prayers but also, from Archaon, the delicate distraction of her lips and the words that might proceed from them.

Archaon felt the weight of the stone in his bones, dragging the blade down. He moved it across her. Over the pale flesh of her neck. Across the soot and grime of her chest and down over her heart. It was time to end it, Archaon decided. Quick. Easy. To remove from them both a further affliction. Giselle had endured enough horror, pain and madness to fill a hundred lifetimes. It was time to release her and bring the only one she'd had to an end. The kris knife trembled in the Chaos warlord's grasp. Anger built in his chest. At himself. At damnation.

At the perverse Powers who would see them suffer so. He had killed countless things that walked and crawled but he could not bring himself to deliver mercy to one that he loved. A dark, twisted love that seemed to be coiled about his heart like a serpent, but love all the same. Something precious and all but forgotten in the living nightmare of Archaon's existence.

'Do it...' Ograx the Great told him. Archaon looked about. While the Swords of Chaos haunted the ground about them with their blistering darkness and the sorcerer Sheerian gave him an unreadable glare on sharp, uncaring features, Ograx was almost foaming at the mouth with his Blood God's lust for slaughter. Although the fiendish prince was staring at Archaon holding the knife over Giselle's heart, what he was living – over and over – was the plunge of the kris into the gory exposure of a blade-mulched chest.

Archaon's trembling blade began to rattle in his gauntlet. Injustice filled him with the dark promise of fury. He turned the blade suddenly about and pointed it at Ograx the Great – manfiend, butcherer and southern prince.

'I think to save my steel for you,' he told Ograx, before tossing the blade into the frozen earth, where it thudded up to its hilt. Archaon pulled Giselle to him and instead of laying a kiss where none could be received, tried to save her. Enclosing her tiny nose with his mouth, he breathed for her – filling her panic-stricken lungs with air the mindless horror of the experience had denied her. Pulling away, the Chaos warlord felt her breathe for herself. Her nostrils flared and contracted to slits as she breathed. Rising chest by rising chest she calmed, the nightmarish disappearance of her mouth accepted, along with the reality that she could breathe. The girl could only speak with her eyes. They had returned and were wet with dread, accusation and relief. 'I know,' Archaon mumbled. He leant forward and kissed her on the forehead. 'We'll work it out. All is possible. We have already proved that.'

Picking her up, Archaon barged past a glowering Ograx before settling Giselle back to sleep in her wagon. Ordering Khezula Sheerian to stay with her, he climbed back up into the saddle, prompting Vier to do the same with his wagon. The daemon steed Dorghar snorted, no more impressed by the spectacle than Ograx had been. Savagely jabbing the heels of his boots into the creature's infernal flesh, Archaon urged the beast on and led his monstrous horde out of the Northern Gate and into the slaughter of the Shadowlands beyond.

As the glare of the riftflame subsided, Archaon was granted his first clear sight of the Northern Wastes. It had been many years since he had first set foot there. Fleeing towards his fate, he had left the civilised lands of the Empire and his life

as a templar of Sigmar behind. He had exchanged a life half lived, an unloving god and a world strangled by corruption and contradiction for the dire freedom of the north. He had embraced gods who cared even less so that he might destroy them, and lived his life as a savage – a warrior of the Wastes – so that he might one day return to the glowing ashes of the Empire the architect of the world's end. In all of his time as a wandering madman, a marauder and warrior of Chaos – leading bands of other souls into damnation – he had never travelled this far north. He had never crossed the Shadowlands. He had never bathed in the balelight of the ruptured gate, the fires of doom that crowned the world.

The Shadowlands about the gate were everything he had imagined them to be. The Northern Wastes were not as savage as the southern lands from which he had departed. The southern continent was swarming with bestial barbarians. It was haunted by daemons and fiends. Its storms rent both land and ice apart while the limb-shearing cold, which would descend on a monstrous whim, could kill in seconds. The Northern Wastes were no less lethal, but Archaon admired their subtlety. Beasts and lowly daemons lacked the imagination to influence the primordial chaos of the landscape about them. The Northern Wastes were the hellish domain of lost men, however. Doomed individuals who were not lacking in the desires, perversions and needs required to feed the afflicted land with suggestion – to inspire the warping currents that swept south from the ruined gate with their bloodlust, ambition and deviance. Here the land was a law unto itself, dreaming itself up into a frenzy of forever changing forms. Storms were everything and nothing – with gales that might howl sweet visions through your being one moment and then coat you in rancid acid the next. The cold lacked the savage elemental punch of the southern continent but was just as likely to creep into your furs like a serpent and stop your heart, as claim frostbitten fingers and toes.

Here, in the wine-stained gloom of the Shadowlands, Archaon found himself before the Battle Eternal. A cycle of never-ending death and destruction. The doom at the top of the world. Archaon had known warriors of Chaos who had searched a lifetime to find the Battle Eternal. Pilgrims of dark faith who had become lost in the madness of the Wastes and had never breached the inner nightmare of the Shadowlands. Exalted warlords, with small armies of fell followers, who had been showered with the warping gifts of the Dark Gods but for whom spawndom waited. Whereas the Ruinous whisper of the Chaos Wastes drew man, beast and the lost of the elder races north with the promise of more, those that braved the murder and madness eventually came to seek some higher

form of realisation. For Archaon that path had already been laid, as similar paths had extended before all of the Everchosen champions of Chaos who preceded him. For those unblessed with apocalyptic destiny or some other cursed fate, the Battle Eternal called. An irresistible force pulling at all who had been on the road to damnation long enough or who had impressed their dread patrons with rare deeds of darkness. Marauder chieftains. Bestial warlords. Truthseeking witchbreeds. Knights of ruin. The exalted warriors of Chaos, seeking solace in slaughter.

Those chosen to find the Battle Eternal – those that did not lose their way to blade or abstraction – all found the same. In the mutable madness of the Wastes, the Battle Eternal remained a constant. For the dark trials, the struggle, slaughter and fury were forever. Stumbling, half mad from the storm and perversity of the Shadowlands, the warriors of Chaos, clad in their blood-stained plate, feasted their eyes on a vision from their darkest dreams. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of monstrous men, like themselves – fighting for the glory of their patron Power, fighting for the Ruinous Pantheon, fighting for themselves. Hacking. Skewering. Skull-cracking. Piercing with arrow and bow. Burning with the cold energies drawn from an otherworldly realm. Bludgeoning with club, rock or hand. Savaging, with mouth and claw.

They desired the decimating attentions of their Dark Gods. They knew they were watching. Drawing their weapons they became part of the perpetual havoc of the place – as all others had before. Sacrifices were demanded. The warriors of Chaos offered themselves and as many souls as they could steal from enemy Powers, carving the path to a glorious death on the battlefield of all battlefields. They did this in a kind of hope. Hope that their Ruinous Patron would see such a sacrifice. Hope that they may be rewarded for the darkness they had brought to the world. Hope that they might serve on – in daemonhood – and become more than they had ever been. Archaon grunted. These men, these beasts, these twisted souls were fools. Damned and deluded fools.

The daemon steed Dorghar stepped out into the slush. The battlefield stretched as far as the eye could see. The slaughter was like an amorphous blob of clattering plate, singing blades and fountaining gore. It was pure, cacophonous havoc. Helms bobbing and weaving. Banners held high. The blades of swords cutting through the gelid air of the north. The shafts of spears reared. Shields shattering before the devastating onslaught of hate-heaved weaponry. The light-smear of torches clutched in the gloom. The clouds of exertion, misting away on the wind. Warcries screamed to the sky. Roaring determinations. The cries of the



wounded. The shrieks of the soon to be dead.

The ice was a filth-percolating slush, stained red with the incessant slaughter, body parts and constant corpses splashing down into the steaming sludge. In places hollows had formed that pooled with blood, in which the warriors of Chaos fought, thigh deep. Where the heat of gathering gore, blood and fresh death wasn't melting the ice, the white of the freeze was besmirched with rust from the veritable carpet of plate and armour. Armour belonging to Chaos warriors whose journey to daemonic ascension had ended in the rabid, scrambling slaughter of the Battle Eternal. There were bodies also. The butchered. The unworthy. The warrior victims, whose ice-white cadavers stared up through the ice or whose creaking limbs were frozen in place, reaching out of the corpse-stomped slush, mummified by the deep cold.

It was across this macabre, blood-logged plain, clambering over the frosted mounds and ridges of the freshly fallen that the bloodshed and desperation unfolded. Warriors of Chaos stabbed, smashed and decapitated, only to turn and find another armoured foe, lurching out of a similar victory. Both would in time lay slain in the wake of some greater champion – a man bearing greater favour and determination until he too would fall to the lucky strike or back-stabbing cowardice of some nothing of a man. The insanity went on, as it always had.

'Banner,' Archaon called. A manfiend came forward. A comely youth that had once been a long-snout in the employ of the daemon lord Agrammon – muscular and bearing the buds of small horns. He held the banner proudly to the sky, pronouncing his warlord's intention to join the battle. The flayed flesh flapped in the wind. Archaon had no actual intention of joining the Battle Eternal. Its leagues of madness, surrounding the polar gate as it did, were simply in his way. Unlike every other Ruinous warrior on the battlefield, Archaon's destiny was taking him south.

'Protect the wagons,' he called back savagely, his orders relayed through the ranks of the horde. 'Defend the siege engines. Make sure you don't get bogged down or isolated. Scavenge what you can: armour, shields, weaponry. Exchange fur for plate, bone for steel – for this is the armoury of all the world. Pass the word. Have Jharkill unleash his beasts to clear us a path. His monsters to create calamity at our flanks. To the horde the rest!'

Archaon heard the thunderous cheer of bloodthirsty manfiends. Trapped in the wraithscape of the beyond for what could have been a wretched eternity, Archaon's horde could not wait to be part of the horror of battle once more. The top of the world would certainly afford them such an opportunity, Archaon

mused. As the jubilant roar of slaughter-happy fiends shattered the still air of the battlefield, helms were turned. Chaos warriors who had spent many exhausted hours fighting their way through the morass of bodies and clashing plate were now confronted with a new challenge. Having slaughtered their way through a sea of Ruinous warriors, warbands, tribal hordes and small armies, the exalted warriors of darkness now faced the prospect of fighting an entirely new host. A monstrous horde that was marching through the fires of doom and straight out of the gates of hell at them.

‘We are not here in search of favour. We are not here in search of reward. We have been blessed by the darkness and we fight as one. Death to the weak. New purpose and a place in our ranks to the strong.’ Archaon pulled a broad-bladed axe of hell-forged craftsmanship from his belt and raised the heavy weapon. ‘I am Archaon,’ the Chaos warlord announced to the carnage and confusion of the Battle Eternal. ‘Chosen of the Chaos gods. Walker of worlds. Herald of the End. And I bring you your doom.’

The ice either side of Archaon suddenly became a blur. Jharkill had opened the cages and unleashed the horde’s pack of chimeric beasts. Like a torrent of fur, wing and snapping jaws, the emaciated fusions of monstrous beasts surged past. The stream of savagery smashed straight into the shocked warriors on the battlefield, who – exhausted and barely able to raise their weapons to defend themselves against similarly spent foes – were now barrelled to the ground by misshapen predators. The creatures clawed plate from savaged scarred bodies, before thrashing the rag doll corpses of the unfortunate warriors from side to side. Dropping the dead, the chimeric nightmares leapt at their next victim. With the surging advance of the emaciated predators slowed by such shredding butchery, the winged nightmares of Archaon’s horde swooped over the Ruinous warlord’s head.

Cutting down through the streaming ice and gloom, beasts of scale, feather and skin stretched between twisted bone beat their wings. Coming in low over the chimeric killers and their carnage, the airborne monstrosities plucked armoured warlords from stumbling steeds. They skewered Chaos warriors from the ice on single tusks and twisted horns before shooting for the skies to devour their prey. They streamed flame at the clashing mobs, turning columns of doom-pledged pilgrims into thrashing infernos, who shrieked through the battlefield confusion, setting alight the furs and cloaks of nearby champions.

As the horde’s complement of warp-spawned creatures carved a path through the havoc, Archaon urged Dorghar on, the daemon steed ambling through the

carnage. As well as the savaged slaves to darkness that the chimera pack left in its wake, tight throngs of blood-splattered warriors stumbled through the slush and away from the beasts, clearing the way for Archaon's horde. Rolling in the armoured saddle, however, the monstrous magnificence of his mount, the infernal craftsmanship of his ancient plate and the banner that bobbed above his head drew the Ruinous champions down on Archaon. Veteran warriors of Chaos, who had spent the lost and bloody years of their lives seeking out foes who fought for enemy gods so that they might draw some favour from their own miserable deity. The more deadly and infamous the opponent, the greater the glory in the eyes of the Dark Gods. It was a simple and merciless constant in the Wastes, which purged the unworthy and forged from the dross of damnation the most devastating of warriors. Marauder savages, beastlords, altered, twisted sorcerers and exalted champions dressed from head to toe in foetid, baroque finery. All surged for Archaon from the flanks of the chimeric slaughter. Stumbling over the freshly savaged, doomed warriors were drawn to Archaon like moths to the furious flame of a torch in the darkness.

Riding tall on his daemoniac beast – cruel, supremely confident and reeking of infernal favour – Archaon was a Ruinous altar of flesh and hell-forged steel upon which lesser men sacrificed themselves. With the frost of oblivion still sparkling on the battered brilliance of his dun plate, the veteran doomed of the Battle Eternal saw both blessed release and infernal salvations in the dark wonder that was Archaon. Riding out of the gates of hell with an abominate horde at his back, decked in the filth-treasures of Chaos, he immediately struck them as worthy. Worthy of their death. Worthy of a life, given in service of the doom Archaon promised to bring to the world.

As Archaon leaned left and right, hauling the daemon Dorghar around, he felled the great warriors of Chaos about him with single, mangling strikes of his axe. Smashing straight through battle-brittle shields and blades, Archaon cleaved down through his armoured opponents, his axe crashing down through fell-hearted rivals and spinning gore-spiralling heads from damned shoulders. He was a dread sight to behold. With savage beasts consecrating the frozen ground before him with slaughter, a battle-hungry horde of scavenging manfiends butchering in his wake and monstrosities creating blood-misting carnage at his flanks, Archaon's progress through the warriors, warbands and unhallowed armies of the Battle Eternal became irresistible. Like a great ship ploughing through a sea of ice and bobbing bodies, Archaon drove the warrior multitudes before him, the swell of admiration and fear parting a path through the massacre.

‘Archaon!’ he roared to the skies. ‘Archaon!’

It was an announcement. It was a warning. It was a challenge.

Then it happened. Dark-armoured warriors – some draped in filthy furs, some jangling with skulls and chains, some wearing great horned helms and others sporting plate of blood-stained spike – turned from the advancing horde.

Whether it was a form of primordial submission, the dark inspiration of men still devoted to a doomed path or the mind-shearing whisper of Dark Gods, Archaon heard his name erupt from foes who were moments from the welcome of his axe.

‘Archaon!’

His name spread like a plague through the blood, thunder and fatigue of the Battle Eternal. Men and beasts who moments before had swung their notched weaponry in exhaustion and their own belief, turned to hack warrior unfortunates out of Archaon’s path.

*‘Archaon!’*

*‘Archaon!’*

*‘Archaon!’*

His name became a rallying call, uttered in a plethora of accents, for dread warriors whose plate and the banners bobbing above their warband advertised their allegiance to daemon princes and the different gods of the Chaos Pantheon. Some, like Archaon, fought for the pantheon in all its glory. Some fought for lies. Some fought solely for themselves and the corruption of calamities that had transformed the nobility of former lives. Others still bore the symbols of dark entities that even Archaon – having slaughtered his way across the globe – could not identify. They turned in advance of the crest of gore rolling before Archaon’s axe. Before the bone-shattering, body-breaking carnage of his monsters and the fury of his fiend followers, who step by scavenging step, looted the battlefield dead.

No more was the horde a rabble of southern bare-chested barbarians, clad in cannibal furs and skins, wielding the sharpened bones of the conquered. The fiends baptised their manflesh with cold steel, plucked from the dead and the slush: scraps of mail, battered breastplates, spiked pauldrons, Ruinous Star-bearing shields, the clinker-plate of armoured boots, helms of horn and fearsome faceplate. Their gore-splattered claws were drawn to the wonder of forged weaponry that lay chill, blood-stained and rusting in the slush. Some were drawn to the savage ostentation of brute equivalents to their own bludgeoning weaponry: great serrated axes, pikes, spiked flails and the heft of monstrous hammers. Others couldn’t resist the relative craftsmanship of blades that had

found their way there from all corners of the world. In the hands of the horde, all killed with equal prejudice and indiscriminate butchery.

*'Archaon!'*

*'Archaon!'*

*'Archaon!'*

*'Archaon!'*

*'Archaon!'*

The Chaos warlord heard the chorus of his name move through the carnage of battle. It rose above the screams of the slaughtered and the ringing clash of desperate blades. For every ten unworthy tribal champions, altered hulks, sorcery-streaming witch-warriors and dark knights of doom felled, Archaon added an armoured axeman, some black-hearted bestial chieftain or broadsword swinging lord of Chaos to his number. Like a line of reapers moving through a field of wheat, Archaon and his growing horde felled the unworthy. Only the strongest, the most committed and doom-hungry of the gods' champions survived the onslaught of Archaon's horde. Men and monsters who had stridden through flame streaming from the skies. Who had survived chimeric predators launching themselves from freshly savaged foes. Who had walked away from the apocalyptic devastation of flesh-smearred giants. Who had fought clear of Prince Ograx's fiend mob and had slain their way through other warriors of Chaos who had achieved the same.

The Battle Eternal was a hellish vision of violence and brutality. The sound of clashing blades, death cries and bombast rang in the ear. The sting of the cold made way for the stench of old rot. On his lips Archaon could taste copper from the mist of blood in the air. His mind and muscles ached with the urgency of murder, carried out with bone-aching force and determination. All Archaon could see was the blur of furious attacks streaming by as he urged Dorghar back to the forefront of the battle-parting assault, where Chaos warriors pledged to Archaon's flayed banner only minutes before were making progress.

As he led his army through the havoc – killing the weak and recruiting the strong to his banner – Archaon was granted a view of what he had achieved. His darksight was merely a scramble of wretched souls clashing for miles around, while his good eye struggled to peer through the storm-streaming gloom ahead or the intense blaze of the Northern Gate, which threw everything before it into an amorphous silhouette. The Eye of Sheerian burned above the socket-slits of his helm, however, revealing to Archaon the devastation he had caused. Like a colossal wedge, Archaon's horde had charged out of the Ruinous fires of the

Great Gate and into the havoc of never-ending battle.

Behind, Archaon could see the steaming, bloody expanse of fast-freezing bodies Prince Ograx's manfiends had left behind. Clad in real mail and plate, while wielding forged weaponry of steel and strength, the horde had proved more devastating than ever. Archaon watched broken corpses sail across the heads of the manfiends. Abominate giants and warped titans under Jharkill's influence swept and smashed enemies into the air with colossal bone clubs and the flick of monstrous horn-crowned heads.

The airborne nightmares of the horde tore Chaos warriors from their mounting assault on the flanks, beating their wings for the sky before dropping the armoured champions to their deaths. Winged serpents and mutant monstrosities soared along the same flanks, laying down streams of flame that cooked blood-sworn knights in their plate as the ice beneath their boots turned to shallows that swallowed their splashing bodies. Those warriors of Chaos that did reach the manfiends beyond the meltwater and the flames had other things to worry about. As they carved into Archaon's half-breeds, the chimeras, warhounds and emaciated predators that had been unleashed from the cages now prowled the crowded flanks – their lithe, skeletal bodies held close to the ground. The only evidence that they were even present on the field of battle were the unmanly shrieks and sudden disappearances of beastmen and marauders who, moments before, were there fighting next to their Ruinous lords and who, moments after, were gore-splatters in the snow.

Archaon had achieved more than just the slaying of enemy warlords and the Ruinous followers that fought for them. That was the purpose in every *other* servant of the Chaos Pantheon fighting before the Northern Gate. The Eye of Sheerian showed him that the wedge of Archaon's horde – including the freshly recruited and growing army of Chaos warriors and doom-destined champions that fought with him at the driving point of the path-carving assault – had actually disrupted the Battle Eternal. It was breaking up.

Archaon allowed himself a crooked smile and a grunt of derision. Truly only the Everchosen of Chaos could cause such a wonder. Only the Lord of the End Times could bring the greatest Ruinous warriors in the world, partaking in the greatest battle in the world, under his banner as one.

Archaon suddenly cursed – his daemon steed and himself – as Dorghar lurched around, nearly knocking him from the saddle. Like a stupefied fool he had allowed himself to be distracted in the middle of the battle he was threatening to end.

Dorghar reared and snorted. Dun-armoured knights who had been splashing through the red slush to rally behind Archaon now parted to reveal the wielder of a monstrous mace.

An abominate champion of Nurgle stomped forwards, making fountains of curdling meltwater splatter up about the dimensions of its grotesque form. Like a small mountain of rancid fat, its bare pox-riddled belly poked out from its filthy leper's shawls. The rusted plate that barely fitted around the trunks of its legs squealed for oil like a tortured child. The corroded shells of pauldrons sat on its great globed shoulders, while a tiny head sat inside the beaked, metal mask of a plague doctor. The crude instruments of the champion's former calling – saws, pincers and lancets – jangled on the belt of its brown mail skirts. The boils on its belly grew to horrid fruition. Bursting. Splattering. Dribbling their pus-streaked corruptions into the slushy shallows and mixing with the slick of rust that followed the Great Lord of Decay's champion. New boils erupted almost immediately from the afflicted flesh in a continuous celebration of rot and renewal. Worse than that, Archaon could see a growing army of the afflicted, shuffling in the champion's rank footsteps. The rust, pus and plague, the effluent corruption the champion had trailed behind it on its journey north, now clouded its way through the meltwaters of the Battle Eternal.

Archaon saw that upon coming into contact with the corruption, it was now spreading. Bestial champions, marauders and alterededs who stumbled through the muck-infected slush were afflicted almost immediately by a septicity that felt its way up their pus-streaked and blistering legs. Dark knights and Chaos warriors decked head to toe in hell-forged plate were struck down by a living corrosion that crept up their greaves, turning their suits into rust-fused incubators of virulent plague. Champions of the Dark Gods, who stared on in horror as the supernatural contagion worked its way up through their bodies began to violently empty their stomachs, erupt with pox and bleed pus from their eyes, ears and nose. This spread the virulence further. Souls curdled by the Great Lord of Decay. Such warriors joined the growing horde of plague-riddled followers, stumbling in infected agony after the man-mountain of pus that stood before Archaon.

This was to be his challenge. As fast as Archaon was recruiting the warriors of Chaos to his doomed cause, the grotesque champion of Nurgle would be infecting them to his own. In their infinite, twisted perversity, the Ruinous Powers had inflicted two game changing warlords of Chaos on the Battle Eternal at the same time. Archaon, who minutes before had been so impressed with

himself for bringing a fresh kind of havoc to a place that was nothing, came to understand that the Dark Gods would not be denied their cruel amusement. There would be a battle within the battle. A clash of two mighty hosts, one pouring from the decimated gates of hell and the other from the bleak insanity of the Shadowlands – each laying claim to the malevolent talent on display in the rampant, never-ending butchery of the Battle Eternal.

Turning Dorghar about with a twist of his torso and thighs, Archaon snatched the barbed length of a broad-bladed partisan from where it was standing upright in the petrified body of a Slaaneshi warlord. As Archaon rode around, through the savage clashes of champions who had been fighting through the Battle Eternal, he held up his weapon as a signal to his horde.

‘Archaon!’ he roared to the stormy tumult of the skies.

‘ARCHAON!’ the growing insanity of his horde called back.

Archaon turned to face the monstrous sack of disease-carrying putridity that was his opponent.

‘Gangrysssss...’ the Plague Lord’s champion managed through the beak of its mask. ‘Chosen of the Godsssss.’ To this his blight-afflicted followers simply echoed with the cacophonous misery of a moan that might or might not have been the champion’s dread name. Like a brain-fevered bull, Gangryss threw its disease-swollen bulk into a charge. It swung its monstrous mace through brute marauder warriors, mangling them out of its path.

Archaon’s face drew back into a malevolent snarl. The Chaos warlord had competition for the gifts of the Dark Gods. Holding the reins with the arm upon which his shield sat, Archaon prompted Dorghar into a charge of its own.

Archaon leaned back in the rolling saddle. He narrowed his good eye in the darkness of his helm. He peered at the blazing mound of diseased ruin with his darksight. He stared straight through the plague-promised hulk with the Eye of Sheerian, the sorcerous jewel granting him a vision of the champion’s rotten heart, thunder-pumping pus and spoilage about the monster’s great body. Archaon’s arm snapped forward like the string on a ballista, launching the shaft of the partisan through the air. It sailed through the northern freeze, rising, wobbling and irresistibly drifting downwards towards its target. Nurgle’s great beast of a champion did not stop and did not care. When the partisan hammered into the meat of its rancid carcass, the monster missed its splashing step. Skewered on the barbed shaft, its mighty heart a barb-shredded mess, the champion lurched forwards before crashing down onto its armoured knees in the slush. It slid through the blood, snow and bones creating a crimson wave before



coming to a stop. It still clutched the monstrous mace in one greening hand, the spikes of the crowning ball acting like an anchor in the ice.

The ruin of its chest rose and fell once more, pus streaming down into the waters about it, then the Great Lord of Decay's champion was no more. Archaon hauled up on Dorghar's reins – approaching the defeated champion slowly – and the Chaos warriors splashed to a slowing stop at his command.

Archaon took a deep breath of the freezing air. In the presence of the diseased hulk he thought better of taking another. He feared no opponent and had faced his fair share of Ruinous monstrosities, but there was a part of him that was glad he didn't have to face the champion of the plague-ridden.

Then he saw the partisan. The shaft of the barbed weapon had, moments before, been the sheen of midnight metal. Now it was browning, mottled and eaten through with emerging rust. Where the shaft sat in the champion's chest, pus seeped and corruption spumed. A few seconds more saw the partisan cascade to the ice in a shower of rusted flakes. Gone.

Even where he was sitting, Archaon heard the ugly beat of Gangryss's mighty heart thud back to diseased life. With a suddenness that shot a bolt of panic through Archaon's own, the creature was on its feet. It turned with a leper's grace, the spoilage of hidden strength in its arms brought to bear as the rusted ball of the mace came up and around, scraps of rotten flesh stuck on its spikes. Once again the shield, with its pantheon-blessed boss, took the brunt of the potent attack.

Spikes punctured the shield and the heavy head of the mace smashed the surface into a crumpled mess. The force behind the impact was devastating and took Archaon clean from his saddle. The armoured warrior hit the ice some distance away, rolled and clattered to a stop in a corpse-crowded pool of meltwater and gore. Gangryss was no daemon, like Archaon's father Be'lakor, but the monstrous champion had god-given gifts of its own. Its rotten resilience. Its otherworldly contagion. Its troll-like powers of regeneration. Its nerve-dead muscles, tendons and bones that didn't have to feel the torturous forces required to knock a foe like Archaon clean from his mount. Gangryss had been rewarded well indeed for the horror and havoc it had spread.

Gangryss was not the only one with gifts. The hulk's devastating blow would have broken any of a thousand dark champions. Not Archaon. Not any more.

Not that Gangryss felt anything. As Archaon scrambled arm over arm for the frozen edge of the pool, he saw the monstrous champion swing its great mace back around and up before bringing it down on the daemon steed Dorghar with

unearthly force and power. Red slush and diseased meltwater surged for the sky as the mace came down. The hulk's corrupted lungs uttered a roar of jubilant determination. It didn't knock the steed unconscious. It didn't break its back. It hammered the beast down into the ice. Smashed into a shattered mess and into its own hollow beneath the surface of the battlefield, Dorghar was gone.

Archaon was surprised at the rage he felt, the presence of the Blood God's wrath in his heart. Perhaps it felt like losing Oberon all over again or perhaps he had grown to value and even like the sneering daemon steed. Conversely, it might simply have been the destruction of one of Archaon's dark treasures: the infernal steed destined to carry him into the bleak oblivion of the End Times. It might simply have been that the Chaos warlord felt that Gangryss had plagued the world long enough.

Archaon rose from the shallows, foetid water raining from his plate, as Gangryss turned to see that the champion-thing he had broken still lived and moved. Turning, Nurgle's hulk stomped through the icy graveyard at Archaon. Stabbing the shield upright into the bloody snow, the Chaos warlord reached down into the burn of the freezing waters. Prising a battle axe from the mummified fingers of its former owner, Archaon lifted the weapon above him. Its axe-head was made up of a huge and hollow blade, crafted in the design of the unhallowed eight-point star. He jabbed the head of the battle axe at the thunderous approach of Gangryss.

'End them!' Archaon roared to his army. 'End them all...'

Archaon's Chaos warriors and the plague slaves of Gangryss surged at one another. The clang of blades was soon followed by the cries of the wounded and the roaring defiance of the dying.

Archaon fainted right and then rolled left across his furs and pauldrons. Dripping with slush, the Chaos warlord allowed the champion's ice-mulching mace to smash into the ground, sending meltwater towards the sky. Archaon spun round, bringing the star-shaped blade of his battle axe about him. The axe tore through the stinking flesh of Nurgle's hulk at the side. Ducking the spiked head of the mace as it was swung around, Archaon felt the savage movement of air through his helm. Chopping down with the axe, Archaon smashed through the rusted plate of one leg before dragging the serrated spikes of the steel star back across the joint behind the knee of the other leg. The armour just crumbled there and the axe bit through flesh and tendon down to the rancid bone. Ripping through slabs of flesh on the champion's back, Archaon risked an economical hack at the thing's diseased paunch. As the axe thudded into the belly of

Gangryss, Archaon ensured that he was out of the path of the spurting boils and gushing contagion.

Tearing the battle axe out of the champion, Archaon spun back on himself to wrong foot his opponent. Burying the battle axe in the hulk's meaty shoulder, Archaon shattered the rusted pauldron that covered it. As shards of brown metal rained about him, Archaon heaved his weapon out of the blubber of the monster's globed shoulder. He dare not leave the blade in his enemy for too long for fear that it would rot to nothing. As he stared at the horrific, muscle-shearing gash that his battle axe had left in Gangryss's spoiling shoulder, he was struck by a symbol burned into the champion's flesh. A symbol the axe had cleaved in two but a symbol that Archaon recognised. The monstrous warrior was an ever living example of the Plague Lord's patronage, yet the eight-point star seared into his shoulder supported his claim that Gangryss himself, at least, thought of himself as the Chosen of the Chaos gods. A festering champion of the Great Lord of Decay, drawing the eye and admiration of the Dark Pantheon with his ability to join all warriors of Chaos under a communal suffering, yoking the joint power of his collective horde with a single plague.

Archaon knew he had seen the symbol before. Then it came to him. In the Forsaken Fortress. His father's palace. He was staring at no ordinary Ruinous Star – the kind cut into the flesh of a thousand pantheon-pledged warriors of darkness or carved into the surface of countless shields. It was Be'lakor's star. The Mark of the First Daemon of Chaos. The Mark of the Bearer. The Herald. The same burned into the darkness of his shadowy champions. The same dread sigil that burned across the daemon prince's own heart and chest. Archaon was not the only mortal champion in search of the treasures of Chaos. Be'lakor had other pieces moving across the game board of the world. Gangryss was one of them. Gangryss and how many more, Archaon wondered? How many promised the power and the position of being Everchosen of Chaos – only to be a soul-in-waiting for Be'lakor to possess and flesh for the daemon prince to wear?

The shock of the discovery had cost him. Seconds had bled away with his racing thoughts and now Gangryss – who couldn't have cared less about the healing flesh of his shoulder and his patron's monstrous mark – all but had him. Narrowly leaning his helm out of a brutal backswing with the monstrous mace, Archaon began to understand how Gangryss could be at the head of such a host. As fast as Archaon was opening him up – revealing bone, ripping up muscle and allowing a nest of rotten intestines to follow his retracted axe out of the champion's belly – the monster's regenerative powers were healing him.

Gangryss couldn't feel the pain of such injuries; he barely knew he had them before flesh knitted back together and innards slurped back inside his putrid carcass. Worse, the more damage Archaon inflicted, the more pus-streaked blood and contagion stained the slush through which Archaon was slipping and sliding.

Looking down, Archaon found that he was barely keeping a foothold on the edge of a hulk-stamped hollow brimming with bloody meltwater and doom. As his balance wavered and his armoured boot slid down, Archaon had visions of being rust-entombed in his ancient armour and living out the rest of his days in the putrescence of a plague-filled metal coffin. Instead of committing his footwork to another brutal axe swing through the champion's maggot-squirring corpulence, Archaon held his ground. Movement meant infection. Remaining still meant allowing Gangryss to land the bone-ringing blow he had been attempting to execute. Holding the battle axe under its star-shaped head and at its haft, nothing could prepare him for the mind-numbing impact of the brute's mace against the presented axe. Archaon was batted away from his foe and the deadly pool of corruption, rolling, flailing and skidding into a rank of the champion's plague slaves.

Again, Archaon's stone-laced skeleton had saved him. Blinking himself back to the moment, with the clash of steel around him slowed to a dreary metallic din, he pushed himself up and lifted his helm. The Swords of Chaos had raced into battle behind him. While Zwei and Drei leapt at the champion of Nurgle with acrobatic flaps of their wings, the wraith-warriors cutting the monster up with their bone swords, Eins was racing across the ice towards his master. Archaon felt the footsteps of the infected padding through the shallows about him.

Archaon rose and scooped up the axe that had been knocked from his grip. When Gangryss saw that Archaon still lived and was walking through the Battle Eternal towards him, it bellowed a lung-shredding challenge to the stormy skies.

'Come get me,' Archaon roared back, 'you sack of spoiling meat.'

Stomping through the pus-swirling pool, Gangryss forced his fat legs on, batting champions both pledged to Archaon's banner and his own aside with murderous sweeps of his mace.

Turning the battle axe about in his gauntlet, swinging the blade about his body to the left and then the right, Archaon marched across the red ice. He would have to destroy this plague champion once and for all or surrender all of his dark treasures to the monster – stripped from his frozen corpse one by one.

As the determination of a slip-shod march became a slush-splattering run,

Archaon spied a kind of hope. Narrowing his eye he swooped under the mottled steel of rust-riddled blades and lurched out of the clumsy arcs of flails and hammers brown with old blood. Holding his battle axe beneath its star-shaped blade, he despatched those servants of Nurgle who he could not avoid, mercilessly sinking the steel points of his weapon into their skulls. Tearing the axe blade out he allowed plague slaves to drop beside his footprints before economically skull-hooking another unfortunate.

‘Youuuuuu...’ the hulk seethed, the deep rasp both an accusation and a challenge issued. Archaon didn’t need an invitation. He had invited himself to the monstrous warrior’s doom. As the champion of Nurgle brought his mace over his beaked mask, his intention to smash his opponent into the Chaos Wastes clear, Archaon stomped at speed through the slush. As he held his own weapon close, Archaon leapt from the ice. Gangryss turned the beak of his mask in confusion, since the Chaos warlord was too far away to effect an attack. The grotesque hulk was wrong. So very wrong.

Archaon curled into an axe-hugging dive. Hitting the ice with a half-accomplished roll, Archaon tumbled across his shoulders and the furs mounted on his back. Stamping his armoured heels into the freeze, Archaon brought himself to an abrupt halt – transferring the dreadful momentum of the manoeuvre to the battle axe that he launched from his clutched gauntlets. He sent the weapon off with a roar of effort, watching the battle axe spin haft over the star-shaped steel of its razor-sharp blade. The speed, cutting hiss and ugly revolution of the weapon was a sickening wonder to behold. Within moments that seemed like a sickening age, the battle axe landed in the head of the Great Lord of Decay’s champion, splitting his beak mask down the middle and cleaving through the front of Gangryss’s demolished skull.

Blood, pus and brains slurped down the champion’s chest in a slow but insistent cascade. The small mountain of fat and spoilage tottered, his armoured feet slapping backwards through the slush. His gargantuan mace tumbled from his plump, twitching fingers and his hands began to blindly grasp for the battle axe firmly buried between his eyes.

Archaon knew this would not stop Gangryss, with its god-blessed regenerative powers. The Chaos warlord had already resumed his charge. Ice and brittle bones crunched beneath his furious footsteps. Meltwater splattered behind him, while his cloak twisted and turned in his wake. Archaon closed on the skull-split Gangryss. Snatching his cloak with his right gauntlet, the Chaos warlord pulled it around in front of him like a cape. Holding the material out like some kind of

shield, Archaon left the ice once more. This time he embraced the momentum of the charge and smashed into the wall of rot-threaded blubber that was Gangryss. Striking Nurgle's champion like a cannon ball at a castle wall, Archaon felt the splatter of pus from the bubbling boils on the monster's belly, his presented cloak keeping his armour from the worst of the corrosive corruption.

As Archaon went down in the slush and bloody meltwater, the champion stumbled backwards. Gangryss suddenly disappeared into the depths of a hollow Archaon had spotted behind it. The gruesome tentacles of a monstrous spawn slapped, grasped and seized victims from the edge of its crater. Some thrice-blessed champion or creature of the Battle Eternal, rewarded for its fortitude and butchery with transforming gifts that turned it from devout servant of the Chaos gods into a mindless, tentacular maw buried in the ice. A thing of horrid darkness that served on by dragging the weak and unworthy of the Battle Eternal into the thrashing teeth of its horrific jaws.

As Archaon crawled arm over arm towards the abomination, he heard the burst of Gangryss's gas-bloated belly. He heard the excruciating crunch of bone and rusted steel in the beast's masticating maw. He heard the horror of a death from which Gangryss – champion of the Plague Lord, Chosen of the Ruinous Gods and servant of the Dark Master – could not survive. As Archaon neared the edge of the hollow he could hear the groans, bubblings and rumblings of the spawn-monster's cavernous stomach. Then suddenly a magnificent fountain of blood, pus and macerated bone rocketed up towards the heavens in a steaming stream.

'Heal that,' Archaon dared the monstrous champion of Chaos. The Chaos warlord heard a familiar sound. It was the whooshing revolution of the battle axe. With its star-shaped blade spinning over its haft, the weapon had been vomited up out of the pit with the rest of the rancid champion. As it descended, Archaon lowered his head. As it thudded blade first into the ice, like a wood axe in a block of firewood, the warrior grunted.

Archaon heard something within the hollow and envisioned that he might be the next mighty champion of Chaos to sate the appetite of the monstrous spawn. Snatching up the battle axe from the ice, Archaon ran forward, intending to chop snaking tendrils or loathsome tentacles reaching out for him and hell-bent on dragging his armoured form down into the pit and a waiting maw. As the squelch of his footfalls took him closer, however, he found no such abominate appendages feeling their way towards him. Instead he was confronted by the nightmarish form of a midnight stallion, climbing out of the hollow. Upon crossing the lip of the ice crater with its spiked hooves, the steed shook itself

from snout to tail, rattling the armoured saddle that sat on its back. The daemon Dorghar's eyes burned with the infernal fire of its transformative powers. Snorting the last of Gangryss's repugnance from its nostrils, the daemon steed once again spoke. Its words were unknown to Archaon but the furnace-hiss of otherworldly scorn that accompanied them was unmistakable.

'Yes,' Archaon told Dorghar simply. 'Quite.'

Grabbing the reins and slipping an armoured boot into a spiked stirrup, Archaon hauled himself up into the saddle. In the desperation and drama of Gangryss's end, Archaon had not noticed the haunting silence of the battlefield. The freezing wind moaned about the armoured forms of Chaos warriors who had slowed to stillness. Through the statuesque wonder of warriors and monstrous talent, only one figure moved. An emaciated wretch in rags and chains, his head forever trapped in a cage with no key. The flagellant Gorst. Gorst who had followed Archaon unharmed across the Southern Wastes. Who had survived with him the dread dangers of the dark Realms of Chaos. Who now walked unmolested – and unlike the rest of Archaon's horde, unchanged – through the Battlefield Eternal. Gorst dragged his trailing chains through the bones, bloody slush and still bodies before coming to a stop himself and staring up at his master.

About them, dread serenity swept through the carnage, bringing the Battle Eternal to a halt never witnessed before. Foes lowered their weapons. Banners drifted to the bloody ground. The din of battle died.

'I was one of you,' Archaon called across the frozen silence, his voice carried on the shearing wind. 'A puppet in a sick show – like this. Dancing for my dark masters. I dance no more. And neither should you. The gifts of the gods are no such thing. Let us not seek reward. Let us not ask for power. Let us not wait on that which is given. Let us take what is ours. Darkness is ours. Ruin is ours. The world turns beneath our feet for the taking. Real power resides not with gods or any following but with those who take it from them. I am Archaon, doom to my enemies, doom to all the world, doom to the gods invested in that world. Come with me. Why earn the treasures of Chaos when you can steal them? Why kill for Ruinous patrons when you can kill for yourself? Why sell your souls so cheaply, when you can make the worlds of gods and men pay for your miseries?

'I might be Chosen of the Dark Gods – but I did not choose them. I will be Everchosen of Chaos, whether the dread Powers and their daemons wish it for me or not. The legions of hell will be ours to command and we shall use them to demonstrate true power. The power to choose. To be or not to. To drag the sick

perversity of this daemon-haunted existence kicking and screaming into a time of Ending. To end the world, the gods that torment it and ourselves. That is real power and I ask you to seize it with me. With he who is one of you: lost, damned even, but a slave to darkness no more. With Archaon...'

The infernal fires of the collapsed gate blazed, like flames upon which gunpowder had been dashed. The balelight of the beyond burned ferociously at Archaon's god-thwarting words. Archaon couldn't tell whether the brilliance raged in warning or celebration of his wondrous achievement.

'Archaon!' a voice boomed across the killing fields. A skull-axe thrust up at the sky, above the heads of countless warriors. It was Ograx the Great, the half-breed prince who was beast no more. The former bestial champion of the Blood God, whose army of manfiends had smashed through the havoc of the Battle Eternal, collecting before its example an ever growing vanguard of Chaos warriors. He knew precious few words in his master's tongue but he knew the glory of his name. With his chest heaving, Ograx roared the warlord's name to the storm-crashing heavens.

'Archaon, Archaon... Archaon!' the daemonbreed chanted.

'Archaon!'

'Archaon!'

'Archaon!'

Once more the battlefield rang with the thunder of his name, uttered like a dark oath from thousands of doom-lifted hearts. Warriors of Chaos, fighting for every Ruinous Power and daemoniac master, united as one dark, apocalyptic force behind the dread syllables of his name.

'ARCHAON!'

'ARCHAON!'

The warlord turned his daemon steed about to soak up the power and possibility of his intoxicating achievement. The ground trembled. The fires of hell roared forth from the gate of oblivion. Thunder tore through the sky and lightning shattered the gloom.

'ARCHAON!'

He held up his battle axe, the steel blade of the Ruinous Star rising. He lifted it above the chanting thousands. The dark star of a Chaos undivided. United. As one. The chanting echoed to nothing on the chill air.

'Let us be the storm that rolls south!' Archaon bellowed back at them, levelling his battle axe towards a world awaiting its end. It was all the monstrous horde needed to hear.





## CHAPTER XIII

*'There is a mountain of shadow thrown,  
The only feature the Wasteland knows.  
The mountain waits;  
The mountain slumbers;  
The mountain quakes;  
The mountain thunders.  
A mountain more than storm or place –  
The Black King of an ancient race.'*

– The Mad Minstrel, excerpt, *Chimerica*

*The Chimera Plain  
The Northern Wastes  
Date Unknown*

Archaon would not make the same mistakes again. There would be no repeated disasters. You could not be betrayed by those you did not trust – and Archaon trusted no one. The only betrayals the horde suffered would be his own.

Archaon's colossal host marched south. Through the Shadowlands. His vast

Ruinous army contained representation from every marauder tribe fighting for god-fearful territory in the Wastes. Northmen from the mountainous lands of Norsca. Berserker Bjornlings. Warring Aeslings and Sarls. Werekin. Expeditionary raiders from the Kraken Sea and Varg reavers. From the cruel lands of the Kurgan and the Eastern Steppes he had Yusak warlords, centigor nomads of the Endless Land, savage horsemen of the Tokmar and Skull-landers of the dread Kul. Of the mighty Hung, Archaon's host boasted masterless warriors of the Man-Chu, Weijin invaders and terrors of the Great Bastion, pirate clans of the Yin and even fallen hordes of the unstoppable Ungol.

Where Archaon's marauders happened across territorial hosts of their parent tribes, the Chaos warlord gave instructions that such savages be assimilated into his army or be utterly wiped out. Bestial hordes needed little convincing of Archaon's strength when stunt-horned scouts reported back his army's expanse and growing number. Only Clovak Moonhoof and Truskag the Red denied Archaon the brutality of their beasts. The coward Clovak Moonhoof and his half-breeds fled Archaon's outriders and were lost in one of the Shadowlands' soul-swallowing storms. The blood-crazed Truskag the Red, conversely, gave Archaon's expeditionary champions a sample of their talents by leading his warherd into sacrificial annihilation, in honour of his gorethirsty god.

The bulk of the horde's continual supply of recruits were small hosts, warbands and lone champions wandering the Wastes. Chaos warriors and dread sorcerers, devoted to different Ruinous paths and honouring different barbarous gods and aspects of the Dark Pantheon. These warriors had found themselves on the path to darkness from innumerable lands, both civilised and savage lands. Many heralded from Archaon's homeland – the doom-ripe principalities of the Empire. His horde also boasted twisted knights of Bretonnia, raven-haired warriors of the southern states, who felt the chill of the Wastes worse than most, man-eating hulks of the Ogre Kingdoms, who had wandered too far north in search of slaves, and hardened Kislevites, fallen veterans of the border wars against Chaos invaders.

Confronted with the fearful number of Archaon's Chaos army and the potent determination of their purpose, most warriors from these far off lands and their motley warbands of afflicted oddities came to see the darkness from Archaon's unique and incontrovertible perspective. Whether delivered in person or through the champions he honoured with temporary command of despatched hosts, the offer was always the same. The dark warriors and their bedraggled followers could continue their service to the Ruinous Powers or single unholy god under

Archaon's banner of the Ruinous Star – bringing honour to Chaos in all its contradiction and undivided glory – or be sacrificed by Archaon's horde to the self same cause.

Most had been wandering victims of the Wastes and its perversities for some time. In Archaon's great host they saw food, water and even protection from predatory daemons, competing warbands or the insanity of the environment itself. Some champions felt they had lost purposes of their own, if they ever had them, and felt the pull of Archaon's fate and the prosecution of his personal mission to find the legendary treasures of Chaos. Some simply gave him their blood fealty based upon some measure of supremacy. His warrior prowess. The wonder of his accomplishments. The leadership of his loyal masses – the example of warriors like themselves, who rode with Archaon and fought for him.

There were of course those who refused his dark offer. Upstarts, newly arrived in the Wastes and wrapped up in delusions of their own invincibility. Madmen who didn't seem to understand that they were courting certain death or whose minds had been so warped that they didn't care. Then, of course, there were the pretenders. Exalted warriors of Chaos, dark lords and monstrous sorcerers who had been deceived by their patron Powers or had lied to themselves: champions who called themselves the Chosen of Chaos and boasted of their fearful ambitions. Death was the only cure for their predicament and Archaon granted such warriors the swift mercy of his battle axe for such Ruinous blasphemies, before assimilating their warbands into the dark magnificence of his horde.

As the colossal horde wound its way through the warping landscape of the Shadowlands it drank polluted rivers dry. Archaon had charged Jharkill with the training of mounted hunting parties to track and kill herds of twisted beasts that roamed the gloomy wilderness. Many parties disappeared – no doubt eaten by something they in turn had been stalking – but those that returned did so dragging the warped carcasses of rhinox, roaming sauria, thundertusk and razorgor hogs, ready for skinning. Jharkill himself Archaon kept busy with the hunting and enslaving of further monstrosities to add to their abominate collection of calamities. Chimeric predators. Skulking daemons. Flocks of flesh-feasting harpies. All fell to the huntsman's eye, his poison-smearred arrows and the brute range of his tusk bow. It had been Jharkill who had found the Chimera Plain.

Intent on finding the *Slayer of Kings* as soon as possible, Archaon had entrusted small hosts of his greater horde to four champions of Chaos who had proved themselves worthy lieutenants. Having his colossal horde make camp in

a fang-lined impact crater called the Whispermaw, where champions of Chaos were supposed to hear the land give up its secrets, Archaon sent his four champions off in search of the lonely mountain. All set off in different directions, the mounted champions and their contingents swallowed up by the gloom of the Shadowlands.

Casimir Ghislaine returned first. The Bretonnian knight wore his exquisite suffering like he wore his suit of immaculate armour. His dark plate was riven with barbs and spikes on the inside as well as on its polished surface and enclosed the Pleasure Lord's champion like an Iron Maiden. His steed's armour and Ghislaine's saddle were similarly a nest of spikes to suffer upon. Archaon was furious with the Slaaneshi knight for returning so swiftly but Ghislaine insisted that he and his host had been gone for months. He hadn't found the mountain Archaon was seeking but had discovered another called the Thunderhead, at the foot of which he had discovered the age-browned bones and rotting armour of the past champion simply known as Deng. Deng had been a hulking easterner, a former worshipper of Tzeentch, the Great Changer, who had been a silent but deadly warrior-lieutenant in Archaon's horde. His lacquered armour was very distinctive, however, sporting a daemon-mask helmet through which Deng's strange blue eyes used to blaze. It was unlikely that Ghislaine had found the armour of another such champion and Archaon reasoned that Deng and his host must have been caught in some kind of storm at the Thunderhead, trapping them in some horrific version of the past.

Lothar Bott made his way back some weeks later at the head of his slave-swarm of mange-eaten beastmen, also unsuccessful in his quest to find the lonely mountain. The Nurglite was a stinking sorcerer with three heads, grotesquely conjoined at the temple and jaw in the same orientation as the Great Lord of Decay's sigil. Carrying a scythe-staff and riding a skeletal steed, Bott was an unimaginative, if capable lieutenant who carried out his master's orders and no more.

Ulfen Schorsch was the last to return. A champion of the Blood God, Schorsch was a ghoulish sight in the red and black of his armour, trimmed as it was with spikes and draped with blood-soaked furs. Worst of all was his patron's gift of a fleshless face. Sparse muscles and tendons were still visible about his blood-stained skull, as well as a pair of piercing eyes that never closed and peered out from hooded sockets. A pair of gleaming brass fangs framed his jaw and marked him out as a warrior-parasite. A cannibal. He commanded a contingent of similar warriors, who bore the same curse of fleshlessness and blood-hunger, which he

called the Crimson Company. Many of the Crimson Company were merciless warriors of Chaos in their own right and acted as Schorsch's own lieutenants.

At first, Archaon thought that the fleshless-faced champion had news for him. Instead, Ulfen Schorsch only had news of a running conflict the Crimson Company had become involved with along the banks of a river of eel-teaming mist. After an unsuccessful ambush, a furious Schorsch had committed his host to hunting down their attackers in a labyrinth of razor-sharp canyons. Stalking and slaughtering their foes to the last urchin-armoured warrior of Chaos, Schorsch boasted to his master of a battle to the god-honouring death with Kormac Graw and the bloodfeast that followed. With fang-lipped insolence, Schorsch told Archaon that Graw was a celebrated champion of the Ruinous Star, very much like the warlord himself. Archaon was furious with Schorsch, berating the bloodthirsty champion not only for failing in his mission but also for wastefully sating his personal appetites on potential recruits for the horde.

When Jharkill returned from a hunting trip a day later, however, he soothed Archaon's anger with news that he had sighted the mountain his champions were searching for. Leaving Casimir Ghislaine in charge of the crater camp and Khezula Sheerian with a secret responsibility for watching over the twisted Slaaneshi, Archaon took charge of a scouting party himself. With the ogre huntsman tracking for them through the changeable landscape of the Northern Wastes and taking the Swords of Chaos as a Ruinous escort, Archaon also selected Ograx the Great as extra muscle. If there was blood to be spilt, then who better than a champion of the Blood God to perform the duty? With the half-demon, Archaon also ordered Ulfen Schorsch and his Crimson Company along, to demonstrate his displeasure with the Chaos champion and his butchers.

With Jharkill's broad strides taking the monstrous huntsman at a pace through shimmering highlands on the border of the Shadowlands and the wider Wastes, Archaon had little trouble keeping up on the back of Dorghar. The members of his wraith-warrior escort also made short work of the frost-baked terrain, for Eins, Zwei and Drei now seemed less and less part of Archaon's world of blood and muscle. Day by day they continued a transformation they had begun in the Realm of Chaos, assuming the terrifying form of solidifying shadows. The servants of the Blood God enjoyed the pace less, however. At least Ograx had the benefit of having walked half way across the world in the footsteps of his master. Ulfen Schorsch and the leeches of the Crimson Company were attempting to keep up in full plate and weighed down with their butchers' weapons. By the time the highlands dropped down into a desolate wilderness,

the skull-faced Schorsch was in no doubt that he and his men were being punished.

As Jharkill tracked for them across the featureless Wasteland, the ground as hard as iron below their feet and the clouds the colour of iron above them, the malformed ogre pointed out the mountain to his master. Following the line of the huntsman's tusk bow, Archaon sat up in the saddle and picked out a distant peak rearing out of the cold haze of the wilderness. Using the Eye of Sheerian, the jewel glowing eerily in its setting, Archaon brought the sight of the mountain streaming closer.

The mountain looked as unnatural as any other feature of the Chaos Wastes. Thrusting up out of the plain, it was a fat peak, nestling in scree and boulders. Its lazy inclines were thick with dust and grit, which had given purchase to isolated patches of wretched vegetation. Sitting in the broad peak was a hollow, like the crater of a dormant volcano, despite the fact that it was clearly a mountain. As Archaon stared at it, something bothered the Chaos warlord about its shape and the strange, sweeping lines of its ascent. Something he could not quite explain. Like much of the warped Wastes, it seemed dreadfully suggestive of a land that was living. A track swirled its way about the mountain's odd dimensions, up to the rim of the hollow peak in which Archaon was confident he would find his prize.

Riding across a chill plain of stunted grasses and spidery patterns of burned soil, where lightning had showered down on the expanse, the scout party was accompanied by small twisters of dust and ice. Even on the desolation of the plain, Archaon and his warriors of Chaos were not alone. The Wastes wouldn't allow it. The very perversity of the land itself seemed to take pleasure in rising and falling – allowing paths of least resistance to drift wanderers into bloody converges and encounters. Here, out on the haze of the plain, the fat mountain – the only feature for many miles – drew travellers towards it. The mountain harboured no obvious draws, like a settlement in its foothills or the refreshment of a waterfall cascading from its heights. On the insanity-inducing endlessness of the plain, it offered the reassurance of something different. A break in the dry, cold monotony of the wilderness and its eye-stinging haze. A feature that invited curiosity on the horizon.

For a time Archaon's small host seemed on course to meet a larger warband led by a warrior-shaman. The Mung Savage was on horseback and trailed a train of wretched spawn tied one to another like a chain gang of criminals. Archaon suspected this was done to ensure the horrors did not wander off on their own.

The shaman changed course suddenly, however, leading his band of unfortunates away from both Archaon and the mountain. Believing that the warrior-shaman had had some kind of prophetic indication of the danger ahead and had turned to avoid Archaon and the doom he represented, the Chaos warlord held his own heading, despite entreaties from Ulfen Schorsch and his Crimson Company to hunt down and slaughter the shaman and his spawn.

Not long after, a lone knight in black, burnished plate approached the party from some distance away, making his meandering way towards them. Upon taking off his helm, the knight introduced himself as Sieur Wenzel, grinning inanely through the tangled curtains of his long, unkempt hair. Slipping a dagger from his belt, Sieur Wenzel prompted the Swords of Chaos to reach for the bone swords in their wing-sheathes – ever in defence of their master. The mad knight only meant harm to himself, however, opening up his throat in front of Archaon and his Chaos warriors, before crashing face first into the hard ground.

The body attracted predators, chimera and chaotic fusions that stalked the scouting party. The monsters were blessed with the same chameleonic hides, which rippled with the dun colours and textures of the plain, hiding the danger of their numbers in the haze. Ograx the Great smelled the danger first. Dorghar seemed unconcerned and it was only a matter of time before the huntsman's eye spotted their stalkers. When Jharkill warned his master of the imminence of their attack, Archaon slipped his battle axe from where it sat in one of his armoured saddle's many holsters, hooks, sheaths and scabbards. Lifting his body shield up onto one arm, the Chaos warlord waited for the attack. The beasts were as fast as the lightning storms that burst above the desolation of the plain. They appeared suddenly from the haze, their surging movements revealing their positions.

Chimera swarmed the scout party, cannonballing members of the Crimson Company over and turning the savage tumbles into the desperation of clattering plate, claws and jaws. Thrice-breeds and abominate fusions leapt at Archaon, while others surged into the sky only to swoop back down at the hunting party. The air was thick with the roars, hissing and shriek-bleating of the monsters' myriad heads, as well as the whoosh of their bat-like wings and the seething snap of their serpent tails. One of the beasts sank its claws into the body of Sieur Wenzel before surging up into the heavens, while others seemed unwisely preoccupied with Dorghar and the feast its midnight flesh would make.

As the chimera swept in, emboldened by hunger and twisted of predatory instinct, Eins, Zwei and Drei kept their closing number back with shadow-smearing flourishes of their bone blades. A surging opportunist left the ground

and beat its wings, sending its drool-trailing jaws at Archaon and his mount. While Dorghar casually kicked the skulking forms of snapping chimera senseless with its spiked hooves, Archaon smashed the airborne monster aside with a swing of his shield. As the beast hit the ground nearby, it shook comprehension back to its three heads. It needn't have bothered. Rearing, Dorghar brought its huge hooves brutally down on two of its skulls before kicking the snapping head of a malformed lion clean off its body.

The attack was over swiftly enough. With half of the number dead, the pack of chimeric monsters broke off, either beating their wings for the sky or slinking back into the haze that had formerly hidden them. Whereas the kills of Archaon and his Swords of Chaos were modest enough – including even Dorghar's brutal contributions – the pack suffered most at the hands of the rest of the scouting party. Jharkill's bow hammered monstrous fusions into the iron-hard ground and pinned them there, impaled on the great bone shafts. Ograx the Great hadn't even bothered to slip his skull-axe from his back. As a beast warped into the barbaric flesh of a man, Ograx was a wall of brawn and daemonic strength. When he wasn't wrestling the chimeric monsters with his bare, muscle-bound arms – breaking necks and spines – he was stoving in ribcages with his hooves or lifting beasts above his head to gore on his infernal horns. Ulfen Schorsch and his Crimson Company, however, attacked the closing chimera with as much frenzied ferocity as the beasts themselves exhibited, hacking creatures apart with serrated axe and sword, painting the plain red with the excesses of their butchery.

As the ogre huntsman recovered his arrows, Archaon urged the scouting party on, pulling the Crimson Company from their favoured ritual of draining their enemies of polluted blood. Archaon's orders were edged with distaste, having little time for the appetites of the fanged warriors, who looked like animals feeding on animals amongst the slaughtered chimera.

Step by step, the fat mountain rose above them. Closer, it was clear that the chimera pack had made their home in the caves, hollows and on the gentle bone-strewn slopes of the peak. Slipping between boulders and openings, the predators' chameleon-like abilities could not hide their silhouettes creeping up and down the mountainside. At the foot of the narrow slope leading up the mountain's broadness, Archaon brought Dorghar's clopping hooves to a halt. Jharkill grasped the daemon steed by the chains and waited on his master. Archaon turned his helm. The Swords of Chaos stood behind him like statuesque shadows. Ulfen Schorsch and the Crimson Company crunched to a stop in the grit and scree with Ograx the Great bringing up the rear of the scouting party.



‘This is as good a place as any,’ Archaon announced, prompting Ulfen Schorsch to ask if they were heading up the mountain.

‘Some of us are,’ the Chaos warlord told him from the saddle. ‘For some, this journey has come to an end.’

Ograx the Great was suddenly behind the fleshless-faced warrior. Wrapping the muscular vice of his arm around the neck of the Blood God’s champion, the prince of fiends tore at his grotesque head. Schorsch’s clawed gauntlets scratched at the irresistible force of the arm and he sank his leech’s fangs into Ograx’s flesh. As his feet left the ground, the armoured warrior kicked out, clattering furiously in his plate. The struggle was over as fast as it had begun, however, as – with an excruciating crunch – Ograx tore the fleshless skull of the warrior from his suddenly flaccid body.

Realising that they were being betrayed, the Crimson Company ripped the barbed blades of their swords and axes from their belts, rallying to the commands of one of Ulfen Schorsch’s own lieutenants. This was one of the reasons that Archaon had ordered them killed. He was the only dread authority in the vast horde and the only one permitted to empower subordinates. The Crimson Company might have pledged allegiance to Archaon but Schorsch’s band of cannibals still harboured loyalties of and to their own kind.

Spinning around, their bone blades already whispered from their wing-sheathes, the Swords of Chaos decimated the front rank of Crimson Company warriors with a single coordinated strike. The decapitating slash sent skulls sailing through the air, the gloom glinting off their brass fangs. With weapons in each hand, the Swords swept the blades of the Blood God’s warriors to one side and stabbed the tips of their shadowy swords through the bared bone of skulls. Retracting in unison, Archaon’s henchmen worked their way methodically through the Crimson Company, who were caught between the merciless bladework of the Swords and Prince Ograx’s skull-axe, being used to smash skulls from spines in showers of brain-mulched fragments.

It was not in the nature of the Blood God’s servants to flee and the Crimson Company did not disappoint, forcing Ograx to murder each warrior where he stood, smashing the armoured leeches into a mess against the hard earth of the plain.

Archaon looked down on the carnage. What others might have called brainfever or a murderous madness of the Wastes, Archaon considered pruning. Hordes, like shrubs and bushes, were at their healthiest when trimmed to ensure guided growth. Archaon needed warriors of character to lead the contingents of

his monstrous horde into battle – a horde that assimilated more and more Wasteland wandering dross every day. What he did not need was the loyalty of those contingents in the hands of conspirators and dissenters, who might be tempted to secretly build an army within Archaon's own, secure the future loyalties of other lieutenants and murder Archaon for his great treasures. This was not warp-baked paranoia. It had happened to Archaon before. He had lost an entire host through the machinations of pretenders to his titles to come and had barely escaped with his life. To ensure that never happened again, that the wild and wayward forces at work within the monstrous legion at his command were kept in check, Archaon routinely slaughtered his own. Issuing charismatic warriors, defiant savages and overly successful lieutenants acting on their own initiative with tasks and missions that took them and their loyal followers away from the horde, Archaon would have them secretly butchered. If he had any evidence of their plotting against him, Archaon would even end them himself. That had not been the case with Ulfen Schorsch and the Crimson Company, however. Archaon simply had an instinct for those overreaching individuals whom he felt would disappoint him. Such assassinations always happened in secret but there was a general suspicion amongst the horde's wretched multitude that such a practice went on, and this also helped to subdue would-be challengers. In a land of madness, leading a dark army of the vile, the bloodthirsty and the daemonic, it sometimes paid to advertise a little darkness of your own.

'Burn the remains,' Archaon told Jharkill, stepping down from Dorghar. 'With anything you can find.'

Archaon's boot crunched in the grit next to Schorsch's decapitated head. The warrior's eyes still stared up at Archaon in searing, uncloseable accusation, while his fanged jaws snapped unconsciously in the dirt. Leeches were notoriously difficult to kill and Archaon wanted to ensure the fiery end of the vampiric Crimson Company. The monstrous ogre nodded his understanding, keeping hold of Dorghar. 'Stay with Jharkill and my steed,' Archaon told Zwei, who was cleaning off one of his bone blades. Like the ogre, the wraith-warrior nodded silently. 'You two,' Archaon told the others, 'prince, with me.'

As Archaon set off up the winding incline, Eins and Drei flanked their master, while Ograx the Great, flicking gore from the skull of his daemon-headed axe, followed, his brazen hooves pulverising the grit of the trail. As they ascended, the wind picked up. The dizzying expanse of the endless plain glowered about the mountain, stretching off into the gloom in all directions. The fat mountain,

meanwhile, wound its ridge-lined track up and around its odd bulk, working up towards the lip of the hollow above. Unlike the cold dirt of the plain, where only stunted grasses managed to grow, the stone of the mountain was warm underfoot and even provided shelter enough in crooks and clefts for twisted shrubs and the occasional petrified tree. As Archaon advanced, he saw chimera take to the wing from the heights ahead and swarms of monstrous eyes blinking malevolence from the darkness of caves. The predators did not seem to want a re-match and instead withdrew or fled to the safety of the skies.

As they hiked up the sweeping incline, winding up the fat mountain like a serpent, Archaon started to notice stains in the dirt. They were a reddish brown, and at first the Chaos warlord took them for the sites of recent kills by chimera on the mountainside. Upon closer inspection he found it to be rust blotching the mountain trail. Sporadic patches of corrosion that had stained the grit and stone. Looking about, Archaon saw that the stains were everywhere, covering the mountain like a rash. He considered the possibility of surface iron deposits or perhaps the abandoned weapons of the chimera pack victims. He knew this couldn't be the case when he came across his first blade, stabbed into the mountainside and sitting straight up in the rock.

Kneeling down, Archaon inspected the weapon, an ancient blade almost black with rust and age, eaten to a ragged shadow of its former glory and design. Walking from patch to rust-red patch, Archaon found more weaponry, also corroded and ancient. Spearheads bearing the stumps of broken shafts. Brute axes buried almost up to their withered hafts. Blades – stone-cleaving broadswords, the tapering elegance of longswords, serrated scimitars cleaved into the rock, ensorcelled swords of dark magics long dead, rusting daggers stabbed almost up to the hilt. As Archaon trudged up the trail and around, he found himself in a graveyard of such weapons. The mouldering steel of primitive butchery, bejewelled craftsmanship and hell-forged lethality.

As the incline steepened and Archaon's strides pushed him up the mountain path with greater urgency and insistence, he found other weapons buried in the mountain. Amongst the stunted forest of blades, Archaon found hundreds of metal arrow shafts, rust-shattered and buried in the rock. He also discovered the pitted surface of great cannon balls sitting half buried in the mountainside. The countless swords that sat like the grave markers of soldiers in the stone were broken up by the occasional monument – great rotting weaponry of gargantuan size that had been smashed deep into the rocky surface. Monstrous axes, hammers and the huge spiked balls of chain-trailing flails – the kinds of

gargantuan weaponry that could only be wielded in the huge hands of giants, great daemons and titanic abominations. Even they had done little but crack their way into the surface of the indestructible mountain.

Archaon's mind whirled with dark thoughts. Perhaps the peak had been the site of a colossal battle? The Chaos warlord discounted the idea. The blades had not been abandoned there in the hands of rotting champions. They were embedded in the dirt and rock. Perhaps the mountain was some kind of unholy site or colossal tor? Archaon could see some brutal deity like the Blood God honoured with steel in such a way, but he couldn't find any evidence that the mountain was dedicated to an infernal patron or marked by a daemoniac sigil. The mystery ate away at him as he ascended. Behind, Eins and Drei followed their master in unquestioning silence, their own blades ready to behead some hidden attacker or emboldened chimera leaping out from a cave entrance. Prince Ograx simply chewed up the mountain path with stabbing steps of his hooves, yawning with boredom.

As they approached the crowning lip of the hollow peak, Archaon became increasingly agitated. The mystery no longer occupied his thoughts. In such a sea of rust-eaten steel and myriad swords, Archaon began to worry that he would miss what he had come to the mountain to find. Vangel's daemonblade – the *Slayer of Kings*. Sword of the second Everchosen of Chaos. The steel prison in which the abominate entity U'zuhl the Skulltaker was trapped. How many of the magnificent weapons, half buried in brown-stained stone, could the *Slayer of Kings* be? As he rounded the hollow peak, Archaon's progress slowed, the Chaos warlord moving from weapon to great weapon and inspecting the rusted ruin of each blade.

With no blade matching the specific description the daemon Z'guhl had given of the *Slayer of Kings*, Archaon reached the end of the mountain trail. He felt the hollow peak above him like a dare. Without stopping for breath, the Chaos warlord mounted the rocky wall. Like the rest of the mountain, the approach to the peak was littered with embedded blades, sunk in rust-stained blotches of stone. It was as though the mountain had been attacked by some great army. He hauled himself up through the weapons. They made for excellent purchase, with the exception of age-corrupted hilts and axe hafts that simply disintegrated in the hand or under boot, showering the climber below in brown flakes. Nothing would stop Archaon, however. He felt close. He knew that the *Slayer of Kings* was on the mountain. That the treasure of Chaos was there for the taking. Ever impatient, Archaon started to leap from blade to rusted blade, heaving himself up

through the forest of weapons at speed – even in his cursed plate. As his ragged cloak flapped in the rising wind like a banner or flag, Ograx the Great and the two Swords of Chaos followed. Ograx the Great found the climb a test but Eins and Drei, helped by occasional flaps of the wing, had little difficulty making the kind of ambitious jumps to which Archaon was committing himself. Moving across as well as skyward, Archaon swiftly inspected swords of particular magnificence, blades that could possibly have matched the description of the *Slayer of Kings*.

With no luck in locating the daemonblade, Archaon pulled himself up and over the precarious lip of the crater peak. Standing on the edge of a mighty hollow that ran deep down inside the fat mountain, Archaon's black heart sank. Eins, Drei and the fiend prince were beside him, dusting off their hands. The mountain was no volcano. Not even a dormant one. It was hollowed out at the core, however. It reached down through smooth lines and a mountain trail that spiralled into the depths like the one leading up the rocky exterior. Just like the exterior, the inside was covered in a rash of rusted blotches and protruding from each one was an ancient blade, axe, spear or other kind of weapon, rearing up from the stone at crooked angles. The swarm of blades gave the hollow the appearance of some great mouth, brimming with needle-like teeth.

Peering into the depths, past the madness of the swords, the chimera-haunted caves and dark crevices, Archaon's darksight picked out a light in the darkness. Although the mountain itself was no more corrupted than the endlessness of the surrounding plain, and a number of ancient swords glowed with the malevolence of time long served to the Ruinous Powers and their champions, there was but one that burned with radiance reserved for a dark blade, a daemonsword – a weapon worthy of the Everchosen of Chaos. A blade that seemed to take pride of place at the bottom of the sword-stabbed pit.

Archaon dare not wait. He was so close. He didn't even bother with the spiralling trail. Skidding down the steepness of the hollow wall, grasping the mouldering hilts of swords and crumbling hafts of axes, Archaon made his descent. Scree and grit shifted beneath his boots, making the descent a skid and slide as much as a weapon-weaving trudge. Disturbed rocks and small boulders started to bounce beside and from behind the Chaos warlord as Eins, Drei and Prince Ograx followed in their master's footsteps.

As a large rock over which Archaon had climbed became dislodged, the Chaos warlord skidded to one side – grabbing a pair of swords to stabilise his position on the steep gradient of the descent. The boulder rolled, tumbled, pranged off

and over the rusted blades afflicting its path. Accelerating and bouncing, the large rock smashed into the bottom of the pit near the burning balelight of the dread blade.

Archaon felt it immediately. Building beneath his boot. A rumble. A tremble. A tremor. A quake. Soon the entire hollow was shaking with a monstrous force from deep within the mountain. Dust billowed down into the crater. Carpets of dirt, grit and loose rock shifted beneath his feet and flowed like a flood through the fixed forest of blades. Archaon tried to grab the rust-eaten shaft of a spear that protruded from the rock like the skeletal trunk of a petrified tree. The ancient metal of the weapon just disintegrated in his gauntlets, however, and Archaon felt himself lose his footing. Skidding. Grasping. Falling. Tumbling down through the corroded weaponry that was like a spiked wall. Many blades succumbed, becoming clouds of red dust and showering fragments. Some of the finer crafted weapons were age-ravaged to blackness on the surface but still boasted good, strong steel within. These blades surprised Archaon with their resilience. The savagery of their limb-smashing, gut-wrenching impacts. Their insistent refusal to break as Archaon's armoured form clattered through them.

Hitting the bottom of the pit with a crash of plate, Archaon felt the dying rumble of the quake through his gauntlets. As it died away to a rising silence, grit and dirt still hissed down the slopes and through the blades. Small rocks and boulders bounced off the sword-barbed nest of the hollow, several thudding and shattering against Archaon. Grunting, the Chaos warlord pushed himself up. The rock had become still beneath him. The hollow was a swirling, dust-choked miasma. Behind Archaon, Prince Ograx and his Swords of Chaos completed their messy descent. Archaon held up a finger. He wanted silence. Something wasn't quite right.

He turned, grit scraping under his boot. There was movement in the murk. Chimeric predators and monstrous fusions were scrambling from their caves. Some clawed their way up and out of the hollow. Others took to the skies with the urgent beating of leathery wings. Archaon looked about. He took in the contours of the mountain hollow. The pit bottom beneath his feet. The strange quaking that had rippled through the rock. As the dust cleared, Archaon felt the bile of a bad feeling climb the back of his throat.

'This is no mountain,' he announced to the grit-skittering silence of the hollow.

As he did so, what Archaon had formerly taken for the cragginess of a hooded cave opening suddenly flickered to life. As dirt and dislodged scree rained from it, an armoured lid rose like the great stone door of an ancient temple and

Archaon and his hench-warriors were suddenly caught in the gold maelstrom of a colossal, reptilian eye. At its heart was a chasmic sliver of black – the pupil of the eye unfocused and unseeing. The Chaos warriors froze as they were bathed in golden doom, remaining still as the craggy lid made its dozy descent.

Archaon risked another glance about the hollow. Much of the centuries-accumulated dust and claw-scraped rock that had sat atop the colossal creature had fallen away in the rumbling quake of the titanic creature's disturbed movements. It was still difficult to make out through the fog of dust and the fact that Archaon was standing right in the middle of this madness. He could make out the half-buried features of a gargantuan and monstrous face. A single tusk rising like a peak of its own from a cavern-closed mouth. The winding, hollow-hugging twist of a head-sprouting horn.

The thing was impossibly huge – even for the Wastes. Like a sleeping god-monster, the fat mountain that the Chaos warriors had climbed was the abomination's slumber-curved body – its form buried in the dust and corruption of the Wastes, whipped up about it on the backs of perverse winds, twisters and Gate-flowing gales. Like some animal, it had scraped itself a colossal hollow in the rock and earth of the storm-plagued plain, raining the warp-baked material down on itself as it settled, curling itself up in the shape of a fat mountain. The hollow or crater in which Archaon and his hench-warriors were standing was the pit created at the heart of the curled beast.

The stone seemed half fossilised to the colossal creature's skin. Clefts and hollows created by the titan's curled body created the caves and shelter overhangs of which the chimera of the plain had made such good use. Archaon could now see the true flesh of the beast. A ridge running across the monstrosity's half-hidden face was in fact one of its colossal legs. What Archaon had taken for the smooth surface of a great boulder, was in fact a gargantuan claw resting across the beast's nose. The talon-foot to which the scything claw belonged had shaken loose the encrusted dust, dirt and petrified rock that had encased it to reveal the gargantuan scales, like those of a dragon. This was no dragon, however. The horns, the tusk, the scales and the dark face of the monster reminded Archaon of creatures he had fought the last time he had crossed the Wastes. Ancient abominations that were a ground-shaking, storm-bathing fusion of dragon and ogre. Mountainous titans of muscle and darkness-pledged savagery from the waist up, curse-blessed with the legs, bodies and tails of dragons.

The oldest, largest and most monstrous of their kind were called shaggoths,

and Archaon had faced one such monster during the lost years of his wanderings – as a marauding warrior of Chaos – when the Wastes still had the making of him. The beast had carved up the landscape with its colossal storm-forged axes, decimating a full half of Archaon’s warband and the warbands of scores of other warriors similarly fighting for their survival. The creature had almost been the end of him, but Archaon had prevailed. This monster was something else. Impossibly huge. God-tremblingly powerful. Something beyond ancient. Perhaps one of the forefathers of the abominate race. Archaon looked about at the midnight sheen of scale and the storm-scorched skin of the monstrosity’s face... Krakanrok the Black.

Archaon looked across the rust-stained surface of the hollow. Krakanrok the Black. Unimaginably old and huge. All but immortal. A mountain of lightning-lashed flesh, pierced with the blades of a thousand dead warriors – the rusting steel such an insignificance to the monster that each one was like a speck of dust on a knight’s suit of armour. Krakanrok did not care... But Archaon did. Stabbed into the petrified rock and sable flesh of the monstrosity’s face was an ancient blade that through Archaon’s eyes burned with the dark light of ruin. The benighted orb of its pommel. The age-tarnished upturns of its crossguard, giving the stone-sheathed sword the appearance of hate-bared fangs. The Chaos half-star in which the broadness of the blade was set. The eternity-encrusted rakes and sweeping gullets of the sword’s warped serrations. This was the *Slayer of Kings* – of that Archaon had no doubt. It sat an abomination-blinding distance below the monster’s closed eye, almost covered by the claw of the creature’s taloned foot that rested across its nose.

Archaon couldn’t believe what he was going to do. He could not defeat such an abominate ancient of the world with steel alone. It would be like trying to destroy a mountain, which Krakanrok had almost become. Archaon had fought for every treasure of Chaos he had so far claimed. This was not a test of steel, he decided. This was a test of nerve. Like the shimmering shadows of the Swords and Prince Ograx, snarling in silence, Archaon stood transfixed by the heart-stabbing shock of their doomed predicament. Swallowing down his dread with the bile burning the back of his throat, Archaon willed his limbs to move.

Treading lightly on the gravel, Archaon approached the impossible monster. He turned to the wraith-warriors behind him but he dare not speak for fear of waking the beast and attracting its apocalyptic attentions. Archaon pointed at the sky. Eins nodded and the two shadow-smearred warriors unfolded their wings. If Krakanrok the Black did wake, Archaon intended the winged warriors to get



them off the mountain as soon as possible. To Prince Ograx, Archaon gestured towards the colossal claw, indicating with an upward motion of his armoured palms that they gently lift the thing.

The half-breed was all muscle and living metal. He stretched his neck from side to side to indicate that he was ready, but the expression of his fiend's face was one of horror and uncertainty. He may have been a daemonbreed. He may have conquered the bestial hordes of the southern continent and walked the Realms of Chaos with Archaon, his master. He had never faced something so unimaginably colossal, its mountainous flesh quaking with raw power and calamitous possibility.

As the pair slid their hands beneath the claw and slowly – so slowly – lifted it from the abominate's face, Archaon felt his arms burn. He felt his bones groan. His cursed plate rattled with the effort. Ograx fared better. The prince was built like a horned barbarian from the waist up, while his cloven feet and the brazen brawn of his legs solidified below him into the unbreakable stillness of a statue. The Blood God's indomitability burned up through his veins, while the daemonic strength of his father gifted Ograx with the ability to take the titanic weight of the claw alone. Whether in service to his master or driven by the monstrous pride of the prince – an advertisement of his power and an unobvious warning to Archaon – Ograx lifted the claw off the Chaos warlord's gauntlets. The mounds upon mounds of muscle that globed on the prince's arms began to tremble. The fruits of exertion began to bead about his horns and drip from his cheeks.

Archaon nodded to Prince Ograx and the half-breed nodded back his insistence that he could hold up the claw. Archaon was about to venture forth when he saw that lifting the weight above his head and the muscle-rippling demands of the task had burst one of the flayed-flesh straps holding Ograx's bronzed breastplate in place. The primitive piece of plate bore the rough-carved sigil of the Blood God and was more for decoration than anything else, swamped as it was by the wall of brawn that was the half-breed's chest. As the plate dangled away from the trembling demands of the prince's flesh, Archaon could see that there was another symbol burned into the flesh beneath. A searing star that seemed to scar eternal. A symbol that Archaon had seen before. On the unkillable champion at the top of the world. On the living shadows of warrior-servants long past that Archaon had fought in the Forsaken Fortress. On the Dark Master's own monstrous chest. The Ruinous Star of the Herald. The Dark Star of Be'lakor.

Archaon stopped and stared at the betrayal that burned in his champion's flesh. A creature whose bestial nature and infernal heritage Archaon had long despised. A half-breed who had disappointed and impressed him in equal measure. A warrior that Archaon had placed at the head of his horde all the same and employed as his brutal enforcer. Prince Ograx – a shadow placed pawn of the Dark Master. A blunt tool with a deft purpose. The creature's mindless violence putting it beyond the shadowy veil of suspicion. A traitor-beast slipped unsuspectingly into Archaon's brutal trust.

Perhaps Ograx had been Be'lakor's long before they met on the field of battle. Perhaps the daemon had worked the prince's infernal father or claimed Ograx in the eternity of madness between the Chaos Gates. Perhaps the Dark Master had recruited Ograx to his cause the day before they set off for the mountain. Archaon would never know.

The glazed quiver of the prince's own eyes came down from the claw he was holding above his head. Archaon had not moved and this had attracted the half-fiend's attention, knowing not how long he could bear the weight on his own. When he found Archaon staring at the exposed sigil on his chest, Ograx glared at him. The fiend's face was a mask of contortions. Archaon didn't care. Whether Ograx had been placed by Be'lakor to ensure success in Archaon's quest or whether the prince was waiting for the right time to murder him and claim his dark treasures for himself was irrelevant. He would have been or would be the Dark Master's willing puppet.

Archaon knew he had a battle coming. Another desperate fight against the monstrous Ograx, this time to the death. At that moment, standing on the cusp of calamity, there was nothing to be done: no words or blows to be exchanged. They were caught in the dire nature of their circumstances.

Archaon took several steps towards the abominate face of Krakanrok the Black. Watching the craggy lid for any signs that it might rise on the golden sun of the titan's gaze, the Chaos warlord reached out his gauntlet. The huge blade had spent a Waste-warped eternity buried in the fearful flesh of living catastrophe. It hungered to be held once more. To be wielded by one who could end the world with its talents. Dust fell from its two-handed hilt. Its crossguard rattled. Spidery cracks felt their way through the petrification of itsommel-orb. Its broad blade seemed to shift slightly in its sheath of flesh and stone, edging fitfully towards Archaon's outstretched fingers.

As Archaon felt the ghost of a quake beneath his boots, he grabbed hold of the blade's hilt. Like some kind of horrific infant, the weapon seemed to be soothed

by the action and the rattling subsided. With it the monstrous intention of movement died in the flesh upon which Archaon was standing. While the daemonblade seemed soothed by the black-hearted touch of a warrior of Chaos such as Archaon and the dread violence he intended with the weapon, Archaon felt something himself in the ancient blade. The horrific thing seemed to grip back – as though the sword wielded him as much as he intended to wield it. Archaon closed his eyes for a moment and enjoyed the bloody passions that raced through his heart. He fell through visions of slaughter. Tidal waves of blood crashed over him. Death and its dealing became his only desire.

Gripping the sword, Archaon's gauntlet creaked about the age-ravaged hilt. He felt as if he could pulverise the ancient metal in his hand. Archaon forced his eyes open. He breathed deep and wished a cold calm down through his being. The monstrous being in the blade would not have its bloody way with his soul. The *Slayer of Kings* would be his, not him the goreslave of U'zuhl the Skulltaker. With a snarl, the danger of his circumstances returned. Krakanrok the Black. Prince Ograx. The fifth treasure of Chaos.

Tensing his arm, Archaon pulled the daemonblade from where it had sat for centuries – buried in rock and abominate flesh. The stone sheath refused to release its prize at first but with some teeth-gritted insistence, Archaon felt the blade rumble from its resting place. With a murderous thrill that shot through his soul like a battlefield victory, Archaon held the *Slayer of Kings* up to the sky. To his relief, there had been no reaction from the monster-mountain upon which he was standing. The ancient wound inflicted by such a weapon – even a daemonblade – would have been nothing to the father of the dragon ogre race, whose flesh and scale were as ageless as they were immortal, whose mighty soul would have been a lightning storm eternal.

Archaon admired the blade. It was encrusted with age, like a thing fossilised and primordial. Even through the petrified rock and solidified wyrdstone, Archaon could feel its power. They would forge a mighty partnership. He would feed the blade what it desired – the soulfire of warrior victims, taken from them in the hot doom of defeat. The *Slayer of Kings*, in turn, would serve the Everchosen of Chaos once more. It would be Archaon's ambassador of darkness. The everlasting darkness he would bring to foes defeated and the apocalyptic end he would visit upon the world. As he held the crooks and crags of the magnificent blade to the sky and considered the horrific daemoniac force enslaved in steel, he thought of his soul-pledged promise to Z'guhl, the Skullreaper, the Herald of Hate, the Crimson Doom. How Archaon had promised

to set the blade's daemon free not only to honour his compact with Z'guhl but also so Z'guhl could honour his compact with his infernal brother. Archaon smiled behind the skull-plate of his helm.

'I will set you free, mighty daemon,' Archaon said, half to himself. 'Slayer in steel. Spiller of blood. Feaster of souls. Fury of the razor's edge... But not today.'

The sword's reaction was instantaneous. Like a rage building, the hilt grew hot through Archaon's gauntlet. It trembled in his grip. Cracks felt their way through the petrified stone and encrustation before suddenly – with a forge flash and the whoosh of a freshly stoked furnace – the material exploded. Archaon turned his helm and was showered with shards of wyrdstone and fragments of rock that pranged off his plate. When he turned back, he found the wonder of the daemonblade in his hand. The *Slayer of Kings*. The rage that coursed through the steel prison of the blade bathed Archaon in its hellish radiance. The barbs and curves of the blade's cutting edge glowed almost to transparency, while the Chaos half-star crackled furiously with the infernal energies and bindings that held U'zuhl, the Skulltaker of Khorne in service to the blade and the blade in service to the warrior brave enough to inflict its rage upon the world. The steel fangs of the crossguard, thirsting for blood. The hilt that burned in the hand. The pommel-orb, whose smooth, dark crystal writhed with the baleful yellow fury of U'zuhl's eye, looking down on Archaon with abyssal hatred. Then he heard it. Like a blade ringing off another, Archaon heard the daemonsword's steel sing. He felt the sword throb and its blade resonate. The terrible sound built, filling Archaon's heart with a ghostly dread and turning his stomach. As the daemon's sufferings built to a steel shriek – its eternal thirst for blood, its bottomless hunger for souls, its infernal fury to be free – Archaon understood the danger that they were all in.

Looking from the dread magnificence of the screaming blade to the cragged eyelid of Krakanrok the Black, the Chaos warlord realised what the daemonblade was doing. If Archaon would not set U'zuhl free then he would be destroyed – and since U'zuhl could not turn the service of the blade upon he that it served, the daemon would need to stoke the thunderous wrath of an awoken titan. Archaon watched as the rock-encrusted lid rose once more, flickering before the golden sun of a single eye behind. He felt the mountain beneath him stir. Tremble. Quake.

At first, Archaon did not know what to do. The dire magnitude of their circumstance was overwhelming. The daemon in the blade would shriek its fury

and hunger until the gargantuan father of dragon ogres, awoken from an aeons-long slumber, effortlessly destroyed them all in his thunder-fuelled anger. The bloody solution was accomplished before Archaon had barely thought it through. With the daemonsword bleeding its wrath into Archaon through the warm metal of his gauntlet, his mind burned with necessity while his arm seethed with bloodthirsty action. Ograx the Great, visibly shaking under the weight of Krakankrok the Black's colossal claw, knew the problem's solution a mere second before it was brutally carried out. Leaning forward under his monstrous burden, Prince Ograx roared his defiance, that of his daemonic father and that of his bloody god. Archaon whipped the *Slayer of Kings* around to present it like the tail of a scorpion. Fury smoked from the blade, burning on the air and making the weight of the broad blade a nothing in Archaon's hand.

Thrusting the daemonblade forward with merciless force, Archaon rammed the *Slayer of Kings* into Ograx's open mouth, down his throat and into the monstrously muscular torso of the half-breed. With the blade up to the fanged crossguard in its scabbard of butchered flesh, the shrieking of the imprisoned daemon died on the wind. The hate-hot blade bubbled in the bloody ruin of Ograx the Great's body, while the entity U'zuhl feasted on the soulfire of the Blood God's champion – the rich brutality of his death and the countless deaths for which the half-breed was responsible. Ograx might not have been a king, but he was a prince, and the slaughter-filled barbarity of his existence seemed to satisfy the steel of the Slayer.

As Ograx faltered, Archaon was there to take the burden of Krakankrok's mighty claw. Eins joined him, while Drei grabbed the toppling half-breed before he crashed to the ground. The half-breed was dead. Far from displeasing Khorne, his sudden and violent death honoured the Blood God. His crashing corpse or the dislodging of the daemonblade might have cost them still in waking the father of dragon ogres, however, had the wraith-warrior not reached Ograx in time. Combined, Archaon and Eins did not have the strength of the Blood God's champion and juddered down to their knees under the weight, before laying the claw back across Krakankrok's abominate face with as much arm-trembling care as they could manage.

From the rocky floor, Archaon watched the lid of the monstrous eye droop back down, eclipsing the golden sun behind it. After a few heart-thumping twitches, the abhorrent creature returned to its eternal slumber. Archaon's pauldrons slumped. The Chaos warlord shook his head slowly from side to side. The shimmering shadows of Eins and Drei simply waited on their master's

instruction. As Archaon got to his feet, he looked down at the corpse of Ograx – his face fixed in an expression of pure horror, mouth agape and brimming with the blood in which the *Slayer of Kings* snugly sat. Archaon wouldn't risk unsheathing the sword from its cadaver-scabbard until he was very far from the lonely mountain. Walking past the Swords of Chaos he nodded at Prince Ograx. Eins and Drei clasped the corpse, one under each arm, intending to drag the daemon prince between them, the crossguard, hilt and pommel-orb protruding from the half-breed's open mouth and skewered head.

'Let's get the hell out of here,' Archaon announced, walking on ahead. As Eins and Drei dragged Prince Ograx and the daemonsword behind their master, Archaon said, 'All of us.'



## CHAPTER XIV

*'Now shall ye assay, he said unto Alderiq. And anon young Alderiq fought for all he was worth, therewithal the knight emerged victorious, presenting the head of the invader beast, for he loved this land, its kingdom and its people highborn and low and would not see it polluted by things unfit for existence.'*

– Roland Rancourt – *Le Morte D'Alderiq*, Chapter IV:  
Of the First War and how King Alderiq won the field

*The Marches of Brilloinne  
The Bretonnian Coast  
Jour de Roi IC 2518*

Archaon felt the galleon roll with the storm. He had given up the cavernous darkness of the great cabin to Giselle but found himself returning there often. To be alone with his thoughts. With the accusatory silence. To be alone with her.

The world had indeed turned. The years had passed and taken their inevitable toll. Even the warlords of Chaos suffered the ravaging attentions of time. The girl was little more than an emaciated bag of bones now. A wasted, skeletal

wight of a girl, whose soft skin was stretched to transparency across the sharpness of her bones. A horror to behold, rippling with ribs and spine. She had not the miserable strength to lift herself from the bunk and furs. She was a cursed invalid that Archaon kept alive for his own selfish reasons. Without a mouth, the girl could not even scream away her sufferings. Most of the time she simply lay there, still, like a cadaver in an ancient tomb. The lanterns that swung and creaked with the pitch of the vessel were kept low and the windows of the great cabin boarded up. For Archaon it was a ghoulish retreat.

Like a flagellant – like Gorst – returning to the chain or whip for purification and self-remonstration, he would stand before Giselle to remind himself of what he had done. He had lived a long life of blood, fear and darkness. His victims. His dire acts. His dread and unsung achievements. His world-shaking atrocities. These all seemed lost to a life half remembered. It was in the girl that he found the true horror of his Ruinous existence. It was a daily test. A punishment he subjected himself to for his many failures. His failure of an innocent young girl. The failure of the abyssal love that even now he somehow felt for her. The failure of his dark quest to find the final treasure of Chaos – the Crown of Domination – and end the living nightmare all the faster.

The years of his life had ebbed away in search of a treasure it had taken longer to find than all of the others combined – and every day he returned to Giselle to look upon her terrible beauty. She was like a mirror in which Archaon saw the terrible things he had done. He had brought a terror to the world. He had massacred with indifference. In the wretched suffering of this girl eternal, this memory of his past that would not die – when he had been a better man – Archaon came to know the true measure of his darkness.

He lay with her nightly. Archaon didn't sleep. Not any more. He just sat there on the bunk, amid perfumed silks and rich furs stripped from the palaces of the mighty and the dead. Holding her. Holding her to him. Holding the blade of a dagger to her throat. He felt her willing him on. Begging him without words to do what he had failed to do many years before. When they had shared a bed and each other it had been Giselle's turn to fail him. Fail to slide the dagger across his throat. Fail to release him from the suffering of a dark existence as he nightly failed her.

He knew it wasn't love that stayed his hand. The obsidian of his heart, that sat heavy and useless in his chest, was beyond such things. Giselle had been his prisoner. A slave to his physical needs and her own in the long, dark night at the top of the world. He had inflicted upon her the unspeakable perversions of his



foes, enemies who wished to wound him through her. He had visited upon her the savagery of the Southern Wastes, the madness of the Northern Wastes and the living hell that was the Realm of Chaos inbetween – where daemons stalked your soul and Dark Gods all but destroyed you with their obliterate gaze. And now, an endless search through faraway lands for treasures that refused to give themselves up. She was a slave again. Slave to a need he had for her that was beyond words or physical expression. Prisoner within the agonies of skin, bone and withered muscle that would not obey. When Archaon looked on Giselle, he knew he was a monster.

He heard the rattle of his plate. He watched the shimmering glint of the lantern's low and ghoulish light off the dagger's blade. His face was a wretched snarl behind the skull of his helm. Black tears of will defied had left the stain of their progress down one side of his face. He sat behind her on the bunk, amid the mound of furs. He had Giselle's horror in his armoured embrace. His blade was at her throat. It would take nothing. Nothing. He heard the slightest of murmurs issue from the misery of the girl's form. The slightest of movements as Giselle's skeletal touch pulled at the cold metal of his arm. He wanted to release her from torment. To give her what she desired. What *she* needed. The dark will wasn't there, however. A roar built within Archaon's chest. A fury that wracked his being as he leant his head and horned helm back to bellow his withering rage to the cabin ceiling. To the storm-churned sky. To gods that would not listen and did not care.

The blade drifted from Giselle's throat. Archaon let it tumble into the furs. Pushing her gently away, he got up off the bunk and walked away, becoming one with the darkness of the cabin. Giselle slipped back into the furs, tears of her own glistening across eyes that caught the lantern light. She had not even the strength to turn over and bury her head in the covers. From the shadows he watched the girl. Her suffering and torment as she tried to tremble the emaciated horror of a hand down the furs towards the knife. To pick it up and to use the blade... on herself. Archaon's heart thumped its encouragement. He wished she could do it. Save herself. As the skeletal fingers plucked gently at the dagger, he saw the hand shake and then fall. Giselle could barely life the hand, let alone the blade she intended to clasp within it. Archaon turned away. He could bear to look on her no more.

Closing the archway door to the great cabin behind him he found Zwei and Drei standing silent, like sentries, either side of the entrance. In the chart room, Archaon spread the fingers of his gauntlets and leant against the dark altar. It

was covered with Ruinous symbols and the implacable illustrations of daemons. Over these were laid maps, charts and twisted instruments. Ancient books and dusty grimoires were stacked about the room, while a lantern swung above the altar, throwing the chart room in a fiendish light.

There was a lifetime of study in the chart room and the Chaos warlord had spent many lost hours searching history, the quill-scratched ramblings of mad men, ancient stone tablets and mythical maps for clues to the location of the final treasure of Chaos.

On the shattered coast of the Northern Wastes, Archaon's colossal army had searched for vessels to transport their number. For months the horde camped out on the storm-lashed coast, taking raiders and Norscan longships where they could. These Archaon despatched with false word of a thousand slaves stranded on the coast following a shipwreck of a slaver fleet.

The Chaos seas spat out a number of greedy opportunists, which Archaon's hidden horde enslaved since the number of their vessels were unsuitable to their needs. A month later, the ocean offered up a legend. Captain Kurdogoli Darghouth. The Devil of Araby. The Dread of the Infidels. The Cloven Captain of Kalabad. Darghouth had come a long way since his days as a merciless slaver and then brutal corsair on the Pirate Coast. Some said his appetite for human flesh extended beyond trading and stealing such cargoes and that he would select the finest specimens to be roasted for his table. Estalians. Tileans. Even the occasional dwarf. As wealth lost its appeal and the dread of victim-nations became Darghouth's guiding star, the pirate gave up the harsh strictures of his one god for the freedom of a pantheon of Ruinous admirers. Plying the coasts of Estalia, Tilea, the Pirate Principality and the Border Princes, the Cloven Captain amassed a fleet of gun-toting galleons, as well as carracks and caravels loaded with cannibal crew.

Some he took with ease on trade routes he knew all too well. Others were warships sent to deal with the piratical threat he presented. All failed. Darghouth's attack fleet was heralded by a swarm of smaller craft, including lanteen-masted cogs and armed pinnaces. Behind these trailed hulks that carried victims by the hundreds – to be traded, eaten or sacrificed to the Dark Gods at Kurdogoli Darghouth's bestial whim.

His hunger for suffering and destruction took him into cooler climes where he found new prey in Bretonnian shipping and the great ships of the Empire. Farther north he found the Chaos seas replete with raiders, madmen and warriors of the Dark Gods. In Archaon, the Cloven Captain met his match. Playing the

part of the stranded slaves, Archaon allowed himself and his horde to be transported over to the pirate captain's fleet before staging a bloodbath of a mutiny. Sparing Kurdogoli Darghouth and some of his most gifted cannibal captains, Archaon had offered them continued service to the Dark Gods in his name or the fate of being fed to his monstrosities. Darghouth and his captains had chosen life over death. To confirm that they had made the correct choice, Archaon gave them as their first responsibility the transport of Archaon's monsters and abominations over to the fleet's hulks with the horde's mounts, wagons and siege engines.

With a Chaos fleet once more at his command, Archaon left the execution of his orders to trusted lieutenants spread throughout the armada, which sailed like a black plague south from the berg-clashing coast of the Wastes. Navigation, the running of the flagship and communication through the fleet he left to the Cloven Captain. Archaon, in turn, divided his time between study on the long ocean voyages and savagery upon reaching his destinations. Each one was either a possible resting place of the Ruinous Crown of Domination, or of other illuminating treasures, ancient texts or individuals that delivered to Archaon with their dying breath further clues to the crown's location. Months. Years. Decades came and went in fruitless search for the treasure. What felt like a doomed quest to some of Darghouth's cannibal captains and crew, captured from vessels and flotillas that ran foul of Archaon's dark armada, was nothing to Archaon and his horde, who had endured eternities in the Realm of Chaos.

There were mutinies, of course, shore-sent forces that failed to return. Splinter flotillas that attempted to leave the fleet. Archaon had learned much since the last time he had commanded idle warriors on the high seas. He trusted almost no one and although he was infrequently seen, his authority was felt in the brutal recapture, horrific torture, execution and macabre decoration of his vessels with the bones and body parts of those that lacked the fear, dark faith and common sense to be loyal.

For almost a century, Archaon held the world quivering in the palm of his gauntlet as his vast fleet and the thousands upon thousands of Chaos warriors under his monstrous leadership circumslaughtered the globe. In the Kraken Sea the longships and raiders that tormented the north were decimated by Archaon's fleet – so much so that the mist-shrouded kingdom of Albion and the Sea of Claws saw no Norscan raids or invasions for a year. For months Archaon's ships haunted chill Naggaroth, razing the coastline of the Sea of Malice and destroying swarms of druchii reavers. For the inscriptions on the mighty monoliths that

stood ancient and untouched in the east of Naggaroth, Archaon brought blood and fire to the dreadlords of the Witch-King's coastal strongholds.

Sailing east, Archaon's fleet met the miserable flotillas of other damned souls out in the desolation of the endless Great Ocean. Plaguefleets of the low races and the hellships of Chaos captains, who wished – like Archaon – to bring terror to the world. Some, like the Bloodships of Bjornvar the Berserker, went to the bottom of the ocean with their lack of reason. Others – upon sighting a horizon blotched with the black sails of the dark armada – fell into formation behind the flagship with signalled obedience. No shots were fired and no lives were lost. Souls were another matter entirely.

Rounding the squall-lashed cape of the Southlands, Archaon almost lost half of his fleet to the cyclonic fury of an unnatural storm that swept up out of the Southern Wastes. The Sea of Dread, conversely, killed with calmness as for months the fleet saw not a breath of wind. Archaon's army suffered under the blaze of the unrelenting sun and were forced to resort to blood-letting slaves to survive the ravages and madness of thirst. When they did reach land, the horrors of disease waited for their number on the foetid Mangrove Coast. Seeing virtue in a violent distraction, Archaon visited the frustrations of his followers and the wrath of his fleet on the stilt cities of Clan Festerlingus. The skaven of the south with their sun-bleached fur and savagery poured from the swamps and swarmed the shallows, while verminships and coastal clanfleets of neighbouring infestations – to which word had been sent – hit Archaon's anchored armada from both the north and the south. With a fleet becalmed and an army weakened by equatorial fevers and rat-bred pestilence, Archaon eventually ordered his armada north, leaving the skaven with their stinking mangrove kingdoms.

Plundering the city ruins in the Lands of the Dead, Archaon honoured the Dark Gods at several Chaos shrines half swallowed by the sands. Going in search of ancient scrolls and the Crown of Domination itself, Archaon was disappointed, as he had been a hundred times before, to find that the Straits of Nagash and skeletal civilisations that plagued the bordering lands with their unlife did not hold the secrets to his lost treasure.

Negotiating the clashing cliffs of the Gates of Calith, where the ancient Hinterlands of Khuresh threatened to reach out and touch the polluted lands of the southern continent, Archaon took his fleet to the legendary Lost Isles, hoping to learn more of the Crown of Domination. There his army laid siege to the ancient High Elf fortress colony of Tor Elithis, only to find that it had long succumbed to daemons of the Southern Wastes who held it as their own.

As they travelled, Archaon discovered that he was being hunted. The Dragon Emperor of Grand Cathay had heard of Archaon's coming. Spies had reported the warlord's decimation of coastal kingdoms of the Ind and the emperor had been advised to have his own amassed armada of celestial vessels meet Archaon in battle out on the Far Sea, away from the Cathayan coast. It was a colossal battle, fought on the sun-blushed emptiness of open water. Archaon never got the chance to meet the Dragon Emperor's admiral, although he wished he had. Fighting for days, through the equatorial heat of the sun and the star-lit depths of night, both fleets eventually broke off the engagement. Although Archaon's hordes and airborne monstrosities claimed many celestial sons and war-junks of the enemy fleet, the impregnable turtleships of the armada smashed through Archaon's formations and celestial sorcery claimed many Ruinous warriors. A change in the wind made further engagement difficult and while Archaon hunted for the Dragon Emperor's fleet, he never saw their exotic vessels again.

Re-fitting his fleet in the shattered lands off the coast of the New World, Archaon's fleet rounded Lustria to sack the scaled civilisations of the Fire Islands, not for their gold but for the treasure of their ancient knowledge. Finding himself once more on the expanse of the Great Ocean, Archaon decided upon returning to the Old World, with its delusions of enlightenment and the sweet taint of ancient corruption. He became convinced that finding the treasures of Chaos everywhere but the Old World meant that it was almost certain to be nestling somewhere on the edge of civilised darkness. Having spent decades bringing hell to the other side of the world, Archaon found himself strangely pulled towards his homeland and its neighbouring nations. His blade ached for the blood of pompous fools and the crushed will of the underclasses upon which they had always ridden high. Dark dreams drew him north. The taunts of daemons and sorcerous whisperings.

It had been lifetimes since he had set foot in such a land. He had left the Empire a formidable warrior. His time in the Wastes and the abyssal realm had crafted him into an almighty champion of darkness, exalted to demi-godhood by the Ruinous treasures in his possession. The decades on the far side of the world had done more than temper the living weapon he had become. With age, study and experience had come the rewards of merciless leadership. He was not just a dark warrior at the head of a fractious mob, the first among equals. He was not a brutal conqueror leading a bestial horde into bloodshed. He was a warlord of consummate skill. He had held a great Chaos host together – which ordinarily would have torn itself apart along divisions of Ruinous worship and individual

allegiance – through strategy, cold supremacy and the ruthless force of his dread will. He had become a worthy leader of the dark things of the world, commanding the corrupt hearts of mortal monstrosities and inspiring in his champions and lieutenants a reverence usually reserved for their daemonic overlords. His armada was doom sweeping in from the darkness of the open ocean. His army of pantheon-pledged champions and veteran Chaos warriors had been hewn from calamity into a force of darkness undivided. An abominate army of ruin that shook the world.

As he sailed north to his destiny, Archaon's fleet met strange ironclad vessels that belched smoke and fire in the waters of the Black Gulf and made the seaport beardlings of Barak Varr pay in torture-sought knowledge and blood. Archaon's dark armada all but wiped out the pirate fleets of Sartosa and sacked Tilean cities, ransacking libraries and private collections of antiquities in search of answers to dread questions. He burned an Estalian armada of carracks and caravels at anchor at Magritta before lighting up the coastal kingdoms of the west. An attempt to make back out to sea was frustrated by storms that swallowed the dark warlord's own and succeeded in smashing the armada up along the shores of Bretonnia. The bad weather held his great swarm of black ships to the coastline along the Sea of Claws. With his monstrous armada barely holding off the rocky shores and the glowering moonlight of Morrslieb dusting the distant Marches of Couronne with its dread attentions, Archaon became suddenly aware of an intrusion in his dark thoughts.

*Archaon...*

The warlord looked up from the altar, with its maps and scrolls.

*Archaon... Chosen of the Ruinous Gods. Pawn of the Harbinger. Hear me.*

As Archaon left the chart room, he hauled himself up the companionway ladder with his cloak trailing him. Zwei and Drei followed like shadowy sentinels.

*Brother darkness. We are bearers of his mark both...*

'Lord Master on the deck,' a Chaos warrior called from his sentry position on the ladder archway. Archaon looked back to see Eins – the wraith-warrior was standing against the poop deck rail, his wings globed to protect him from the storm. Archaon always had Eins on deck when he wasn't. He might have left command of the flagship and coordination of the armada and its captains to Kurdogoli Darghouth, but Archaon left Eins as his trusted eyes on the deck. The Sword of Chaos nodded his head at Archaon who strode out towards the helm.

The great black deck of the galleon rolled with the churn of the seas. Above,

the clouds billowed and flashed with the shore-smashing storm. Rain and salty droplets from waves crashing about the flagship's tall, port-sealed sides pattered across Archaon's dark plate. The storm ruffled his furs and tugged at his cloak.

The flagship had been a captured Estalian battle galleon that the Cloven Captain had re-named the *Perdición* in honour of his new master. Kurdogoli Darghouth had confided to Archaon that it was considered, even among his own wretches, bad luck to re-name a ship but the warlord had told him that where they were going, bad luck was the least of their worries. Archaon had added that they would be bad luck indeed to any vessel falling within the scope of their spyglasses.

The Cloven Captain was where Archaon always found him – at the Ruinous Star of the *Perdición*'s great wheel. A dark-skinned southerner stood aside at the rhythmic rattle of Archaon's approach and bowed. The buds of horns ruined the shiny perfection of his blade-shaved head, while his face jangled with hoops, jewellery and gold. His chest was tattooed with maps of his many journeys and his bulging arms bore the mangled flesh of scar tallies. He had been one of Darghouth's former slavers, now serving as the captain's enforcer and boatswain on board the flagship. On the rare occasions Kurdogoli Darghouth left the wheel of his dark ship, he also doubled as helmsman. For now his great hands were employed in holding the Cloven Captain's spyglass and sack of spiced wine.

Kurdogoli Darghouth was a breed apart, even for the cannibal wretches that crewed his vessels. Magnificent of black beard and moustache, the Kalabadian tied the lustrous lengths of his midnight mane in a turban. A boat cloak rolled off his powerful shoulders and down the length of his stallion's back, having the torso of a man but the body, legs and tail of a horse. The Cloven Captain's hooves clopped on the deck as he re-aligned himself to the pitch of the *Perdición* – although having four legs instead of two, the Ruin-blessed Darghouth coped with this better than most. Archaon caught the glint of the captain's mighty scimitar – the broad curve of its monstrous blade half sheathed to the side of the Cloven Captain's muscular flank.

Darghouth said nothing as Archaon approached the wheel, too busy with keeping the *Perdición* and Archaon's dark armada off the Bretonnian rocks. Snatching the spyglass out of the southerner's hand and slipping it in his belt, Archaon stepped up on the rail and leapt for the rigging. Scrambling up for the lines, Archaon hauled himself up through the shrouds and ratlines as bonnets and sails buffeted about the towering main mast. The effort tore at old injuries and the tenderness of muscle. Stone-laced bones ached with the jarring ascent.

Archaon might have benefitted from the gifts of the Dark Gods – an enhanced body, an ever-keen mind and an indomitable will. He might have lived beyond his years, the warping powers of Chaos helping him to resist the ravages of old age. He hurt like any other warrior of half his age, however. Bones grated in their sockets. Muscles burned for the youth they had once known.

The higher Archaon climbed, the greater the forces threatening to tear his armoured form from its purchase. The wind dragged him back and forth with a terrible will, while his gauntlets slipped on the wet, swollen ropes of the rigging.

Archaon's mind ached with the intrusion once more.

*You have come far, exalted one. Now come to me and learn what the Dark Master wants for us.*

With a snarl, Archaon leapt for the highest of the main mast's yards and hauled himself up. Holding on to the tapering trunk of the mainmast, Archaon felt the ship move below him, rolling through the storm-whipped waves and leaning over into the wind. He suddenly realised that he was not alone. In the bone basket of the crow's nest, Archaon saw Gorst's wretched form, quietly rusting away in his chains and head-cage. The flagellant had exchanged the whip for the lash of the wind and the freezing rain.

Anchoring himself to the shuddering mast with a leg and an arm, Archaon aimed the spyglass about the battle galleon. Behind the flagship, with the Ruinous Star of its shredded pennant whipping with the wind, Archaon could see the countless ships of his fleet rounding the long shore spit of the curving Bretonnian coastline. Vessels of every exotic designation sailed in the fleet. In the main, the Cloven Captain favoured Old World designs over equatorial craft, the complexities of vessels sailed by the elder races or indeed the war-dhows, xebecs and galliots of his own pirate coast. Bone-lined carracks and spiked caravels swarmed with smaller cogs and storm-battered pinnaces, while towering galleons of black sail and fat hulks formed the trailing backbone of the armada.

Swinging slowly about the wet wood of the mast, Archaon turned the spyglass south, in the direction the fleet was heading. Squinting through the storm, Archaon could see the torches of distant Marienburg and the lantern-lights of fat merchant vessels moving hurriedly into the colossal port and out of the storm. Lightning flashed above the city, giving Archaon the momentary impression of a forest of masts belonging to the anchored fleets and vessels of the port, poking up above the tile and thatch of roofs.

Archaon edged around. As he did Gorst reached out for the warlord, fearful of his master falling. The voice was suddenly there again. A powerful presence that



cut through his thoughts and echoed about his mind.

*The history of days to come knows Archaon as the Everchosen of Chaos. It knows me as the Curseling. As the Twisted Twin. I offer you the most twisted of all things, chosen one. I offer you the truth.*

Archaon scanned the rocky cliffs of the Bretonnian coastline. A benighted realm, cast by the storm and the balelight of Morrslieb breaking periodically through the cloud, in different shades of glowering darkness. Then he saw it. A figure on the cliffs. A tall figure standing in the haze of a thick mist. Under Morrslieb's gaze and with the spuming mist lit by sporadic flashes of lightning, the ghostly shape assumed the eerie appearance of some twisted phantom.

Pulling the spyglass away from his good eye, Archaon drew upon the Eye of Sheerian set in his helm. Cutting through the mist, the tendrils of which swirled about the cliff like the serpentine embrace of a hydra, the Eye granted Archaon a vision of the figure. It was the Curseling from his dreams. The Twisted Twin that had spoken to him through some sorcerous means.

A Tzeentchian fusion, the warrior-twin wore the gleaming plate and scalemail of his calling. His armour ached with sigils sacred to the Great Changer. An ensorcelled blade sat in a scabbard on his hip, while the spiked length of a flail hung from a chain on his belt. A matching cloak snaked about the brute warrior, held in place by a colossal shoulder spike. The other arm, bereft of plate, bulged with muscle and pulled the cloak tight about it. Sprouting from the same shoulder was the horror of the sorcerer twin. A thing of squirming, worm-like horridness. No eyes. No ears. Nothing but a needle-toothed mouth that whispered into the helm of its warrior-twin. A mane of feathers ran down its back, while in one long-fingered hand of a spindly arm, the sorcerer thing held a staff. The headpiece of the staff was a Tzeentchian eye, but within that burned the Ruinous Star of Be'lakor, the Dark Master. Archaon's lip curled. Unlike the hulk Gangriss, unlike Ograx the Great, the Curseling was not hiding his allegiance. The headpiece dribbled a strange, sorcerous smoke that writhed about the Curseling, settling into a haze that washed over the cliff edge.

Archaon thought on the sorcerer's invitation. His memory of him from dark dreams and his dramatic appearance on the cliff. Here. Now.

'All stop!' Archaon roared down from the crosstrees. As the Chaos warlord began to clamber down through the rigging, Gorst watching him as he went, he felt the *Perdición* answer. 'Drop anchor!' Archaon added as he snatched a line and leapt from the shrouds, the weight of his stone-laced bones and cursed plate taking him swiftly to the black deck.

‘All stop, master,’ Kurdogoli Darghouth told him, his hooves clattering on the deck as he twisted and turned at the wheel, giving orders for signal flags to be hauled up, ordering the dark armada to fall into position and hold a storm-battered station on the cliff. It was not an ideal location for such a request but neither Darghouth nor any of his Ruinous captains were going to argue with an order issued from Archaon’s own lips. ‘Lower the launch,’ Archaon barked. ‘I’m going ashore.’

‘Lower the launch, aye,’ the Cloven Captain echoed, before adding a snort and a rattle of the lips. Archaon threw the dark-skinned boatswain his spyglass before the Ruinous thug went off to whip a crew together for the launch and have the boat lowered down the towering side of the galleon.

‘Going ashore. In this?’ a cracked voice barely managed above the storm. Archaon saw the daemon sorcerer Sheerian hobble with difficulty across the pitching deck on his bone staff. His gift of youth regained had been spent in the service of Archaon and so he was a spot-livered ancient once more.

‘I’m not afraid of a little water,’ Archaon told him.

‘That’s not a little water,’ Sheerian returned. ‘It’s a lot of water. But that’s not what bothers me.’

‘The sorcerer on the cliff,’ Archaon agreed. ‘The Curseling.’

‘His name is Vilitch,’ Sheerian told his master. ‘He’s blessed by the Great Changer. A very powerful sorcerer. His brother unfortunate is Thomin. He’s no beginner with a blade either. Do not underestimate the Twisted Twin.’

‘Am I not to be underestimated?’ Archaon said as the launch was swung over the side and Zwei and Drei climbed in with the crew of slave-strongbacks and spawn.

‘Of course, master,’ the ancient said, ‘but Vilitch is no fool. He knows this of you and invites you anyway.’

‘U’zuhl thirsts,’ Archaon told Sheerian, slapping his gauntlet against *Slayer of Kings*, the daemonblade sitting in a black, baroque scabbard across the Chaos warlord’s back. ‘He groans for the blood of weakling sorcerers. Should I feed him your soul instead?’

‘What I’m saying, my most mighty lord,’ Sheerian said, ‘is that you are almost certainly walking into a trap.’

‘I’m counting on it,’ Archaon told the sorcerer, as he climbed over the bulwark and into the launch. ‘The Curseling honours the Great Changer with his powers and deceit but wears the mark of the Dark Master. Perhaps his god-blessed ambition has the better of him. Like Ograx and that monstrosity at the top of the

world, the Curseling seeks to serve Be'lakor through the wider pantheon and become the Everchosen of All Chaos.'

'And perhaps his hearts beat with allegiance to the Great Changer still,' Sheerian said amid the boatswain's rough calls and the launch began its juddering descent. 'There is no love lost between my Byzantine god and the Dark Master. This could be more than a trap. It could be a double cross.'

'Yes,' Archaon agreed, seeming to enjoy the prospect of action on dry land after such a long, storm-battered journey up the Bretonnian coast. 'But for whom?'

Zwei sat at the front of the launch, like some kind of gargoylesque figurehead, flapping his wings at the boat's coxswain to help the strongbacks and spawn keep time with their oars. The slaves and god-blessed unfortunates had been selected for their physical strength and the powerful heaving of their arms on the oars sent the launch cutting through the stormy waves and rock-churned surf. Drei sat in the back of the launch with his master, wings outstretched like a ghoulish parasol, to protect Archaon from the worst of the weather.

As the boat crunched up on the gravel of the nearby landing, the strongbacks and spawn hauled the launch ashore. Ordering the slaves and spawn to wait on the exposed landing, amid the crashing waves, Archaon threw himself at the wet rock of the cliff. Zwei and Drei were obliged to follow suit, the wraith-warriors batting their wings to give them the extra lift required to get their first handholds. Clawing his gauntlets at wet handholds and moss-greasy ledges like grapnels, Archaon powered up the cliffside. Jumping for purchase on the summit overhang, the Chaos warlord dangled dangerously for a few moments, his plate and the stone laced through his bones threatening to drag him to his death. Hauling his armoured form up and over the edge, Archaon allowed the insistence of an offshore breeze to ruffle through his cloak and clear the grit from where it had fallen onto his plate.

With Zwei and Drei shimmering their shadow forms into a flanking formation, Archaon marched towards the Curseling. A glow of mist swirled about its cloaked form, the crackling haze seemingly separate from the weather around it. The ghoulish flesh of the Twisted Twin made Archaon's own crawl under his plate. The warrior stood impassive, like a statue, seemingly unaware of the monstrous twin sprouting from its shoulder. All the armoured warrior knew were the sickly whisperings of his monstrous brother. Like a blind worm, Vilitch twisted and turned, its needle-like teeth gnashing at silent sorceries. When the Twisted Twin did speak, it spoke through the helm of the blank-minded warrior-

twin.

‘Welcome to Bretonnia, Archaon.’

‘To hell with your welcome, Curseling,’ Archaon told him. He gestured to the raging storm above. ‘This is your doing?’

‘Change is mine to wield like a sculptor his clay or artist his brush,’ the Curseling said. ‘A ship-enslaving storm is child’s play. You should see what I can do with light and the very darkness that crafts it. Or flesh and the thoughts that drive it.’

‘You Tzeentchians are all the same,’ Archaon scorned. ‘So in love with your sorcerous powers and fiendish intrigue. Dropping clues of doom to come into the poisonous tedium, you force me to listen to before coming to an actual point. I have scores of such sorcerers at my command. You don’t impress me, creature of unnatural arts – and neither will what you have planned for me. Besides, I’ve never met a sorcerer I couldn’t kill. Despite your talents, you all share the same weakness. My steel in your twisted flesh.’

The Curseling chuckled but Vilitch’s mirth sounded stilted, proceeding as it did from the warrior-twin.

‘You don’t disappoint, Archaon.’

‘You do,’ the Chaos warlord told the sorcerer. ‘You wear both the iconography of the Great Changer and Be’lakor, the Dark Master. Is it not inappropriate to wear the sigils of sworn enemies? Neither daemonic power will thank you for that, Curseling.’

‘Like you, Archaon,’ Vilitch said, ‘I serve the interests of all Dark Powers, through reverence of the pantheon.’

‘You serve only your own ambitions,’ Archaon accused. ‘Like all who bear the Dark Master’s mark, you are driven to madness with your desire for what I already have. The treasures of Chaos.’

‘All but one of the treasures, Archaon...’

‘And there it is,’ the Chaos warlord said. ‘The bait in the trap you already close about me.’ Archaon sniffed at the glowing mist that rolled and twisted about them. ‘A sorcerous trap.’

‘You are indeed a treat,’ Vilitch told him. ‘I didn’t expect the dark, driven, indomitable warrior of folk songs and stories to be so entertaining.’

‘A twisted mind, desirous of such treasures without earning them,’ Archaon continued, ‘might seek to acquire them through the promise of the last.’

‘Very good, Archaon. Very good,’ the Curseling said, the toothed worm-mouth of the sorcerer managing a horrid grin. ‘And how might Vilitch achieve such a

thing?’

‘You would engage me in some fool’s errand,’ Archaon said. ‘Some cause of common darkness which necessitates me and the might of my army. Something to put all under your sorcerous spell. Something to stack the odds firmly in your favour, since neither you nor any of your tested minions could hope to stand before me blade to blade.’

‘Excellent!’ the Curseling cackled, each sound seeming forced and affected through the lips of another. ‘Truly, the Great Changer smiles upon you, Archaon. Now, the details.’

‘Do they even matter?’ Archaon said.

‘Always,’ the Curseling said. ‘I see that I still have a little to teach you, mighty Archaon. ‘A great lie – the kind that takes the lives of men, their futures, their very souls – is predicated upon the foundation of seeming truths. These truths rely on details that are an antidote to incredulity – as a life-saving potion might be to a poison – incredulity that would destroy the lie.’

‘Being in your mere presence is an education, Curseling,’ Archaon told the Tzeentchian. ‘A repulsive one, but an education all the same.’

‘Why thank you, Archaon,’ the sorcerer returned, ‘and I hope that when I have done with you, the pantheon will descend upon the self-importance of your soul and tear it to infinite shreds for eternity. So, the details.’

Archaon looked about the mist-swathed coastline and the darkness of the storm above.

‘These are Lucus lands,’ Archaon said, his half-remembered truths fielding the lie Vilitch needed him to believe. ‘The coastal Marches. If my charts are correct, Brilloinne Castle is not far inland. Baron Lucus was a famous knight of legend, even when I was a child. As part of his questing he recovered many cursed items, trinkets and dark artefacts of sorcerous power, securing them in the chapel about which he built his mighty castle. I assume you want access to this chapel.’

‘I couldn’t have put it better myself,’ the Curseling said. ‘Baron Lucus is long dead but the lands belong to his grandson. While he is not half the man his grandfather was, he is wealthy and his fortifications are well maintained. He also commands the allegiance of those still loyal to his grandfather’s memory, including an army of pilgrims devoted to protecting the sealed chapel’s secrets.’

‘You have attacked Brilloinne Castle already then?’ Archaon asked.

‘I led a horde of spawn – all honouring the Great Changer with their gifts,’ the Curseling told him, ‘but they lacked the discipline of your monstrous army as I lack your warmongering leadership, Archaon. I lost my unfortunates before the

castle walls to Baron Lucus and his attendant knights.'

'So the baron is already alerted to your intentions,' Archaon stated, 'and no doubt has sent riders with word to neighbouring lords, knights oath-honoured to protect his grandfather's legacy and pilgrims sworn to secure his chapel and its dark secrets.'

'Yes...'

'And why would I do this?'

'You tell me, Archaon: why would you do this?' the Curseling asked.

'For one thing,' Archaon said, 'and one thing only. The location of the final treasure of Chaos. The Crown of Domination. But you know this already, sorcerer.'

'Let me trade you truth for truth,' Vilitch said. 'I know not where the crown you seek is, but I know one that does. Take Brilloinne Castle and its secrets for me and I will tell you where he can be found.'

'And then I shall have to gut you, I expect,' Archaon told the sorcerer, 'as you try to spring whatever feeble trap you have intended for me.'

The worm-like sorcerer's mouth formed a horrid smile.

'We are going to make such a good team,' the Twisted Twin said, 'you and I.'



## CHAPTER XV

*'Where'er my eye roams  
Whate'er I fail to see.  
My thoughts untravell'd  
Shall ever return to thee.'*

– Jouffroy, *The Pale Sisters*

*Brilloinne Castle  
The Bretonnian Coast  
La Fête du Lac IC 2518*

Archaon walked the battlefield in a daze. About him tendrils of glowing mist reached through the ranks of dying men. The fields of Brilloinne were red and silver with the bloodied plate of the fallen. Men of noble birth. Knights with honourable histories. The lords of the Marches. Now they suffered like their lowly subjects. In the mud. In pain. Shown no mercy. Horses got up from where the smashed bodies of their owners lay before running off through the havoc of battle. Squires screamed, going down under axe and blade as swiftly as the knightly standards they humped through the butchery. Lances shattered against

hell-forged plate. Steeds shrieked and reared with sword-cleaved legs, tumbling feathered paladins from the saddle.

It was havoc.

Like the land, Archaon's mind was a mist-shrouded realm. He fought, though he knew not why. He killed out of instinct but the will wasn't truly there. The *Slayer of Kings* cut through the sorcerous fog and the crisp air of the Bretonnian morn, reflecting an infernal radiance off the silvered plate of knightly warriors about to die and armoured chargers moments from being cut in half. Swinging the fat curves and serration of the daemonic weapon about him, Archaon cleaved through the colourful shields of men-at-arms hiding behind them and the bloody gush of pilgrim mobs that seemed to run straight into the orbiting path of the blade.

Archaon's mind rang with doubts and questions. He was not some gore-clouded champion of the Blood God or some Slaaneshi deviant, living the moment by moment drive of their desires. He was Archaon. He thought for himself. And yet he could not find his way to answers. He was slaughtering. He was issuing orders. He was mounting a siege but he knew not truly why. It seemed a battle without purpose. He fought for the acquisition of knowledge, of dark treasure, to realise his destiny: he did not attack without reason like Chaos raiders sailing south in their longships. He was Archaon. He was Archaon.

Above him the walls of Brilloinne Castle reached for the dark, stormy skies of a long-fought day. The brick, beautiful in craft and pattern, formed high walls, towers and turrets. The castle was a statement of angular elegance, streaming with colourful banners and pennants, its colossal drawbridge closed before a red moat, choked with bodies. From within, Archaon could hear the agonising release of trebuchets. Gargantuan pieces of shattered masonry and castle wall were launched up into the dark sky, growing smaller, smaller, until rapidly they grew big, black and unavoidable. Hammering into the battlefield like vengeance issued from the heavens, the boulders created bloody craters of mangled flesh and armour before tumbling off through the ranks of Chaos warriors and mud-splattered knights. Ruinous armour and the polished silver plate of Bretonnian lords were equally unimpressive against such obliteration.

Archaon had ensured that his own siege engines, crafted of daemonbone, tusk and sinew gave an equally devastating account of themselves against the castle walls. For hours now, the eastern wall of Brilloinne Castle had soaked up the most appalling onslaught, with smashed sections raining dust and brick under each merciless impact. Archaon had fought his way forward through a sea of



shields, spears and pot-helmed men-at-arms, leading the spiked silhouettes of Ruinous champions and dark-armoured warriors of Chaos to the castle walls precisely because he expected them to fall at any time now.

Archaon heard the crank of the drawbridge. Seeing a way into the castle, Archaon swung the *Slayer of Kings* about him. The daemon U'zuhl glowed with blood-slaked fury as Archaon scythed heads from Bretonnian shoulders, like a reaper in a field. The bodies of men-at-arms, yeomen and squires thudded to the ground, allowing Archaon to lead his Chaos warriors, his fiends, his marauders and bestial hordes on through the ranks of silver knights. Progress was slow along the banks of the body-choked moat, and was slowed further at the sudden whoosh of arrows unleashed by ranks of longbowmen firing from the castle walls. Archaon brought up the Ruinous Star of his shield defiantly towards the heavens. Zwei and Drei were with him, globing the black shadow of their wings about their master, creating with the shield a barrier that thudded and pranged with the shattered shafts of arrows.

The drawbridge boomed the rest of the way down as the castle gate vomited forth another resplendent stream of knightly riders. Surging forth with lances and shields, the silver armoured warriors urged their huge steeds on, their heraldry and surcoats a blur of colour. It was a bold move to be carried out in isolation. Lifting the shield higher above his helm and with arrows still hammering into its metal surface, Archaon cast his gaze across the battlefield. Reinforcements had arrived. A column of knights riding out of the north, fresh, immaculate and trailing banners of eye-stinging colour – no doubt despatched by lords of the Northern Marches, fearful that an invasion force might be headed their way. Turning south, Archaon saw nothing. Then, blotching out of the heavens, he saw armoured knights swooping down out of the sky. Beautiful warriors on winged pegasi, come to inspire the knights and the base-bred of Brilloinne with hope. Come to defend the dark secrets of the castle's chapel against those who would steal them.

Archaon grunted. He struck the silver helm from a knight who ran at him with a broadsword before stamping back another, crumpling his breastplate and sending the nobleman surging back into the brick-shattered castle wall. He turned to Zwei.

'Give the signal,' the Chaos warlord said. 'Bring forth *my* knights.'

Zwei launched himself into the sky to carry out his master's order. With arrows raining down about him, Archaon exchanged blows with a fat, aged knight who roared at him through his grey-threaded beard. The enchantments of

the knight's glorious blade sparked off the *Slayer of Kings*. With a roar of his own, Archaon smashed down through the ancient sword with his daemonblade. As the knight looked down at the ancestral weapon, with its ensorcelled blade shattered, Archaon brought the *Slayer of Kings* back with savage force, thrusting it straight through the Bretonnian knight. As the fangs of his crossguard scraped the demolished breastplate, Archaon tore the daemonblade out of his foe, allowing the horror-stricken knight to topple forwards onto his armoured knees before taking his head.

'Jharkill!' Archaon bellowed, mulching the knight's gaunt squire and his bannerman with the flat of his irregular blade. The malformed huntsman was not far behind. He smashed men-at-arms into muddy graves, wielding his thick tusk bow like a club before stringing the brute weapon with the length of a colossal arrow and firing it at marauder-swamped knights. As skewered steeds crashed to the ground, Chaos marauders descended upon the armoured warriors, beating them to death in their plate. 'Jharkill!' Archaon roared again, Bretonnian arrows cutting through the air about him. 'Unleash your monsters – bring this fortress down into its foundations.'

As the ogre snatched his shaman's staff from an attendant half-fiend, Archaon pushed on through the mud and clashing bodies. Killing. Decapitating. Plunging his daemonsword through armoured foes. He desperately wanted to reach the drawbridge, but it was already rising. A manfiend and a marauder savage clung to the shuddering oak of its ascending form but Archaon knew it would take more than a pair of pantheon-pledged wretches to grant his army access to the castle.

Like a force of nature, the knights riding from the castle smashed into the throngs swarming the besieged fortress. Everything was suddenly broken bones. The shrieks of the impaled. The screams of the trampled. Horses dying. Trains of bodies shot past, skewered on the lengths of lances. Walls of horseflesh, armour and colourful caparisons blurred by. Bretonnian knights were hammered from their saddles by the plate-piercing spikes of maces and flails. Presented spears and pikes went home before snapping in the hands of the infernal warriors clutching them, and both knights and their Ruinous foes went down under an avalanche of faltering steed. Chaos warriors in suits of hell-forged armour suddenly disappeared before Archaon in a cacophony of demolished plate. Blood. Metal. Everywhere.

Archaon turned to present his body shield to a magnificent knight thundering down on him with the merciless length of his lance. As the weapon punched the

metal surface of the shield, Archaon locked his shoulder and pushed back. His boots skidded back through mud and bodies as the Ruinous shield, the cursed plate of Morkar and the warlord's stone-laced bones soaked up the impact. The lance began to shear, split and shatter, showering the area with splinters. As Archaon's boots ground to a half-buried halt, he felt the steed slam into the shield. Archaon surged back through the throngs of clashing warriors, barrelling dark knights and their Bretonnian opponents out of his path. When he came to a stop once more, Archaon felt the armoured rider leave the saddle and sail over his head. Pushing the steed back, Archaon came out from behind the shield to see that the spike in its centre had gored the warhorse. Going up on its hind legs, a ragged puncture wound in its chest, the beast gave one last whinny and a kick of its legs before toppling over and burying a fleeing yeoman.

Archaon whirled around to see the unsaddled knight some distance away, trying to scabble to his feet, struggling in both crumpled plate and the mud. Archaon ran forward as the knight attempted to tear his sword from the gaudy decoration of its scabbard. As the blade cleared its sheath, Archaon booted the knight in the midriff, half lifting him from where he was on all fours in the battlefield mire. The sword slipped from the knight's hand and he landed on his chest. Putting a boot on the back of the knight's helm, Archaon put his weight down on the knight's head. The helm sank under the mud, water flooding in through the faceplate eyeslits and breathing holes. As he held him there, the knight bucked and kicked out in his heavy plate. Men-at-arms and a deranged squire came at Archaon but the *Slayer of Kings* tore through them. Arrows from the castle walls sang off his plate, with two finding their way between his pauldron and backplate. Archaon wouldn't move, however, until the knight's thrashings slowly ceased.

Reaching back, Archaon tore the arrows from his plate before turning around. The knights of Brilloinne continued to smash their way through the ranks of his armoured warriors, his half-breeds, his manfiends and marauders. Exalted champions of Chaos in their benighted plate, bearing the gifts and cursed weaponry of the Dark Gods, rode in through the murderous malaise to meet them, while wretched sorcerers unleashed their dread powers on the silver-suited knights.

Archaon heard a monstrous clash to the north. Peering through the forest of blades, the fountaining brain and falling banners, Archaon could see that the castle's knightly reinforcements had been turned aside by Archaon's own arriving dark knights. Warriors in black plate riding possessed mounts. Slaaneshi

horsemen on spiked steeds. Columns of knights in rusted plate, riding skeletal horses. The Blood God's chosen astride mounts of metal and thunder. As the silver stream of riders were diverted by a wall of armoured steeds and mounted warriors, plate clashed, horses shrieked and weapons sang off one another. The Chaos knights, bearing ghastly shields and the armour-shearing blades of axes and serrated swords, smashed the knights of the Marches out of formation. By the time the noblemen had dropped their useless lances and drawn their swords, many had lost their heads or had the teeth of barbed axeblades buried in their breastplates and chests.

Screams brought Archaon's attention back around as knights swooping from the sky on their winged mounts soared across the battlefield. Some skewered dark warriors on their lances, tearing them from the battlefield in a screech of plate and flailing limb. Others leaned out and beheaded ruin-blessed champions from the sky with surging swipes of their glorious blades. Heads and helms dropped to the battlefield in the wake of beaten wings and spurting blood.

Pulling his shield in close and tightening his grip around the hilt of his daemonsword, Archaon bent his knee. As a shadow passed overhead, Archaon leapt for the creature. Swinging his sword overhead, Archaon cut through the throat of the pegasus. As he hit the ground, the winged horse dribbled gore across the battlefield before crashing messily into a throng of yeomen spearstabbing a manfiend. Another leap only succeeded in turning a wavering lance aside, while a short run into a third sent the tip of the *Slayer of Kings* through the soft underbelly of another flying steed, splatter-spilling its entrails over the polished plate of Bretonnian knights. Archaon was so preoccupied with savagely ending the two noblemen that he didn't see where the disembowelled beast landed or the lance of the mounted warrior that followed. Swooping in on his beautiful white winged beast, the knight aimed his lance squarely at Archaon's horned helm.

Everything went dark for a moment. Archaon felt a crack of thunder pass through his faceplate, his skull and out the back of his head. The world tumbled. Then there was the slip-shod landing on his back, bloody mud oozing about him. He saw the pegasus knight pass overhead but also saw Drei beating his leathery wings in hot pursuit. Within moments, the wraith-warrior had mounted the beast behind the knight and slit his throat with one of his bone blades. As the throat-clutching knight slid from his saddle, down into the havoc of the battle, Archaon saw the sky close up above him.

His world, as disorientated as it had briefly become, was now the feverish

smash of weapons and gritted teeth through mud-smeared faces. Men-at-arms bounced morning stars off his plate, while squires attempted to earn plate of their own by twisting the points of spears into his midriff. Suddenly there was a grizzled knight, helmless and sporting a leathery old scar that split his face in two. A greatsword seethed through the sky overhead and came down at the Chaos warlord. It appeared as though it might take off an arm or even Archaon's head. It would have done if he hadn't torn his shield back from the clawing attentions of two warrior pilgrims. Archaon felt the greatsword smack down across the surface of the shield. He knew another steel-splitting blow was coming.

Meanwhile, the Chaos warlord's world continued to darken as more and more rabid baseborns and legacy-hungry paladins swept in to destroy him. His shield boomed with the desperate desire to see him dead. Snarling beneath his faceplate, which was miraculously still intact, Archaon kicked out, sweeping the grizzled knight's legs out from under him. Swinging his daemonsword in a tight arc, the Chaos warrior chopped through leather boot and bone, felling his circle of attackers like trees. Sliding around in the mud, he continued to hack his attackers to a growing mound of screeching bodies, until finally – with a swish of his mud-slick cloak – Archaon was back on his feet. The face-split knight had also managed to haul his armoured form up and held the glittering sword above his head. He got no further. Archaon saw the surprise cross his face. Then the horror as the tip of one of Drei's bone blades poked out of his throat, having entered from the back of his neck. As it slipped out and then disappeared, the knight dropped his heavy sword and crashed to the ground, revealing the shimmering shadow of Archaon's bodyguard.

The formation of pegasus knights had banked and were swooping in for another skewering pass. Archaon readied himself for another sky-searing attack but he didn't have to. Bolts of unnatural energy struck a crooked path up from the battlefield, striking the pegasi and their knightly riders. It was Vilitch the Curseling, striding up through the destruction of Archaon's progress. The warrior-twin slashed men-at-arms out of his path with his sorcery-searing blade, while the twisting worm-like thing growing out of his shoulder directed his staff at the sky. As the Curseling's bolts struck the pegasus knights, both mount and rider were transformed into sacks of leathery flesh that fell from the heavens. The disgusting fusions of flesh splattered into the battlefield before sprouting tentacles, claws and exotic appendages that reached out for nearby unfortunates. Whip-winding tendrils about the boots of fleeing squires, the spawn dragged the

boys back through the mud and into the abomination's absorbing fleshiness.

While sorcerous bolts streaked up from the battlefield, streams of flame blasted down from above. Knights aflame fell from the sky while pegasi kicked, flapped and bucked their agonies as they tumbled like balls of fire. Knightly riders were torn from their saddles by monstrous airborne predators, throwing and tearing the paladins to pieces between them, while their mounts were set upon in mid-air by winged serpents who savaged the wondrous steeds.

Archaon felt the ground quaking beneath him. Jharkill had unleashed his monstrosities as Archaon had commanded. As well as airborne monsters and the chimeric predators bounding, pouncing and mauling their way through the battlefield, the abominate titans of Archaon's army had been committed to siege. Everything fell into shadow as the monstrous giant Archaon had freed from Lord Agrammon's menageries stomped up behind. The giant was a small mountain of bone, withered flesh and the light of some malevolent life beyond life. Its bones had been etched with pantheon-pleasing symbols and its exposed ribs used as banner poles from which to hang Ruinous flags and standards. It picked up a colossal piece of masonry that had been launched from the castle and heaved it over the enormous dimensions of its deformed skull.

Archaon heard the tortured release of the castle trebuchets fire once more. Massive boulders hurtled skyward before tumbling towards the battlefield. Archaon gripped his shield. The Chaos warrior knew, however, that it could not save him from such an impact.

Things died horribly nearby. An irregular-shaped boulder smashed a throng of battling knights to nothingness before rolling bludgeonry through Bretonnians and the servants of darkness alike. Another managed to hit nothing for several mud-splattering impacts until burying one of Archaon's deadly sorcerers under a ton of rock. A third dropped straight down on the corpse giant, shattering the monster's malformed skull before landing behind it and tumbling away. Archaon stepped backwards as the bone colossus lurched. The ancient sorcery that gave the monstrosity life died to musty darkness and the giant toppled forward, its colossal masonry missile falling ahead of it. As the monster shattered to a small mountain of ancient bones, the falling piece of masonry cleaved down through the top of the castle wall. Its brick-pulverising path continued, cutting a narrow trench down through the side of the castle-exterior defences. As the dust settled and the excruciating noise of the impact subsided, Archaon watched tendrils of the glowing mist that cloaked the battlefield creep in through the narrow opening.

‘To me!’ Archaon roared, breaking into a plate-jangling run for the breach. Batting aside Bretonnian knights who were stumbling through the chaos with his shield, Archaon slashed apart men-at-arms that bravely barred his way with his daemonsword. Like a torrent of darkness, dread champions, Chaos warriors, Ruinous knights, manfiends, bestial half-breeds and marauders broke off from their desperate engagements and formed a rampaging column behind their warlord.

Inside the castle walls there was panic. The courtyard beyond was dominated by trebuchets, but upon seeing Archaon emerge from the breach in the castle walls and the hordes of Chaos pour through behind him, they abandoned their machines. Men-at-arms, charged with defending the fortress, poured from stairwells and archways, led by battle-scarred sergeants, while the remaining knights of Brilloinne brought their steeds back under control and rode for the besiegers.

With his dark horde a mist-swirling silhouette of spiked armour, horned helms and blades behind him, Archaon ran across the courtyard at his enemies. Smashing his shield about him with one hand – goring, bludgeoning and dashing – Archaon held the fierce fury of the daemon U’zuhl in the other, burning within the monstrous blade. Melting straight through the steel of lesser weapons, Archaon hacked the raging inferno of the daemonsword through the armoured forms of knights, through screaming squires and the unfortunate steeds that carried them. As Archaon stabbed, cleaved, brained and butchered a path through the crowded courtyard, the stench of sorcery and bloodshed stung his nostrils. He knew where he was heading.

As soon as he had entered the courtyard, he had seen it. The tiny chapel, rough compared to the surrounding architecture that had been built by Baron Lucus. The stained-glass windows were covered by stout oak shutters and lengths of chain, while the archway door was barred by three thick lengths of oak and criss-crossed with tarnished silver chains. It was unmistakable: the chapel Baron Lucus had constructed to house the dark treasures Vilitch the Curseling demanded.

As trailing splatters of blood flew through the air about Archaon, with hacked limbs and blades that had been seared in half, he was filled with loathing for the cowardly grandson of the mighty Baron Lucus – the hero Lucus, whose stories had even reached Archaon as a boy in the far Empire.

‘Where is the baron?’ Archaon roared, his words bouncing about the courtyard walls. ‘The coward that hides behind his coin and his walls while boys and

baseborns die for him?’

‘Kill him!’ Archaon heard from the castle walls. Looking about the castle Archaon found his foe. While longbowmen turned their weapons down into the courtyard, Baron Lucus the younger prowled the relative safety of the ramparts in polished plate of silver and gold. The plumage of his helm was colourful and extravagant, while the exotic saddled beast upon which he rode looked like one of the finest steeds Bretonnian coin could buy: a hippogryph, an elegant creature that boasted the back legs and body of a stallion and the wings, talons and beaked head of a monstrous eagle. The longbowmen seemed uncertain. ‘Do as your lord commands,’ Lucus shouted through the faceplate of his beautiful helm. Archaon swallowed back the bile rising up the back of his throat. He could hear the edge of cowardice along the cutting edge of the baron’s words. Here was a man deserving of death. A fool that thought that money and status could save him from a man like Archaon.

The courtyard whooshed with the flight of arrows loosed from the castle walls. While several arrows shattered and split off Archaon’s cursed plate – the Chaos warlord not even bothering to raise his shield – most ended up embedded in surrounding men-at-arms and the dirt of the courtyard floor.

‘Still hiding, baron?’ Archaon called up at Lucus. ‘Your men are dying and your castle lost. Fight me or flee – and make your failure complete.’

Baron Lucus attempted a battle roar of his own but no one was convinced. Not the commoners, for whom their lord’s weakling call was the last thing they heard. Not the knights, who fought for the memory of the wretched boy’s grandfather rather than the lord himself. Not Archaon.

Digging his heels into the side of the magnificent beast, the baron urged the hippogryph off the castle wall. Leaping like a forest predator from a tree, the hippogryph pounced on Archaon. The Chaos warlord brought up his shield. For a moment he was lost in the monster, buried in talons, hooves and muscle. With a bellow, Archaon reared and threw the hippogryph and its rider off him. As the thing was tossed back into the battle and bloodshed of the crowded courtyard, Archaon smashed it across the beak with his shield before immediately backslapping the beast further into the surrounding butchery.

Shaking off the impacts, the hippogryph stalked sideways about Archaon. The Chaos warrior and the baron’s monster circled one another. Lucus just seemed to be along for the ride. Striking out at surrounding Chaos warriors in spiked plate with his sword, Lucus had his bejewelled blade batted back by the battle-hardened warriors of darkness. The hippogryph reared at one, slicing three



ragged talon-tears through the warrior's plate and torso. The second it pecked in the faceplate, shattering the horned helm before snapping the warrior's head up in its hooked beak and tearing it free of his body. Lucus let out a jubilant roar, despite the fact that the victory had little to do with his own personal prowess.

Archaon came in with the *Slayer of Kings*, the daemonsword trailing the glow and shimmer of hellfire. The hippogryph launched itself into the air, beating its wings to keep itself and its rider out of Archaon's reach. Tossing the daemonsword into the courtyard, where it hissed blade first in the dirt, Archaon leapt for the hippogryph's back hoof. Grabbing it with both gauntlets, Archaon used his considerable weight to drag the monster back down to earth. The hippogryph flapped furiously for the sky, feverishly kicking out with both back legs to free itself of the deadweight anchor of Archaon. As the hoof of the other leg struck the Chaos warlord and sent him crashing back to the courtyard floor, the hippogryph flapped over the heads of the knights who were fighting for their lives among the Chaos hordes.

As Archaon got to his feet he saw a squire run across the open space and attempt to tear his daemonsword from the dirt. Archaon didn't know whether the Bretonnian boy intended to use his own sword against him or simply deny Archaon his devastating weapon. The Chaos warlord couldn't help but be a little impressed. It didn't last long, however, and neither did the squire. The *Slayer of Kings* would not move from its position stuck in the ground, dragging the squire back. Seconds holding onto the hilt of the daemoniac weapon was enough to scorch the squire's simple soul and envelop the boy in a flesh-melting inferno of hellflame. The daemon U'zuhl had no love for Archaon, but there were few souls dark and powerful enough to wield the possessed weapon, and the Blood God's infernal servant made it a matter of monstrous principle to scorch from existence those unworthy and unwise enough to seize it.

Grabbing a man-at-arms from the throng of battle, Archaon killed him with a gauntlet-clenched punch to the head, snatching up the Bretonnian's spear. Leaning back, Archaon launched the weapon at the flapping hippogryph, burying it in the creature's flank. As the monster shrieked like an eagle about the castle, Archaon ducked and weaved the arcs of poor quality blades and notched axes. Smashing his armoured elbow into the spine of another baseborn warrior, Archaon pulled the warped spear in his grasp over his shoulder and allowed the broken-backed Bretonnian to collapse. Hurling the spear with furious force, Archaon sent the weapon through the baron's plate, skewering his leg to his mount's muscular side. Ducking beneath a Bretonnian knight's battle axe,

Archaon slammed the armoured warrior aside with his shield.

Suddenly there was a monstrous explosion from the east wall. Dust rocketed across the courtyard as an avalanche of demolished masonry cascaded inwards, burying trebuchets, mounted knights and Chaos marauders alike. Archaon deflected the slow swing of the battle axe off the surface of his shield before spinning about the grey-bearded knight and slamming the shield-spike straight through his armoured back.

Prising his shield from the blood-spitting knight, Archaon walked back across the courtyard, snatching up the *Slayer of Kings* from where it still quivered in the dirt. In the narrow opening he had used to enter the castle he saw Jharkill, the malformed ogre, holding his shaman's staff. Manfiends and marauders pushed past him, eager to join the butchery inside the castle. The Curseling was with him, the warrior-twin opportunistically slicing at Bretonnian knights who were desperately trying to stem the flow of invaders. As the ensorcelled blade of the twin cut through plate and the flesh behind it, the Curseling's opponents were swallowed up by a violaceous whirlwind of raw energy that tore the blade-marked victim apart before twisting furiously to nothing. The worm-sorcerer that sprouted from the warrior-twin's shoulder held its staff up high, trailing the haze of the glowing mist and striking castle defenders down with spawn-rupturing bolts of lightning from the headpiece.

The Bretonnian knights needn't have bothered trying to secure the breach. The abominate form of Archaon's slaughterbrute had decimated an entire section of wall and was now crawling across the rubble. The monstrosity of chitinous plate, horn, claw and dagger-filled maw bore the red flesh and fury of its Blood God. It was living decimation and visited some of that potential on Brilloinne Castle. With three tongues flopping out of its mouth, cascading the drool of violent anticipation, the monstrosity smashed its clawed fists through walls, through the foundations of tottering towers and down through the stable structures and courtyard buildings. It snatched up fleeing men-at-arms and bit them in half, discarding what was left before stamping down on a foolhardy knight with its huge hooves, reducing the armoured warrior to splattering scrap.

Winged serpents circled the castle walls, lighting up the ramparts with streams of flame, prompting the flaming, flailing longbowmen stationed there to jump to their deaths. Chimeric predators tore past Archaon, savaging yeomen, squires and knights as they ran from the destructive horror of the slaughterbrute and the monstrosities attacking the castle.

As the abominate creature moved towards the chapel, Archaon found himself

running against the terrified Bretonnians, his daemon sword slashing this way and that to clear a bloody path. Waving his shield and the infernal radiance of his sword before the huge monster, he saw the thing stop – its clenched claw just moments from smashing the chapel to brick-dust. Under the control of Jharkill's primitive charms, the thing turned away, suddenly attracted to the flapping form of the hippogryph and the gleaming plate of the baron on its back. Lucus swung his beautiful blade at the inevitability of the beast's closing claws but the miserable nobleman could not land a strike. It was horror to behold as the slaughterbrute snatched the hippogryph and its rider out of the air. Tearing the shiny form of the screaming baron from the saddle, the abomination grasped the winged steed in its fist. Smashing the knuckles of its clenched claw into the courtyard floor to crunch the creature's bones and snap its wings, the Chaos monstrosity flung the hippogryph's broken carcass with merciless force into the north wall. Archaon could hear the screams of Baron Lucus inside the prison of the slaughterbrute's claw. The monster looked down at its shrieking fist before crushing the insignificance of the nobleman, the royal blood of the baron spurting out from between the abomination's knuckles.

Such a sight was too much for even those knights who had pledged to defend the castle when the baseborns turned and fled. With the castle in ruins and the lord to which they owed their oath dead, there was little left at Brilloinne for the knights to die for. As the knights fled, running for the drawbridge that had been cranked open, Archaon left them to his besieging horde. Turning towards the chapel about which the castle had been built, Archaon levelled the thick oak door with a kick. Worm-eaten oak splintered, and chains slipped through rings and dropped before the entrance. Holding the *Slayer of Kings* out before him, the blade blazed brightly in the presence of such a holy place. The chapel interior was resplendent with the gold and silver iconography of the blessed Lady of the Lake and the Grail, from which the legendary Baron Lucus had sipped. As the furious glow of his daemonblade lit up the darkness of shuttered stained-glass windows, Archaon found the chapel to be empty. A hole shattered in the aged brick that made up the back wall had allowed recent entrance into the chapel, and the dust was disturbed evidence of the recovery of the dread treasures of darkness that had remained locked inside.

Archaon nodded to himself. There was no fury. No dark oaths or threats. This was the double cross of which Sheerian had warned him. This was the betrayal and deception he had expected from a sorcerer pledged to Tzeentch. This was the treacherous truth he needed to know, that the Curseling was pledged to

Archaon's father-in-shadow, the Dark Master. Vilitch had already consigned the knights and men-at-arms of Brilloinne Castle to spawndom and had taken the dark treasures of the chapel for himself. The castle was now a monstrous trap and tomb – for Archaon.

The Chaos warlord turned around. The Twisted Twin stood there. Both warrior and sorcerous worm watching him. The warrior-twin thrust his blade suddenly through Jharkill's back. The monstrous ogre looked down at the tip of the blade protruding from his chest. He clutched at it with the tiny, claw-like hand of his atrophied arm. The huntsman looked up at Archaon across the bloody courtyard before disappearing in a maelstrom of purple light. As the flesh-shredding whirlwind dissipated – ogre, shaman staff and all – the Curseling stepped forth.

There were fresh horrors all around. The Bretonnian knights and the men-at-arms of the castle had stopped running. The glowing mist that accompanied the sorcerer Curseling and seemed to slip through everything, now disappeared into the ground. With the illusory haze no longer required, Archaon and his Chaos warriors saw the Bretonnians for what they really were: the growing number of the Curseling's spawn army. Misshapen monstrosities of raw flesh, tentacular horror and scything appendages leapt on Archaon's bestial champions, marauders and fiends. The corpses of castle defenders erupted like mounds of mutable horror. Stabbing limbs, snapping jaws and streams of caustic liquid blasted forth from things that, as men-at-arms, had been felled but had waited for their sorcerer-master's signal to reveal the truth of their resilient forms.

Archaon broke into a run. He hacked apart spawn creatures that leapt at him in transformation, dashed extra heads with his shield and stomped, skipped and jumped through a courtyard of snaking tendrils. He decapitated heads that crawled their snapping jaws at his ankles and quivering corpses from which chitinous claws erupted. He did not get far. The worm-sorcerer Vilitch had its staff directed at the charging warlord. As Archaon brought his shield up, the Curseling unleashed a stream of dark lightning that blasted Archaon back across the courtyard and into the chapel.

Shaking the impact from his head, Archaon found himself in a dangerous place. The holiness of the chapel – devoted as it was to the Lady of the Lake through the many pure deeds of Baron Lucus – drained Archaon of his potency. It was like burning in the fires of absolution. His eye burned to open. His flesh burned within his plate. His mind burned with the hallowed nature of the place. Outside Archaon could hear the horror of the battle and the monstrous fury of the slaughterbrute. Archaon felt the ground tremble beneath him at its approach.

Like the rest of the monstrosities that were part of Archaon's horde, the abomination was no longer under Jharkill's control. They were slaves to their own dark and savage natures, with some breaking for a cursed freedom while others turned immediately on those about them, savaging the warriors of Archaon's army and the Curseling's spawn with equal ferocity.

Archaon suddenly felt the seething shadow of long fingers around his arm. He felt himself dragged out through the hole shattered in the brickwork of the chapel and when he could open his eye again, he saw that Drei had pulled him free. The chapel suddenly disappeared before them. Grit and shards of stone pranged off Archaon's plate as the chapel was demolished by the slaughterbrute's monstrous fist. With the darkness of the wraith-warrior's arm still alight from the purity of the place, Drei stepped through the dust and rubble of the flattened chapel to engage the abomination.

As Archaon got to his feet and shook off the draining fury of the chapel's consecration, he was set upon by abominations of his own. The tentacles of a rapidly evolving spawn shot out and whipped about his arm. Cleaving through the slime-dribbling tendrils with the *Slayer of Kings*, Archaon felt the huge talons of a winged serpent attempt to snatch him from his feet. Slipping free and dropping back to the courtyard, Archaon rolled. The scaled serpent beat its wings and landed before him, opening the narrow jaws of its mouth to bury its former master in flame. Running at the winged monstrosity with his shield before him, Archaon turned aside the roaring stream, forcing the inferno back at the twisted serpent. Smashing the length of its snaggle-toothed jaws aside with the shield, Archaon turned and brutally hacked down through its long, snaking neck with his daemonsword.

The winged body of the headless monster had barely flapped back into a courtyard stable before another damned creature was on his back. Archaon felt the grapnel-like claws of a chimera on his back and the teeth of one of its several heads crushing the plate of one arm. With a snarl, Archaon barged the nightmare straight into the stone of the smouldering west wall. He smashed it into the unforgiving surface of the wall again and again until the thing's monstrous neck broke and Archaon could shrug the beast off his back.

Archaon found that although Drei had bought him a few moments to recover, his own delay had cost the wraith-warrior dearly. Jumping, evading, weaving and slicing, the Sword of Chaos had slashed at the abominate slaughterbrute with its pair of bone blades. As Archaon charged towards the rampaging monster himself, the wraith-warrior leapt into the furious wing beats of an evasion. Drei

was too late, however, and the monster's claw cut through the air, back-smashing the wraith-warrior into a shower of shattered bone and the smeared haze of shadow.

Archaon's own progress towards the unstoppable fury of the beast was suddenly checked by the appearance of the Curseling. Vilitch was hunting the Chaos warlord through the destruction of the flaming castle. As the warrior-twin marched indomitably towards Archaon, the grotesque sorcerer blasted the stables apart with a reality-scorching stream of dark lightning.

Knocked from his feet by the explosion, Archaon scrambled to his feet with a roar. Trap or not. Expected or not. He would bring this havoc to an end. Archaon broke into a heavy run. With his plate rhythmically clattering about him, he ran along the west wall of the castle. While the warrior-twin impassively marched on towards what he had been told was his foe, the sorcerer was beside itself with feverish, worm-like excitement. The flames. The transformation of spawn. The death and destruction. The smoke-belching castle was a nexus of ruin and change. Directing its sorcerous staff, Vilitch blasted a stream of energy after the Chaos warlord once more.

Archaon ran, barely a hair's breadth before the dark stream. Skidding down to a stop before the bulging foundations of a tower, Archaon allowed the stone to absorb the remainder of the staff's wrath. Looking up, Archaon saw that the slaughterbrute had followed him, its monstrous collection of eyes following the warlord's swift movements.

As Archaon got up out of the dust, the abomination cornered him, its three tongues lolling in monstrous expectation, the throaty thunder of a growl building in the slaughterbrute's chest. The sound was suddenly eclipsed by the ear-splitting cacophony of splintering brick and shearing stone. Archaon had led the destructive power of the Curseling's staff along the west wall, cutting through the thickness of its base. As Archaon stepped back, the wall toppled inwards, smashing the slaughterbrute into the courtyard floor. As the dust rose and the abomination was buried in buckling masonry, Archaon heard the thing's rumbling growl trail off into a bloody rasp.

Scrambling up the mound of red flesh and masonry, Archaon rose and fell with the exertion of the monster's breathing. Pausing amongst the shattered stone, back spikes and chitinous armour of the beast, Archaon turned the *Slayer of Kings* about in his hand. Settling the tip of the blade between the pulverised rock and the armour of the abomination, Archaon took the weapon by the crossguard and leant down on the blade. The daemonsword slid down through the monster's

flesh. With Archaon on his knees and the raging blade of the *Slayer of Kings* skewered through it, the slaughterbrute knew pain. It roared its agonies, blood flooding out of its trap-jaw maw, its three tongues slapping around like fish in a dried up lake.

Grabbing the hilt, Archaon twisted the daemonblade in the back of the beast, enjoying the torment that howled out of the monster's brute form. Twisting it around again, Archaon felt the monstrosity's heart burst within its cavernous chest. As the abomination breathed its last, Archaon could feel the daemon U'zuhl feeding voraciously on the slaughterbrute's gore-stained soul. He pulled the blood-slick blade of the *Slayer of Kings* from the creature's carcass and allowed it to steam in his hand.

Peering through the thinning dust, Archaon could see his horde still fighting for their lives within the courtyard, Chaos warriors, manfiends and marauders being entwined in the slithering appendages and dragged towards monstrous mouths that were opening in the undulating flesh of the Curseling's spawn. The Curseling itself was being kept busy by Zwei. The wraith-warrior had returned from Archaon's errand, to find the castle in chaos. Slashing both the warrior-twin's ensorcelled blade and the sorcerer's staff aside with expert bladework, Zwei was backing the Twisted Twin up the steps leading to the castle battlements. Skidding down the scree in which the slaughterbrute was buried, Archaon ran for a similar set of stone steps nearby. The Chaos warlord knew that Zwei wouldn't last long against the Curseling.

Running along the blackened battlements and through towers that were still aflame, Archaon gutted and shield-smashed the fire-swathed forms of burning spawn aside, grabbing one by what passed for its legs and tipping it through the crenellations and down the outside of the castle wall.

Running up behind the Curseling, with the slashing fury of Zwei's bone blades forcing the sorcerer back, Archaon suddenly found the staff's headpiece turned about to face him. Knowing that the cursed thing would blast him to spawndom, Archaon turned both the staff and the furious stream aside with his daemonsword, while bringing the edge of his shield down through the shaft of the Ruinous staff. Trapped between the stone of the battlements and the cleaving force of the shield, the sorcerer's staff snapped in two, bleeding a glowing mist about them. Smashing the warrior-twin across the helm with the back of the shield and then back into his face, Archaon saw the stone behind the warrior's skull shatter with the force. The ensorcelled blade came at Archaon but Zwei turned it aside, pinning it against the battlements. Archaon chopped down with

the *Slayer of Kings*, the blade chopping the hand holding the ensorcelled blade clean off at the wrist.

Archaon heard the warrior-twin grunt in pain, spitting blood through the grille of his battered helm. Both blade and hand tumbled away down the castle wall, while Archaon held the Twisted Twin against the wall. The worm-like sorcerer writhed and twisted with an agonising frustration, its needle-toothed mouth contorting around a collection of exotic oaths and curses.

‘Shut the hell up,’ Archaon warned, laying the furnace glow of his daemonblade across the throats of both warrior-twin and his sorcerous brother. Vilitch grew silent, instead revoltingly caressing and calming his injured twin. Archaon watched as, horribly, the skeletal fingers of a new hand eased their way out of the ruined wrist Archaon’s sword had left behind. Threading with veins and then blossoming with tendons and muscle, the hand bled new skin through the rawness of fresh flesh. ‘I’d like to see you do that without your heads,’ Archaon told the Curseling, edging the blood-hungry blade of the *Slayer of Kings* towards their throats. The sorcerer smiled hideously.

‘I’ll trade you truth for truth,’ Archaon told the Curseling. ‘I fulfilled my part of our agreement, including the part where I walk into your feeble trap.’ Archaon grunted and turned his helm, allowing the destruction of the castle in through his eye slits. Even he had to admit that the trap had been anything but feeble but he wasn’t going to tell Vilitch that. ‘Now – the Crown of Domination. You promised me the one who knows where it is. You promised me the whereabouts of such a Ruinous individual.’ Archaon leant in close, pressing his burning blade ever closer. ‘If I hear anything else pass your lips – either set – that isn’t what I just asked for, I swear to the dread Powers, I will slash your throats open.’

‘...the Dreadpeak,’ the Curseling managed, ‘where the Worlds Edge Mountains meet the Northern Wastes.’

‘Very good,’ Archaon said, his blade seething against the sorcerer’s flesh. ‘See what a good team we make. Now, I don’t like surprises. Who waits for me at the Dreadpeak with the knowledge I seek?’

The worm-thing began to laugh.

‘Don’t test me, sorcerer...’

‘Be’lakor...’

‘Be’lakor?’

‘Be’lakor is the Harbinger, He Who Heralds Conquerors... The Bearer of the Crown,’ the Curseling told him, enjoying the warlord’s confusion. ‘The Crown of Domination is Be’lakor’s burden. Only he knows where it can be found.’



Archaon's lip wrinkled into a snarl.

'You know something, Curseling,' he said to the sorcerer. 'I think I'm going to kill you anyway, you monstrous son of a...'

In the radiance of the daemonsword, Archaon didn't notice the sorcerer's own glow. The mist pouring from the shattered staff and gathering at their feet had slithered up about the Curseling. As the Twisted Twin let out a horrid laugh that echoed away to nothing, Archaon lurched forward. The *Slayer of Kings* slipped through the glowing mist that the Curseling had become. With the sorcerer's mocking laughter still bouncing around the inside of his skull and dark magic on the air, Archaon sheathed his mighty blade. Zwei began a search of the battlements.

'Forget it,' he told the wraith-warrior. 'He's gone.'

As the Chaos warlord walked along the battlements, the towers of Brilloinne swirling with flame and staining the heavens black, he looked down on the courtyard. As the Curseling disappeared, his spawn seemed to become disorientated wretches of cursed flesh and monstrous gifts – speared, hacked apart and bludgeoned to death by the dark warriors, bestial champions and savages of Archaon's army. Those monsters that had not fallen in the fighting fled the castle to plague the Marches of Couronne. Gazing out across the battlefield beyond Baron Lucus's castle, Archaon saw that the reinforcements and summoned knights were no more. They had been no match for Archaon's monstrous horde.

Looking beyond the battlefield carnage, the Eye of Sheerian granted Archaon a vision of the standing stones beyond. Great glyph-inscribed tors that he had recovered on his travels and transported on board his hulks. Standing stones that the sorcerer Sheerian had assured him – if placed in dark configurations – could draw soulfire from lands cursed with the spilling of blood. Archaon had ordered Sheerian and a horde of strongback slaves to have the tors erected before the battle and was sure that he had charged the ensorcelled stones with enough dread power, violence and bloodshed to blow open a gateway to hell – which is exactly what Archaon intended to do with them.

Then, beyond the soot and smoke of the battle, the Ruinous stones that stood and the storm that battered the Bretonnian coast, the Eye of Sheerian showed him sails. Hundreds and hundreds of sails in the distance. Greatships and galleons flying flags of different nations. Bretonnia. The Empire. At the head of the armada surging north out of Marienburg, he could see a great, ornate galleon flying the holy banners of the Church of Sigmar – the cultship of the Grand

Theogonist himself.

There was little time. So little time. Archaon turned to Zwei.

‘Tell Sheerian to get the stones back to the fleet,’ Archaon ordered. ‘Tell Captain Darghouth that as soon as the stones and the horde are back on board we haul off immediately and make way. Inform him that a battlefleet seeks to engage him from the south but that we sail north.’

Zwei nodded before spreading his gargoyle’s wings and leaping from the battlements. Archaon watched him swoop across the battlefield, carrying his orders. He thought on the Curseling, who had hoped to do his Dark Master proud and strip Archaon’s corpse of its treasures. He thought on the Bretonnian king and the Emperor, who sat in distant Altdorf, briefed on the terrible danger Archaon presented. He thought on the Grand Theogonist – whoever he now was – still trying to finish what Archaon had started in the Cathedral of Sigmar so many years before. They would fail. All of them. For Archaon sailed north into destiny.



## CHAPTER XVI

*'It was Great Grungni told us of his coming. A calamity come of calamities. Daemons born of the land-shaking storm. A prince among daemons risen of their dread number. A doom of horn, wing and terror, walking tall among the darklings, causing mountains to quake and hearts to thump at his passing. He claims the tainted land as his own but Grungni taught us that it was the land itself that would save us. That the depths would be our salvation. That to dig was to dig for one's life. Some say we did not dig deep enough. Some that we dug too far. That the stone of Karak Zhul was cursed long before any dwarf set foot here or desecrated the darkness with pick and shovel. He has found us. The Dark One comes with his legions to reclaim what is his. I write this in my blood, before it is spilt. So that the sons of Grungni, the underkin of Karak Zhul, might be avenged. For our doom has come and visits his darkness upon our own...'*

*– Dammaz Kron, The Great Book of Grudges*

*The Dreadpeak*

*The Worlds Edge Mountains*  
*Grimnir's Day / Passing of Oaths IC 2519*

The Dreadpeak shook. The Dark Master was here. At last.

Archaon stood atop the mountain, with the peaks of the Worlds Edge Mountains extending south through the darkness, like the jagged, monstrous spine of all the world. It was here that the dwarfs looked north and turned back, with dread in their hearts, naming the Dreadpeak for such cowardly fears. Below the levelled peak of the mountain, they built what some claim to be the long-lost hold of Karak Zhul – of which no son of the mountains speaks, for the horrors committed there at the beginning of time.

Archaon walked, pulling his cloak about his plate. It was cold up in the heights. Not the cold of the Wastes or the southern continent. It was a rawness, stiffening the lungs and chilling to the bone. It had taken months to get here, but as Archaon walked around the great black circle of standing stones – arranged on the flat, levelled summit of the Dreadpeak – he knew the time had come. After nearly a century searching for the Crown of Domination, he would know where to find the last of the treasures, the treasures with which the Dark Gods had tortured him for so long.

The dark armada had fled the civilised lands of the south. A great fleet had been despatched to destroy them. Perhaps beacons had been lit along the Bretonnian coast. Perhaps Baron Lucus had sent word before the Curseling had taken Brilloinne or perhaps it had been the Curseling himself who had sent word of Archaon's coming. For all the Chaos warlord knew, the Grand Theogonist might have his own ways of knowing such things and had despatched his magnificent cultship at the head of a hastily arranged armada of warships – both Imperial and Bretonnian – to destroy, in Archaon, a common threat. Archaon would not be drawn into such an engagement, however. He was a warlord of Chaos – he did not assume formations and fight battles on land or sea according to long-held traditions or the rules of titled men. He had not assembled an apocalyptic army to see them sent to the bottom of the ocean in cowardly cannonfire.

Hauling off with Archaon's monstrous horde barely aboard and the great black tors loaded, the Cloven Captain took the *Perdición* with the storms that seemed to accompany Archaon wherever he went. Breaking out of the gulf and out into the Sea of Claws – where the longships of northmen and raiders gave them a wide berth – Archaon ordered the dark armada north, up and around the

treacherous coast of Norsca. The fleet had followed them. Whoever had been charged with his destruction would not return to the Empire with news that the doom of man had slipped out of their grasp once more. Some flesh-purifying high priest or buffoon admiral, with more titles than sense, would not be able to accept the simplicity of their quarry refusing their offer of an engagement and so had foolishly followed him into open waters, where his numbers counted for something. Despite entreaties from Captain Darghouth, Archaon still refused to engage the armada that was chasing him into the north.

For weeks he watched their bobbing lanterns, enjoying the misery endured by the fearful crew and officers of high-walled galleons, fat greatships of the Imperial fleet and the storm-smashed wolfships and cultships that accompanied them. As frost crept through the creaking timbers and dusted rigging, and the Sea of Claws became the Sea of Chaos, Archaon felt the uncertainty of their pursuers. Unlike his own armada, the ships striking out from Marienburg were not outfitted for such a voyage. Food and water would be running low and the clothing miserably unsuitable for such sharp climes. Still the armada crashed on through the high seas and perverse gales that followed in the wake of Archaon's storm-blessed fleet.

Then it happened. A maelstrom not of Archaon's making tore out of the north – no doubt some horror begotten by the Wastes. The Cloven Captain had an instinct for such dark storms and had requested that the *Perdición* lead the armada into the more sheltered waters of the Serrated Shore, a curved peninsula that saved the dark armada from the worst the storm had to offer. The following fleet were not so fortunate. While Archaon watched in silent satisfaction and the monstrous hordes roared their jubilation from the decks of their ships, the vessels of their pursuers were battered by the unrelenting storm, smashed and wrecked upon the broken lands of the Vestligkyst and the daggered fjords of the Serrated Coast. Despite requests from his own champions to hunt down the wrecked survivors, Archaon ordered the armada onwards, leaving the Sigmarite priests, sailors and officer-noblemen to the bloodthirsty tribes of the Graelings that haunted the coast.

The Sea of Chaos became the Kraken Sea. The Kraken Sea became the Frozen Sea, where Archaon had his sorcerers cut a path through the cracking, creaking pack ice. Finally, when the ice would allow no further passage south-east and the vessels of Archaon's mighty armada became a fleet of frozen remnants, stuck in the warped, white desolation of waters bordering the Chaos Wastes, he called for anchors to be dropped. Disembarking his monstrous army and their mounts, he

had the horde craft beast-hauled sleds for his siege engines and dark stone tors. Chopping up the vessels of the fleet to provide firewood, Archaon struck out across the ice on Dorghar, leading the monstrous expanse of his horde on across the pack ice and back onto dry land, heading for the Dreadpeak – the level-topped mountain that marked the dire point where the Worlds Edge Mountains met the Ruinous Wastes.

It had taken days to get the black, sigil-etched stones up the mountainside. Despite being levelled for the minerals blessing its peak, the Dreadpeak still cast its colossal shadow across the lesser peaks that extended south with the range. It had taken even longer to erect the stones and make dark preparations for their use. A great fire was built on the flattened summit, at the centre of the standing stones. Between what Archaon had learned from the daemon *Z'guhl* about the drawing and binding of his daemoniac kindred to the *Slayer of Kings* and Khezula Sheerian's ancient knowledge of otherworldly summonings – the sorcerer having been summoned himself in such a fashion – Archaon felt ready. Despite his monstrous flesh being a living lie, the Curseling's tongues had spoken true. There was an undeniable darkness to the Dreadpeak. Though no one could know and the dwarfs of the Worlds Edge Mountains spoke not of it, it did feel as if something terrible had unfolded deep beneath the mountain. Perhaps the legendary long-lost hold of Karak Zhul had been here and perhaps it had been here that the daemon legions and their dark prince stalked the dawn of the world and massacred the mountain kin. There was definitely a weakening here. A flaw in the darkness. A chink in the mountainous armour of the world.

'It's time, master,' Sheerian rasped in the thin air. The sorcerer was but a silhouette against the raging fire that lit up the abyssal blackness of the night sky. About the perimeter of the stones, Archaon saw his host of dark sorcerers, all acting under the guidance of Sheerian in the preparations to be made.

Looking out over the edge of the mountain peak, Archaon could see his colossal army camped out in the valleys below. Their camp fires were a rash that spread far between the crooked mountains like a disease or affliction of all the world. Archaon had even sent the strongbacks, spawn and champions that had seen the dark tors to the Dreadpeak back down the mountain. He had left the misshapen Vier to watch over the deathly Giselle, in the monstrous ribcage of her fur-lined wagon-sled. A dark delegation of trusted warlords, chieftains and armoured champions had requested to be present on the mountain – for Archaon's protection, if nothing else – but he denied them, selecting only Eins and Zwei, Sheerian and his sorcerers for company. The daemon steed Dorghar

stamped at the rock of the mountain nearby, snorting plumes of its furnace-hot breath into the reedy freeze of the heights.

‘Do you think it will be enough?’ Archaon asked the sorcerer.

‘We are going fishing in the abyss, my lord,’ Sheerian answered. ‘We have the tools. We have the words. We have princely incantations and the fire of soul-thousands to lure the Dark Master in. Quite the contrary, do not be surprised if we land and bind something worse than Be’lakor.’

‘There is nothing worse than Be’lakor,’ Archaon told the sorcerer. ‘You have the blade?’

The daemon sorcerer handed him the short blade of the sword the wraith-warriors had recovered from the caves below the mountain. The Swords of Chaos indicated that there was no evidence that the Dreadpeak lay upon the mines and holds of Karak Zhul but Archaon knew it in his bones. The dread darkness of the place did not lie. The recovered weapon had been smashed from the grip of a skeleton. It was a dwarf blade, black and serrated with age but made of meteoric iron. Still impossibly strong, Archaon hoped that it had belonged to some lowly sentry rather than a warrior king. Some dwarf who had lost his life in the infernal massacre. An ignominious prison, suitable for the prince that led such slaughter.

Archaon walked out into the space between the towering black tors. The heat from the colossal fire raged and turned the metal of his cursed plate to a flesh-scorching affliction. About him the sigils of the standing stones glowed and smoked with a searing balelight – the soulfire of those slain by Archaon and his horde within their configuration. Standing between them, Archaon felt the world-splitting power crackling at the heart of the nexus. The instability of the rock beneath his boots, the heat from the fire and the air in his lungs. The Ruinous realm drawn up out of the beyond, like the black silt coating the bottom of a disturbed tarn, spuming up through the crystal waters and bleaching the surface with its darkness.

He stabbed the ancient dwarf blade into the rocky earth before the fire. Lifting his helm he spat on the blade, watching the spittle sizzle on metal that had already become uncomfortably hot before the raging fire. Lowering his horned helm, Archaon walked back towards Sheerian.

‘Begin the incantations,’ he ordered.

The sorcerer’s milky eyes fluttered shut. Dark words in a dark tongue proceeded from his cracked lips, echoed by the dread sorcerers standing at the perimeter, between each of the black tor stones.

Archaon waited. And waited. The ritual proceeded long into the night, with sorcerous incantations called like a chorus into the terrifying emptiness of the night sky. The fire raged eternal and the stones glowed with an eerie darkness. Archaon stood with his arms folded and his cloak gathered about him, the fingers of his gauntlet tapping the hilt of the *Slayer of Kings*. Dorghar walked up and down, snorting its infernal impatience.

The incantations grew suddenly louder. Archaon heard the black tors creak and groan. Grit began to bounce about the rocky mountain floor. The flames boomed, blasting out with raging balls of blinding fury, before reaching higher and higher into the black sky. The glowing sigils of the standing stones seemed to melt down the sides of the tors before searing into the rock of the mountaintop. Suddenly the flames went out. Thunder rolled across the sky. Silent flashes of lightning criss-crossed the heavens. When the flames returned, with explosive force, they were lustrous black, like an inferno of raging oil. The midnight flames writhed, twisted and contorted into a shape Archaon recognised. Wings. Horns. A muscular torso and arms. The slash of a tail and the abyssal ugliness of a daemoniac face. Be'lakor. The Dark Master. Straining. Thrashing. Clawing up through his own flaming form. The sorcerer Sheerian had him.

Archaon stepped forward. There were several Be'lakors now. All fighting to be free of the summoning's all but irresistible force. Fearful of the iron prison that awaited the daemon in the form of the ancient dwarf sword. Fifty Be'lakors. A hundred.

'Daemon!' Archaon called through the boom of the oily black inferno. As the fiery phantasms raged, one nightmare shape flickered to stillness. It looked at Archaon, seeming to see him for the first time. 'Dark Prince. My father-in-shadow. Hear me...'

*I can hear you*, the daemon said, its slick composure at odds with the thousands of other frenzied Be'lakors that fought to be free of the daemon-trap. The Dark Master was both storm and infernal serenity, living the existential agonies of semi-realisation.

*I can see you. I feel your dark presence in this miserable world. I smell your fear and taste of your bitter despair. Archaon, who would be Everchosen. Archaon, who will herald nothing more than his own disastrous doom.*

'Enough of that, I think,' Archaon told the daemon prince. 'If this flesh is destined to fail, then you fail with it. You tell me what I need to hear, like all fathers to their sons. Spare me, wretched shadow. There is but one thing I want – and will ever want – from you. You are the Herald. You are the Bearer. You, and



only you, know where the unholy Crown of Domination can be found: Ruinous right of the chosen, distinction of infernal sovereignty in this world and those never to follow. Tell me, daemon, where can the final treasure of Chaos be found?’

*Archaon...*

‘Yes?’

*Archaon, Archaon, Archaon. How can a man who has travelled so far, who has lived the lives you have, who has tasted eternity, not understand the nature of his fate?*

‘Explain it to me,’ Archaon ordered. ‘While you still can.’

*Your existence is a history of nevers. A madness repeated, falling from the lips of a lunatic. An echo ebbing away to cavernous silence. You are the ghost that has forgotten itself. The shadow passed. Your flesh only lives to know the true darkness that awaits it – once your soul plagues it no more.*

‘Could the abomination be more cryptic?’ Archaon asked.

*Like the wayward son, you have pulled away, Be’lakor told him. You have defied your father’s wishes, his hopes for your future. You have forged what you have told yourself to be your own path – yet here you are begging for your father-in-shadow once more.*

‘Begging?’ Archaon snarled. ‘You mistake asking for telling, daemon. Entreaty for interrogation. Invitation for imprisonment. Words don’t seem to work on the daemon. Show the wretched thing.’

At Archaon’s order, Sheerian and the dark sorcerers gathered about the circle of stones tightened their hold on Be’lakor. The daemon roared, joining the thousands of Be’lakors already raging against their spiritual bonds. The daemon’s shadowform became stretched and contorted. The blade before it rattled in the ground, drawing the daemon in – like the black, iron doors of an eternal prison thrown open wide. Be’lakor’s torments sent quakes through both the mountain and sky. The agonies of instability. Infernal fears of imprisonment. Bolts of indescribable energy snapped between the meteoric iron of the ancient blade and the daemon prince Archaon wished to consign to it. The blade glowed to unruly darkness while the great black fire began to die with Be’lakor’s hold on the beyond, on the material world, on himself.

‘Had enough, daemon prince?’ Archaon put to his hated father-in-shadow. ‘I am Archaon. My fate is my own. My decisions my own. My existence my own – and I have chosen the doom of all for that existence. I shall trap you in ancient iron, to spend forever in an unworthy blade, wielded by those you consigned to

everlasting darkness in this dreadful place. I shall then take this blade – this prison – out to the ocean and drop you into the deepest waters I can find: lost for eternity in the sands of a dark, watery desert with only carcass-picking crabs for company.

*YOU WILL NEVER...*

‘...find the last treasure of Chaos?’ Archaon said as the Dark Master fluxed and raged, the pull of the ancient iron irresistible. ‘I’ll take my chances. At least I will spend my eternity free to pursue such a destiny. You will not, my father-in-shadow. Besides, the Dark Gods are fickle. Perhaps the next Everchosen of Chaos will be crowned without lowly Be’lakor. After thousands of years, perhaps the Ruinous Powers desire a change. At least one of them does. Oh how he would like to see your failure complete. A world’s end without Be’lakor to usher it in...’

*ARCHAON!*

‘Tell me...’ Archaon hissed at the dissipating daemon. ‘Tell me now.’

*THE CROWN WAITS...*

‘Yes...’

*IN THE FIRST SHRINE OF CHAOS—*

‘Where, daemon?’ Archaon roared.

*WHERE THE FIRST HUMAN SOUL WAS BARTERED TO THE DARK GODS...*

‘Your soul, daemon prince,’ Archaon said. ‘Where?’

*YOU ARE UNWORTHY.*

‘Where?’ Archaon bellowed back at the raging daemon.

*YOU... WILL... NEVER...*

‘Wear the crown?’ Archaon completed for the daemon. ‘Then neither will you! Do it,’ Archaon commanded.

‘But, master—’ Sheerian said.

‘Show this abomination the eternity of iron,’ Archaon roared. Be’lakor roared. The skies split asunder. Thunder rolled backwards through the heavens. The dwarf blade quivered to a sonorous shriek, glowing with Be’lakor’s darkness. The flames boomed and twisted. Dark energies sank a dread chorus, streaming between the Ruinous tors and through the monstrous fire. Thousands of screaming Be’lakors became hundreds. Hundreds became one – a mighty phantasm in flame, clawing, slashing his tail, flapping his wings and tossing the grotesque form of his horned head from side to side, his shrieks, oaths and daemon curses melting the sky.

‘Yes!’ Archaon roared. ‘Yes! Know, monster, what it is to be bound by destiny and a prisoner to your fate.’

Suddenly – with Archaon’s monstrous jubilation still echoing about the Dreadpeak – the daemon prince was gone. The oily emptiness of the inferno died. The black, age-eaten blade quivered and glowed with Be’lakor’s darkness. Dread energies arced from stone to steaming sword. No one spoke. Thunder faded. The skies flashed with silent lightning and black rain fell on the mountain.

‘Master, I...’ Khezula Sheerian began but Archaon brought up a single, armoured finger.

The sword’s quiverings had built to an imperceptible vibration. Beneath Archaon’s boots the Dreadpeak trembled. Cracks felt their way from the daemon-bound blade, through the flat stone of the flattened peak. They creaked and sheared their way through the rock, reaching out to a number of standing stones and creating an eight-point star of ruin. Sheerian and his sorcerers suddenly grabbed for their ears. Archaon felt the excruciating vibration of the ancient blade grow to a mind-splitting shriek. As he screwed his eye shut and grabbed his helm in pain, he heard his father-in-shadow’s voice.

Words of monstrous dread and abyssal determination. Both *No...* And *Yesssss...* The ancient iron of Karak Zhul failed. The sword shattered. Shards of wicked iron blasted out in all directions. Sudden. Shocking. Guided by some unholy force. The sorcerers crumbled, slivers of infernal iron protruding from hoods, faces and chests.

Archaon turned to Khezula Sheerian. The sorcerer who had seen so much – with his own misted eyes and the sorcerous Eye that now resided in Archaon’s helm – now had two barbed slivers of black metal embedded in his sockets. He tried to say something. Perhaps to Archaon. Perhaps to entreat his warped god. Falling forward on his bony knees, the sorcerer drizzled away to otherworldly flame that snaked across the stone floor and down the mountain. There was nothing left of the sorcerer who had served Archaon so long with his twisted counsel. The two slivers of iron plinked to the floor.

As the metal began to dance on the flat stone of the mountaintop and the freedom of Be’lakor’s wrath bled through the rock, Archaon looked down at his own body. A serrated shard of the blade had stabbed straight through his cursed plate, through his stomach, above the hip, and out the back of his armour. His insides burned where the wicked sliver sat, still glowing with the failed containment of the daemon prince. The mountain was shaking with Be’lakor’s wrath. The standing stones were rocking back and forth, then fell forward in

unison, smashing through the cracked rock of the fire-scorched summit, creating a cavernous sink hole in the top of the trembling mountain. As the summit collapsed in on itself, Eins and Zwei surged for the sky, their wings beating with feverish urgency. Dorghar also leapt from the mountain, the black stallion sprouting black, leathery wings of its own to escape the thunderous calamity.

The rock tumbled away beneath Archaon's feet. He twisted around but the movement was agony with the shard skewered through the side of his gut. His right leg felt wet with blood pouring down from the wound. Archaon clawed at the stone behind him but it simply crumbled away, dragged down with the Chaos warlord by a dark force greater than gravity. A lightless chasm opened up like a monstrous mouth to swallow him whole. As the world became a receding vision, like an eye clouding to unconsciousness, Archaon fell. Rubble tumbled with him. The mountain seemed to roar with Be'lakor's voice. Archaon flailed. He plummeted through the darkness, losing his sense of direction. Seeming to accelerate through the abyssal pit that had opened up through the mountain and its foundations. His vision, his darksight and the sorcerous power of the Eye combined to form a kaleidoscope of shadow overlaying shadow. An oblique blackness that deepened to an impossible intensity. Up and down, speed and space; these concepts became meaningless as Archaon plunged through the darkling abyss. All he knew was his father's voice echoing through oblivion. His earlier words thundering about him.

*THE CROWN WAITS...*

*...IN THE FIRST SHRINE OF CHAOS—*

*WHERE THE FIRST HUMAN SOUL WAS BARTERED TO THE DARK  
GODS...*

Then Archaon knew.

*...HERE.*



## CHAPTER XVII

*'What good are souls if they are not to be sold?'*

– Anonymous

*The Dreadpeak  
The Worlds Edge Mountains  
Grimnir's Day / Passing of Oaths IC 2519*

Archaon hit stone. The warlord screamed, although he had not meant to. The impact was bone-shattering enough and would have broken him up into tiny pieces inside were it not for the protection of his hell-forged plate and the wyrdstone that threaded its way through his skeleton. The shard of iron hit the ground at an agonising angle, however, tearing through his insides. Moaning, Archaon scabbled slowly around, holding his plate-punctured side. Opening his eye he saw nothing but darkness. Absolute. Like pitch poured into his mind. The Eye of Sheerian showed only more of the same. His darksight sizzled with the dank evil of the abyssal shrine. Turning his head, Archaon could see the faint shadows created by blasphemous runes inscribed in the stone of some kind of ancient gate.

Archaon felt the cracks created by his impact spread beneath him. The ancient stone gate to the First Shrine of Chaos disintegrated beneath him. Archaon gritted his teeth against the pain and the torment to come. With the cacophonous crash of the gate giving way, Archaon was falling once more amongst fragments of cursed stone.

Archaon tumbled through the darkest night of his soul. He had walked the polluted Wastes of the world. He had even navigated the empty depths of hell – an otherworldly Realm of Chaos, haunted by daemons and dread entities. Here, however, in a darkness to end all darkness, Archaon felt as if he were falling through the benighted pit-pupil in the eye of a dark god. All Dark Gods. As he saw them, they saw him. He was saturated in the bleak ruination of the collective gaze. He was tempered like a blade, moving between the furnace fires of their abominate love and ice waters of their need, stained black with the cruelty of iron. Phantasmic faces raged about Archaon in the blackness. The faces of men and beasts he had killed. Dark champions he had defeated. Monsters he had destroyed. Daemons he had obliterated from existence. All of them. Roaring for his soul.

Before long, his abyssal drop – accelerating faster and faster through the dark below the world – passed through the depths of an ocean of innocents. The men, women and children who would have to die in the End Times to come. A black, constellation-brimming sky of screaming faces, begging for Archaon's mercy. As he fell, Archaon could read the weakness of the world in them all. Given the eternity they craved, such simple souls would fall prey to the wrath, the despair, the hopes and desires that governed their polluted lives. It burst Archaon's heart and scarred his soul to know it, but Archaon came to understand – in the dreadful darkness – that these mortals had to die in order for the Dark Gods and the monstrous, predatory intelligences of the beyond to soul-starve to inexistence. That was what he was he–

Archaon struck the pit floor. The Chaos warlord roared as his plate warped about his smashed body. The shard of iron was hammered back through his gut, the metal twisting through him like a bent and serrated stake. A horn on his helm shattered and one entire side of his suit was battered flat out of shape. Moaning and rolling over onto his back, he felt for the sword splinter. Grasping for it in the darkness behind his eyelid, he gripped it with both gauntlets. Counting silently to himself, Archaon tore the daemon-shattered metal out of him. Again he bellowed. He coughed. He breathed his ragged breaths into oblivion. He opened his agony-clenched eye. His vision acclimatised to the foetid gloom.

There was a miserable light but he couldn't tell where it was coming from. He didn't care. Other senses were being overwhelmed.

As he lay there he was struck by the smell. His laboured breaths took the indescribable feculence of the stench deep into his lungs. He tore off his helm by its remaining horn, gagging for something he could breathe. He retched and gushed blood over the body next to him. He was not alone. There were bodies. So many bodies. Gods, the smell. Rot and pestilence hung over the mound of suffering like a miasma. The gloom was thick with groans, pleading and madness. Insects ran rampant through the plaguescape of diseased forms. Flesh-eating beetles. Fat centipedes. A droning blanket of flies. Archaon tried to stand. Bones broke beneath his boots, leading to more wails of torment. Gangrenous limbs reached out for him. Leprous hands missing fingers scraped at his plate. He pulled his legs away from such pitiless suffering and clambered with difficulty across the diseased mound. Victims had little control over their illness-ravaged bodies – vomiting and making a mess of themselves and those about them. Pox-erupting fevers sent sufferers into a delirium of madness and the twilight was haunted by the laughter of the doomed. People picked rancid flesh from their own bones while the bodies of others bloomed with moulds and fungi that cared not if the nutrient-rich mound beneath was alive or dead.

As Archaon trudged across the never-ending mire of diseased bodies he felt forever pass in the darkness about him. These were the dead and dying he had left in his bloody wake. The millions he would maim and slaughter in the apocalyptic days to come. The famine and disease that would follow in his footsteps. As he strode, climbed and tumbled through the suffering, the armour of Morkar began to creak about Archaon's bones. Some kind of otherworldly corrosion reached through the browning metal. Plates sheared off him, falling into the bodies below. The pus-riddled. The infested. Those ripe with myriad corruptions. Those screaming for help that would never come, grabbing one another for rank comfort. The dead and quietly rotting.

With the rusted armour falling away in a red dust, all else about him disintegrated with the inflicted years. Cloak. Furs. Scabbard. Weapons. The treasures of Chaos. Like a madman – naked and splattered with the filth of the dead and the dying – Archaon clambered and crawled through the grasping limbs and the softening bodies. It was like a gloomy moor. Wet. Stinking. Undulating. Cloaked in a fog of flies and contagion. Before long the laughter became Archaon's own. A dark chuckle. The rasp of laughter. The boom of jubilant doom. The horror of death became a disgusting celebration of life – rich,

ripe and overpowering. It started with the ragged wound in his side. It was no longer bleeding. Now it burned with infections and stank of the rot worming its way through his insides. Archaon's skin began to blister. Rashes spread, competing for flesh to ravage. Sores popped and wept down his body. Black blood and pus dribbled from his eyes, ears, nose and mouth in a constant and sickening stream. Maggots and worse squirmed through his flesh. Bits of Archaon fell away. Abandoned. Forgotten. Growths blossomed about his failing innards. He bloated and burst before his skin became a leathery cape thrown over the sharpness of his bones. Even as this withered away to mouldy dust from his stone-threaded skeleton, Archaon stalked on across the benighted landscape of suffering, rot and doom.

There was sick laughter still, but it was not Archaon's own. He was but bone and the indomitable force of will that held him together. The boom of dark mirth quaked through him. With every laugh from cavernous, froth-corrupted lungs, the moaning, fearful grasping and begging became frenzied and intense. The glee of a dark god passed like wet thunder through the realm of suffering – at once the call of a million crows, the chitter of feasting insects, the wailing of widows, the frustration and fury of approaching death and the drone of bells over gravestones. As the laughter shook the very darkness about Archaon, bones began to fall from his frame. His skeleton – that had trudged so far through the endless suffering – began to crumble. His browning bones slipped down through the sea of bodies. He went under, reaching, clawing with skeletal hands as he was dragged down through the writhings of the diseased, the ripeness of the dying and the ancient dust of the long dead.

Archaon felt the clean darkness whoosh about him as he tumbled through the hell of the abyssal shrine. He barely remembered what it was to have flesh. To feel anything but doom. He was falling for so long through the soothing gloom that Archaon fell asleep. When he awoke, he was surrounded by bodies once more. Bodies falling with him. They reached out for him but not in fear, dread or pain. The blackness ached with need and temptation. As he rolled, thrashed and tumbled through the swarm of bodies he saw that they were all the same. A desire from the darkness of his memory. The bodies all belonged to Giselle. A thousand Giselles, sharing the terror and excitement of the fall. Soon there were so many bodies about him – a swarm of flesh – that he could not tell in which direction he was falling or if he still was at all. Giselle, the fledgling Sigmarite sister, bright eyed and unknowing. Giselle the prisoner, thin-lipped and hate-filled of eye. Giselle the lover, her mind and body lost in the madness of the



Wastes and the insanity that was Archaon. Giselle, the living corpse, the mouthless horror of emaciation and silence, staring reproach.

Archaon roasted in the fires of the pure flame. An inferno of writhing flesh that burned Archaon with his own damnation. Like a fireball of flesh and dark desires, Archaon fell through a hell of his own making. Archaon could not tell his flesh from Giselle's. One body from another. They were fused in a spidery arrangement of entwining limbs and twisting torsos. Their hearts thudded as one – in horrible unity through the blackness – like that beating beneath the single breast of a godly Prince of Impossible Pleasures.

Suddenly there was an impact. Hard. Shocking. The clarity was soul-scouring. Bodies broke. Giselle's died. The aching fusion of flesh was torn from Archaon with a glass-slicing precision. Archaon was himself once more. He had endured... once more. Flailing down through the chasmic pit of the First Shrine, accelerating, falling deeper into darkness, Archaon had stuck something. Fragments of it fell about him. Like a crystal wall that his descent had shattered into myriad pieces, Archaon saw himself reflected in the innumerable facets of innumerable shards. Splinters showered about him like rain, creating a flux of impossible colours. In the reflection of each razored surface Archaon beheld Archaon. Archaon who was. Who had been. Who never would be. A mewling infant. An eager young boy. A young man in the making. A warrior, proud and true. A million darknid interpretations of Archaon. The savage. The Ruinous warrior lost on his path. The exalted champion fighting for each and every dark god. Archaon the defeated. Archaon the dead. Archaon the forgotten. Archaons instead. The warlord. The Everchosen. Lord of the Apocalypse. Archaon – end... of... All. Lives all lived in his endless, tumbling descent. A labyrinth of lifetimes. A mind fit to break, tortured by raw possibility and knowing, the endlessness of existence. Archaon screamed for his one life. His single determination. An end to everything known and unknown. A silent, empty darkness for the world and the realms beyond it. He closed his eye for the length of a boundless moment and it was gone.

Archaon hit water. It was like plummeting into rock. If it hadn't been for the wyrdstone that riddled his bones and skull, the impact alone would have smashed him into oblivion. He thundered down into the depths. He could see nothing, but the waters about him were thick, rich and warm. Eventually the force of his descent slowed and Archaon kicked for the surface. As the viscous darkness of the deep met the infernal gloom, Archaon tasted copper. Spitting his last breath, which exploded from his lungs at the surface, Archaon found that he

was treading blood in a sea of gore. Like flowing magma the blood burned in patches, lighting the abyssal blackness with a hellish glow. Looking about, Archaon saw that predators of sweeping horned head, serrated dorsal sails and whipping tails cut through the bloody waters. Swimming, Archaon made his way to an archipelago of bone. Colossal ribcages of monstrous beasts and daemons. Small islands of shattered bone and piled skulls, up which the tides of gore washed. Storms of flame danced, seethed and churned across the surface of the red sea, sizzling in the never-ending drizzle of blood spilled from the darkness above.

Archaon hauled himself up through the bones of a monstrous ribcage, perching on a breastbone as the horrors on the blood below sloshed and thrashed to a frenzy. He sat there like a savage, his body dipped in drying blood. Then. Bubbles in the blood. A few at first. Building to a spuming maelstrom of gore. Archaon stood up on the ribcage, attempting to get a better look at the abomination rising from the bloody depths.

It was huge. Monstrous horns. Wings that showered gore from torn membranes of their leathery, outstretched surface. A mountain of red muscle, fused with black-bronze chains and great spiked plate. The bottomless bloodthirsting fury of some great daemon, hunched in its bestial rage. It bellowed its abyssal ire, the grotesqueness of its face stretched back over its colossal, fang-crowded jaws. The force of its territorial roar knocked Archaon from his perch and into the bloody waters. Predatory fiends surged for him with their daggered jaws. Grabbing one around the neck, Archaon dragged it up the shoreline of skulls, pummeling the creature to death. Another surged up the bank, snapping ferociously at Archaon, but the Chaos warlord stamped down on its head with a heel, killing the creature outright.

As he stood there, Archaon found that the monstrous Bloodthirster bellowed still. The slickness of blood dribbled away from Archaon's muscular frame. Firestorms died and skulls rolled back up the shore of the island. The abyssal beast was power incarnate. Violence. Murderous rage as an elemental force. Something about being in the monster's presence brought Archaon back to who he was. A butcher of innumerable deserving foes. A survivor of countless monstrous encounters. A nightmare born of blood. Tested across eternity. He had the dark intelligence of a great warrior, the Ruinous blessings of abominate gods and the death-dealing experience of lifetimes lived and lost.

The great daemon brought its gargantuan arms out of the sea of blood. In one he clutched a bronze battle axe that glowed with the darkness of its infernal

craft. In the other was the length of a titanic whip that dribbled flame into the gore.

‘Come on!’ Archaon roared at the daemonic embodiment of his doom. The monster didn’t need any further encouragement. Its arm came up, the searing whip snapped up and around, sizzling arcs of blood from its surface. Archaon turned and ran.

The whip slashed the island to a storm of shattered skull. The daemon stomped its cloven path through the shallow sea of blood. As Archaon leapt for the spine of a long-butchered beast and ran along its length, the Bloodthirster smashed through the titanic, skeletal remains with its great axe. Archaon was once more on the skull-crunching shores of a beach. The archipelago seemed to stretch forever through the darkness and the crashing blood of the sanguine sea. Archaon could only hope it did. He ran. He ran as fast as he could. When he couldn’t run he swam through the rich gore. From island to bone island. Skull mound to mound. Through the ribcages of abyssal behemoths and along the bones of great slain daemons. The Bloodthirster followed like a storm of brass and blood. It smashed through skeletons, decimated isles of bone and colossal skulls that sat in the shallows like standing stones.

Archaon ran on. He could not afford to stop. The blade edge of the huge axe had been sharpened on the Blood God’s flinty heart. It hungered for Archaon’s blood. In the dull reflection of the bronze blade the Chaos warrior had died a thousand times – cleaved clean in half, smashed to oblivion in a fountain of skull and splintered bone, his head whooshed from his body in a glorious splatter of trailing gore. Each flesh-mulching, spine-shearing, blood-storming ordeal of a death Archaon had avoided by the skin of his imperilled soul. The daemon was an indefatigable force of fury with an abyssal appetite for destruction. And impossibly, Archaon was tiring it. Even such an abominate entity had limitations. The inferno that burned with twice the ferocity could only afford to burn half as long and through an endless series of frustrations, in which the great daemon had smashed the skull archipelago to splinters, Archaon had slowed the monstrosity with its own hate-fuelled exertions.

Crunching to a halt in the skulls, Archaon came to a stop. He was no less exhausted. His mind hurt with split-second evasions and strategies. His legs burned from running. His arms from swimming. His chest from breathing, rising up and down as he stood still on the island. He turned and ran straight back at the storming daemon blasting its way through bone and blood. The abomination was far from spent. It was surprised by Archaon’s changing tactic, however, and its

arms swung with the infernal burn of an eternity of last efforts.

Archaon skidded down across the skulls. The axe descended with fury and savage precision. For the ghost of a moment, Archaon saw his blade-cleaved body – split-splattered from temple to toe – in the bronze reflection of the blade. The axe missed, sending skulls rocketing away in all directions. As the great daemon brought up the weapon it found that Archaon was gone. The abominate entity tore its horned head around this way and that. It kicked at the skull shore with its colossal hoof. It peered at the bloody shallows with its tiny, rage-crackling eyes. It looked about at the gore-misted darkness above. Archaon was nowhere. The great daemon unleashed an abyss-trembling roar. The thing had never known such affliction.

Archaon slid down from the pitted bronze of the axe haft. As the blade had buried itself in the skull mound, the Chaos warrior had clutched the thick haft and travelled back with it above the island of bone. As the colossal daemon searched and bellowed, Archaon leapt for the chains and spikes rearing from the embedded plate of the monster's back, riding out the abomination's hellish fury. There Archaon waited. And waited. He held tight to the armoured spikes as the beast went mad, cleaving the dark realm of its nightmare existence to ruin.

Then, as the thing seemed to have no more monstrous rage to give, Archaon hauled himself up the beast's hunched red back and boxed it in a ragged ear. The response was bloodcurdling and instantaneous. The great daemon was insane with its own ire. It swung its colossal axe about it, trying to butcher its tiny foe – who seemed insultingly close yet impossible to hit. As Archaon clambered back and forth through the back spikes, the bronze axe smashed and sparked off the embedded armour. Archaon felt the fury of the blade pass by and hung one-handed from a spike as the axe blade bit deep into the daemon's own back. The monstrosity didn't seem to even notice. Pulling himself back up, Archaon held on tight as the abomination stamped through the bloody shallows to shake him free. Archaon would not be unseated, however, riding the great daemon like one of the lost monstrosities of his horde. Again the axe blade came. Again and again. Smashing spikes from the daemon's back and visiting monstrous wounds on itself in the dwindling fires of its fury.

Finally. With the huge bronze axe still buried in its hunched and mutilated back, the Blood God's greater daemon crashed forward into the skulls of a partially demolished island. Archaon rode up and down on the daemon's exertions. The beast was done. It had visited a monstrous fury upon itself and inflicted grievous wounds no being was meant to survive. It crawled up the shore

before falling on its muscle-bound arms and the length of its extinguished whip.

Leaping down from the monster's back, Archaon grabbed the tapering end of the whip and heaved it up and around the daemon's monstrously thick neck. All the while the devastated abomination watched him through the scorched orb of a single eye – the other having burst from its frenzied efforts to acquire the Chaos warlord. Sliding the tip of the whip beneath the great daemon's neck, Archaon created an improvised noose. Grabbing the weapon with both hands, Archaon heaved. He heaved for all he was and was going to be. The great Bloodthirster could barely heave its decimated red carcass from the beach of bone but managed to claw at the whip cutting across its throat.

Now it was Archaon's turn to bellow and roar. He hauled at the whip, the muscles of his arms and chest bulging, his bones braced to break. He strained for his survival. For victory. For destiny. As the great daemon breathed its last, its own skull crashing to the shore and its claws falling limply away, Archaon released the whip. He fell backwards into skulls and the blood that lapped up the shore. As he breathed, ached, found his way back from the insanity of his trials, the hellfire about the archipelago died. All was darkness. The clink of skulls and the slosh of blood faded away.

Torches suddenly whooshed to fiery life. Archaon squinted. He was in the depths of the shrine. The First Shrine of Chaos. A place of terrible evil that had scorched the stone black with its malevolent significance. That had damned the dwarfs of Karak Zhul to destruction. That had been the site of man's first fall to darkness. It was here that the Ruinous Powers had first bestowed their blessings on the first mortal pledged to Chaos. A dread, primordial savage of strength and cunning, who had earned immortality and a place at the Dark Gods' side as the first daemon prince.

Archaon got to his feet. He had completed the Ruinous trials as he had begun them. Decked in the hell-forged plate of Morkar, with the *Slayer of Kings* hanging from his belt in its scabbard and the Eye of Sheerian bleeding its balelight from his horned helm. Before him, in the tiny chamber, was a black, stone throne – cracked and ancient – the carved symbols and sigils of the Chaos Pantheon all but worn away by time. The torches crackled either side of the throne. In it sat a skeleton. A former mighty champion of Chaos. The bones of the warlord were warped and spiked with the fell gifts of the gods. On his head sat a simple band of black gold, with its eight points stabbing inwards through the champion's skull. The Crown of Domination. Treasure of the Ruinous Powers, bequeathed to the Everchosen of Chaos and Lord of the End Times to

come. Archaon paused for a moment before its reverence and the dread memory of his predecessor.

Archaon clenched a gauntlet and smashed the skull, with all the unceremonious force he could muster. Shaking embedded fragments of bone from the Crown of Domination, Archaon admired its dark simplicity. The crowns of kings might be towering, elaborate things encrusted with gems and devoid of significance. The crown of the Everchosen was elegant in its understatement. It was meant for the darkest of warlords – the most apocalyptic of the dread Powers' warrior champions. Its points were directed inwards, ensuring it could be worn within a helm on the field of battle. It had but one setting at its fore, meant for a single jewel: the Eye of Sheerian with which the crown's terrible power would be combined.

Turning, the grit scraping under his boot, Archaon strode from the shrine chamber. A stone door rumbled aside, the dark sigils that adorned it speaking of the End Times to come. Sunlight, bleak but blinding, was admitted to the chamber, smouldering on the malevolence of the black stone. Archaon peered through the searing light to find he was at the foot of the Dreadpeak. He had no idea how long he had been in the mountain. How long he had suffered the trials of the shrine. What had been an eternity to him might only have been minutes, hours or days in the waiting ruin of the world. All he knew was that he had earned the admiration of the Dark Gods and had been rewarded with their treasures. That now he would be crowned their champion of darkness – their Everchosen – worthy to lead the legions of hell and visit their myriad calamities upon the waiting world. With the Crown of Domination clutched in one gauntlet he ventured outside.



## CHAPTER XVIII

*'It is said that the day was marked in the heavens by a dread omen. The appearance of a great comet that split the sky in two with its passing. A falling star of tails twin that filled the world over which it shone with fear and foreboding.'*

– Urshel, *Signs and Wonders*

*The Dreadpeak  
The Worlds Edge Mountains  
Sigmarsfest IC 2519*

Archaon stood on the rocky ledge. The tents of his Ruinous army dotted the valleys and mountainsides, about smouldering camp fires. Everywhere there was evidence of a battle fought and won. Dwarf helms and weapons littered the disturbed earth. Mounds of bodies burned, the flames of the fallen – both dwarf and those of the horde – licked at the sky. Archaon's army had been kept occupied while waiting for him. A dwarf army marching on Karak Zhul, no doubt following some ancient prophecy – as Archaon did – to avenge their mountain kin.

‘It seems they arrived too early,’ Archaon said.

*Or thousands of years too late.*

Be’lakor was with him. The shadow of the mountain darkened. The surrounding vegetation withered. Rock creaked and splintered in the dark lord’s presence. Small boulders shattered. Archaon’s fingers drifted to the hilt of his daemonsword.

*Even now, with the world yours to burn, you fear me...*

‘Take care now, daemon,’ Archaon warned. ‘I fear we have the eyes of the gods on us this day. You are the Harbinger, the Bearer of the Crown, He Who Heralds Conquerors. You have a role to perform in these dark events. The Ruinous Powers are watching. They will not be denied their amusement.’

Archaon heard calls from the valley floor. Champions and dark knights could see him on the mountainside. Pantheon-pledged warriors dropped bodies they were carrying. Others poured from tents and small camps. Word of his return spread quickly with marauders, bestial champions and dread warriors flooding the area before the Dreadpeak from adjoining valleys. Before long the mountainsides and valleys were swarming with the marauder savages, half-breeds, armoured warriors and dark champions of Archaon’s colossal army – doom, as far as the eye could see. Spiked plate. Horned helms. Murderous weaponry. Banners and standards of flayed flesh and bone, bearing the eight-point star of the Ruinous Pantheon. The symbol of a Chaos undivided. Archaon’s star.

High above the Ruinous horde, the distant thunder of Archaon’s dread presence rolled through the mountains. Above that, a comet blazed across the firmament, slicing the sky in two: a dark omen of the hell the world had to pay and the calamity to come. Archaon slipped his horned helm from his head. He looked up at the sky and nodded slowly to himself. The comet had a twin tail. Like the comet that appeared the night of Sigmar’s birth. Like the comet that had adorned the blade of the greatsword *Terminus* – the sigil of his templar order. Another sick joke of the Dark Gods, Archaon decided.

Archaon saw Eins, Zwei and Vier push through the front ranks of armoured warriors and make their way up the mountainside. The wraith-warriors approached, Zwei leading the daemon steed Dorghar by the reins. The misshapen Vier was helping a figure in furs up the incline. As he moved his warped wing, Archaon could see it was Giselle. She walked with difficulty but aided by Vier just managed the slope. She was a vision of skeletal reproach. The skin of her full and once comely face was stretched over her skull. Without a



mouth she could not speak, but her eyes said it all. This was the moment that she – and Father Dagobert – had tried to keep Archaon from. It had taken a century but he had done it, much to Giselle’s soul-hollow misery. The world would burn and it would be Archaon – the once good man, Diederick Kastner – who would strike the spark.

The Swords of Chaos slowed. The gathered horde fell silent. A monstrous shadow rose up from behind Archaon. The swirling black form of a daemon, bleeding forth from the rock of the cursed mountain. Horned head. A gargoyle’s wings. Cloven claws and slithering tail. A great infernal prince of midnight muscle and daemoniac visage. A Ruinous Star sat on his chest – an ancient scar – that like a living altar declared that the Dark Gods were unified behind a single, mortal champion of Chaos. Despite his malevolent majesty, the daemon Be’lakor hung his head like a dog. From the sky above, from the dirt beneath their feet and through the eyes of every pantheon-pledged maniac, warrior and warlord gathered before Archaon, the dread Powers were watching.

Archaon turned. He looked up at the monstrous form of his puppet master, his father-in-shadow, his daemoniac foe. Thrusting both his horned helm and the Crown of Domination at the abomination’s chest, Archaon gave Be’lakor the burning hatred of one eye.

‘This is as close as you’re going to get to this, Bearer of the Crown. Savour it,’ Archaon said. ‘Now do your infernal duty, dark prince.’

A bottomless loathing crackled between the two. Archaon turned and presented himself to his vast horde of darkness. The daemon Be’lakor hesitated – the rage of having to crown another, again – tearing at the muscles of his infernal face. He lifted the Crown of Domination and offered it to the sky. Moving around in a circle, the daemon presented it in eight different directions, each time announcing Archaon’s coronation in a different dark tongue. Archaon only understood the last of the Dark Master’s sullen proclamations.

*I present to you Archaon – Everchosen of Chaos, commander of the legions of hell and undoubted Lord of the End Times.*

He felt the monstrous darkness of the daemon’s touch as he gently lowered the crown onto Archaon’s shaven head. The Chaos warlord felt the eternally burning Mark of Chaos rage through his flesh, about where the crown was intended to sit. Like a mantrap of the soul, the black gold of the crown’s points snapped shut, piercing both ruin-blessed flesh and skull. Archaon roared up at the heavens. The pain was unimaginable. Like barbs through his very being, the points created a horrific nexus at their centre: an oblivion in his mind through which the Ruinous

hearts and dark thoughts of all dread things under his banner were his to know. Archaon cast his gaze across the monstrous horde he had amassed. Warriors, butchers and abominates from the world over. As his gaze passed across them he felt the individual darkness of the souls, their fear of him and the gods he represented, the savage expectation of the slaughter and ruin to come. He heard the whisper of betrayal in champions that he knew he must kill. He knew the dark secrets and strategies that would keep such a colossal army – all fighting for a different world ending dread – unified.

Be'lakor brought the horned helmet of Morkar's cursed plate down over the Everchosen's head. The helm sat snugly – as it always had – with the crown slipping slickly into the space crafted to accommodate it. With a sizzle of sorcerous power, the Eye of Sheerian – already ensconced in a setting at the front of the helm – became as one with the Crown of Domination. Although he had not realised it, Archaon was still roaring his soul-shearing agony and jubilation to the sky. The world had become more than just an experience of the moment. Pain. Emptiness. Expectation. Through the Eye of Sheerian, combined with the properties of the fell crown, the world seared into spectral focus. Beyond the blunt appreciation of what was happening to him – the chill air of the mountains, the agony of the metal punctured through his skull, the thousands of eyes on him, their gaze the burden of dark expectation – Archaon now saw more. A ghostly existence of what had been and what would be. He saw the dwarf army butchered by his warriors of Chaos in the valleys mere hours before and he saw the mountains shake and shed grit, scree and bouncing boulders in some calamity shortly to come. Whereas the Eye of Sheerian had shown him secrets great distances away – across ice, ocean and mountain range – combined with the Crown of Domination it could now cast its gaze both forward and back into events that had been and were yet to be. The sensation was a dread knowing, both intoxicating and fearful. Like a man leaning off a cliff, intending to fall, Archaon obeyed an instinct to pull himself back. It would take some time to acclimatise to the power and overwhelming intensity of the terrible gift and longer to command such abilities. Archaon could think of no better tool, however, to help him usher in the apocalypse than the gift to see the end before it came to pass. With such a dread gaze directed into the days, dread months and dark years to come, Archaon truly had become the Lord of the End Times.

Archaon's roar had been joined by thousands of others. As his voice trailed away, the mind-shattering effect of the crown numbing to secrets unthought and a future waiting to be known, Archaon drew the *Slayer of Kings* and held the

blade up. Beside him Archaon sensed that the mighty Be'lakor had taken to a daemonic knee. Archaon's horde did the same, bowing their horned helmets and slamming armoured knees into the dirt. Prostrate before the Everchosen of Chaos.

'Daemon, begone,' Archaon hissed at Be'lakor, without even turning his helm. 'I see you, monster. For the first time I truly see you. Stay out of my past. Make way for my future. Now get out of my sight and never sully my presence with your rank darkness again.'

Archaon expected some kind of protest. A threat. A warning. A rejoinder of Ruinous wit. The Everchosen of Chaos turned. Be'lakor was gone. The shadows of rocks, boulders and the Dreadpeak itself seemed to recede and lighten. Archaon grunted.

His Swords of Chaos approached, accompanied by Dorghar and the frail Giselle. Now Be'lakor was gone, he sheathed his daemonsword. Archaon knew what was expected of him. To climb into the saddle. To ride through the roaring jubilation of his colossal host. To lead them out of the desolation of the mountains and into civilised lands of wanton slaughter, flame and darkness. He didn't need the Crown of Domination to show him that.

Vier helped Giselle up to Archaon before backing away. The girl was a skeletal horror – like a wight that haunted the tomb of Archaon's old life. She sank into her furs, the slightness of her emaciated body susceptible to the cold. Long, bony fingers pulled the furs about her. Her jaw moved under the skin stretched across her skull, as though she wanted to say something. Archaon took her skeletal hand in his gauntlet and said it for her.

'Still think I can be saved?' he said, his words a whisper and his humour dark.

Giselle leaned in, holding her fragile form close to the Everchosen's armoured form. He was like a monstrous statue hewn of apocalyptic promise, while she was a deathly echo of the past, so slight and wasted that the rising wind itself would have felled her. The storms that accompanied Archaon everywhere crashed thunder through the skies. Giselle brought her head up next to his, as if to whisper something into the side of his helm.

'Save you?' the girl eternal hissed. 'Who do you think damned you in the first place?'

After everything that Archaon had seen, all the horror he had experienced, he didn't think it was possible to be shocked. The girl's voice – a rasping, suggestive shadow of what it had been – sent a bolt of lightning through the emptiness of the Everchosen's dark heart. Grabbing her by the furs that sat on

her sharp shoulders, Archaon pushed Giselle away. The girl's eyes had bleached to an oblivion of blackness and a wretched mouth had stretched itself through the stringy flesh beneath her nose.

'No,' was all the Everchosen could manage.

Excruciating pain once more cut through his side. Looking down, Archaon could see that Giselle had stabbed him. Blinking the shock from his mind, he recognised the dagger. It was a savage thing, both blade and hilt crafted beautifully from the claw of a daemon. Be'lakor's claw. The claw Archaon had chopped from the Dark Master's hand and claimed for his own. Giselle had taken it from him and been busy in her starvation and infirmity. She had slipped it straight through the hole where the shard of sword had punctured the plate. Straight into the agonising sheath created by the old wound.

Giselle was laughing. Girl. Withered hag. Daemon. She was all these things at once. Horrifying and alluring in equal measure, like an abominate daemon of Slaanesh. The girl's scorn cut through him. Clutching his side, Archaon tried to focus through the black torment tearing through his flesh where the daemonic dagger sat. Through the Eye of Sheerian he saw the real Giselle. With heart-stopping horror, Archaon felt his way through a century of haunting suspicions and spectral realisations.

It had been Giselle who had brought the *Liber Caelestior – The Celestine Book of Divination* – to him in the first place. Who with the cruellest weapons of all – pity, trust and even love – had helped to damn him. Had kept him on the dark path, even when she seemed to want to drag him from it. The burn of her touch, her purity, was a torment Archaon had visited upon himself, some part of him wanting to believe. Some part of him desiring a saviour. Desiring a way back. For him, Giselle had been a thread he had unravelled as he wandered the benighted labyrinth of his doom. Through his feelings for her, Archaon fooled himself into feeling as though he always had some kind of way back. At least the strength to end himself before he became an end to all else. Such honesty scorched his Ruinous flesh and lit a fire in the darkness of his mind.

Archaon looked from Giselle to the dagger hilt and back to the girl. The girl who while the world turned, while the champions of Chaos lived and died and Archaon spent a century seeking his doom, had remained ever young. Ever Giselle the girl he had saved from the beastmen in the forest. Ever Giselle, the Sigmarite sister. Even after their time in the Realm of Chaos had changed them, Giselle's affliction should have been her end decades before. Only some living lie, some daemon-thing existing within the dark consecration of Archaon's

presence could exist as such. As a skeletal horror bereft of lips. Of words. The daemon had words for him now and they proceeded in the voice of the girl he had known.

‘Save me, Archaon, save me,’ she cackled in mockery. Then her voice changed, searing with the bottomless hate of the abyss: ‘Archaon... save yourself!’

The Everchosen grabbed Giselle’s furs and tore them away. As they ripped and parted, the daemon’s foul carcass was revealed. A wasted cage of stretched skin and sharp ribs. On her chest, protruding proudly through the emaciation, Archaon could see a mark, a sigil in protruding bone. The Ruinous Star. The star of the Dark Master. The Mark of Be’lakor. The same one that Archaon had found on Gangryss, on Ograx the Great, on the Curseling and the living shadows of the Forsaken Fortress. On Be’lakor himself.

‘Kiss me, Archaon,’ Giselle taunted, her infernal laughter everywhere as the abomination leaned in with her ragged mouth.

Archaon grabbed the daemon dagger and heaved at the Ruinous blade. The Everchosen roared his agony and fury to the gods. Moving his gauntlet to the *Slayer of Kings*, Archaon drew the daemonsword. It blazed from its scabbard, already glowing with hate for the Slaaneshi daemon. Giselle’s cackling died on the wind as the *Slayer of Kings* passed through her – scorching her furs to ash and smashing her bones to furious oblivion.

As what remained of Giselle bounced and clattered down the mountainside, Archaon doubled over. The Swords of Chaos had already drawn their bone blades but seemed as shocked and confused by the rapid turn of events as Archaon himself. The colossal horde looked on with bloodthirst and wonder, assuming that the Everchosen of Chaos was putting on some kind of brutal, sacrificial display of merciless power.

The searing torment of the wound and the daemonic claw embedded in his flesh became something else. Darkness flooded from the blade, filling him with helplessness and woe. His black heart pumped to a pause while some dread presence deep inside him strangled his soul. It was Be’lakor. The Dark Master had made his play. Archaon had tried to bind the daemon prince to a blade of iron. Be’lakor had used one made from his own flesh, however, to invade Archaon’s own. To breach the walls of Archaon’s plate and storm the spiritual fortress of his soul. The Dark Master was winning. By the gods, he was winning.

Archaon suddenly reared and roared, the *Slayer of Kings* rattling in his gauntlet. He tried to talk to the daemon possessing his body, mind and being but

only found his threats and entreaties bounced back at him through the black oblivion creeping up through him. He was drowning in Be'lakor. The Dark Master – who was bound by dark decree to be the Bearer and not the wearer of the Crown of Domination – had achieved both. Now Archaon was the Everchosen of Chaos, Be'lakor would assume his son-in-shadow's flesh, be the darkness that wore the crown and lead the legions of hell across the face of the world as he had done before.

Archaon started to say something but it was Be'lakor's savage words that passed his lips.

'Die!' he roared. Archaon swung the *Slayer of Kings* – aware of his devastating movements but not in control of them. He demolished Zwei with the daemonblade. The misshapen Vier went to turn the *Slayer of Kings* aside with his crooked bone blade but Be'lakor swung back with Archaon's clenched gauntlet and knocked the wraith-warrior's head from his hunched shoulders. Eins slashed the daemonblade away once, twice... even a third time. Be'lakor was just playing with the Sword of Chaos, however. Lunging forward with unstoppable ease, Be'lakor rammed the daemonsword straight through the chest of the wraith-warrior, steaming its darkness away to nothing.

The Everchosen stood there for a moment. Still. Not thrashing. Not bellowing.

'Flesh of my flesh,' Be'lakor said with Archaon's lips. 'I am yours and you are mine. Soon your soul will be but a forgotten blemish on my own—'

Archaon roared. The mountains rang with his fury. The warriors of Chaos pledged to Archaon's doom lifted their heads. Morkar's ancient plate trembled. The darkness fighting within slowed to a soul-pulverising stop.

Be'lakor was not the first daemon Archaon had fought for his soul. Thunder tore through the heavens above. Archaon reached up and lightning jagged down through the skies to his fingertips.

As Archaon's roar echoed away and a grim silence descended, the Everchosen's plate smoked. With slow, agonising movements, Archaon lowered his hand. With some effort he pulled his boots, one then the other, from the glass about him. Sand, grit and rock had fused to obsidian as the lightning strike passed down through Archaon and into the cursed mountain. Turning, the Chaos warlord saw that his shadow had similarly been melted into the mountainside – except it wasn't his shadow. It was the monstrous outline of Be'lakor. Stepping back, Archaon turned the *Slayer of Kings* in one hand. The obsidian outline began to steam and bubble. The black glass melted. One claw, then another, reached out of the liquid. Be'lakor's horned head broke the surface and Archaon

watched as the daemon prince climbed up out of the rock of the Dreadpeak.

*Do you know what yo—*

‘I’ve spent a century listening to your monstrous self-pity, Be’lakor,’ Archaon spat, his words almost cracking under the intensity of the hatred with which he spoke them. ‘And eternities trying to escape it. This world has seen your time, abominate. Now it will see mine. You will never be the Everchosen of Chaos – for my reign will be dark, bloody and short, and this world ends with me. And when it does, daemon – with no damned followers, lost warriors or innocent girls to worship you or do your bidding – so will you...’

Be’lakor seethed with dark rage and abyssal frustration. The air crackled and spat about him like a midnight forge. The daemon prince reached out. His shadow sword rose up from the pool of obsidian from which he’d ascended. Taking the monstrous length of the weapon in his claws, the Dark Master levelled the blistering shadow of the blade at Archaon.

‘Die...’ The daemon proclaimed once more.

‘You first,’ the Everchosen of Chaos told his father-in-shadow.

The sword of shadow and the *Slayer of Kings* clashed. Each impact echoed through the mountains. Sparks of unnatural energy blasted from the blades as mortal and daemon prince tested each other once again. The shadow blade that seethed darkness one moment and nothing the next. The *Slayer of Kings*, which raged to blistering brightness as the prison blade sang with the daemon’s desire to maim, cleave and kill. Archaon held himself to one side, covering his wound and the dagger still skewered through him. Every movement was a muscle-shredding agony that the daemon prince attempted to exploit.

Towering above Archaon, the Dark Master was still the monstrous, elemental force, swinging his blade with ancient skill and the power of oblivion. Archaon no longer moved through the split-second evasions and desperate attacks that had been his only defence in the Forsaken Fortress. Archaon fought not like a father’s son or a master’s puppet. He was the Everchosen of Chaos. The world quaked beneath his boots. Archaon fought like he had never fought before. Everything he had ever learned. Every success. Every failure. It all fell into place as the Everchosen expertly turned Be’lakor’s blade aside – swinging, stabbing, cleaving, back-slashing and smashing his way across the side of the mountain.

As the titanic battle raged up the Dreadpeak, dislodging tumbling boulders and cleaving away entire shelves of cursed rock, thunder shook the heavens. Lightning slashed at the rock about the pair and Archaon’s horde moved up through the valleys to watch them – champions ordering those warriors willing

to assist their warlord back to the Ruinous ranks. For Archaon there were no more monstrous lunges, only to cut through the sizzling shadow of Be'lakor's insubstantial form. The Eye revealed strategies to the Everchosen moments ahead of time, prompting Archaon to abandon such futile attacks in favour of those with a greater chance of success. The Dark Master felt the change in his shadow-son immediately. Tested by the Dark Gods and awarded the boon of their powerful gifts, Archaon as mortal champion was a match for the daemon prince – much to Be'lakor's fury.

The huge daemon wheeled about, his tail and wings angling furiously to aid balance while at the same time tearing through the air as weapons of their own. Archaon leapt the monster's slashing tail while jumping between rocks and smashing down through the defensive presentation of the solidified sword of shadow. Archaon passed the streaming glow of the daemon weapon about him and from hand to hand, slashing aside the daemon prince's furious attacks and cutting nicks in the membrane of his great wings.

Archaon rolled as Be'lakor's cloven claw stamped an impact crater into the rock where Archaon had been standing moments before. The Everchosen buried the daemonblade in the cursed stone of the mountain, cutting away stony ledges and sending the daemon prince slip-sliding down the slope in a small rockslide of scree and boulders. Archaon ran, skidded and jumped down the mountainside at his infernal father. A leaping chop of the *Slayer of Kings*, with enough force to split an oak, was met by the shadow blade and turned aside by Be'lakor. Pushing Archaon back at the mountainside, the Dark Master smashed his broad blade at Archaon, dislodging the stone above and sections of rockface that almost buried the Everchosen.

The Dreadpeak shook with the monstrous battle, the mountain smashed by otherworldly blades and the supernatural power of the exalted warlord and the daemon prince. While most of the time both Archaon and Be'lakor were seconds away from being skewered or sliced in half, some raging assaults were more furious than others. When Archaon lost his footing, Be'lakor stabbed the shadow sword under the Everchosen's arm and into rock. Archaon brought the *Slayer of Kings* up immediately, the daemonblade passing through the insubstantiality of Be'lakor's blade and up past the daemon's face. Sparking off the dark glory of his horns, the daemon prince was surprised for a moment before landing a brutal kick in Archaon's armoured midriff and driving the embedded claw-dagger in further.

Landing nearby, Archaon allowed himself to skid away down a sheer slope,



landing at the bottom and rolling over in agony. Be'lakor swooped down on his great wings; the Everchosen reared and launched into a blistering attack, which backed the Dark Master out onto a treacherous cliff.

As the battle raged and the mountains shook, the heavens began to darken. Night fell with the twin-tailed comet streaking high overhead and the dread moons rising over the Worlds Edge. The torches of Archaon's monstrous horde moved like a rash through the valleys, circling the Dreadpeak and following the battle around.

As the night wore on and both mortal champion and daemon prince began to tire, the world felt the abominate gaze of the Ruinous Powers. The mountains glowed with a Ruinous hue while vegetation withered on the mountainsides. The dwarfs, greenskins and ratmen of the range hid in the tunnels and holds while those unlucky enough to be travelling the passes and high trails turned rabid with the murderous appetites of the Dark Gods.

Be'lakor's outlandish bladework – accompanied by his slashing tail and slicing wings – became slower but more determined. Archaon, slowed by his grievous wound and his mortal limitations, had to abandon the more adventurous ripostes and athletic evasions, in favour of savage lunges and decapitating backswings with the daemon-fuelled *Slayer*. Like pugilists at the end of a bout, the pair's attempts to land a murderous blow became laboured, but the monstrous sword swings more powerful. With their blades showering black sparks off each other, glancing plate and the mountain, huge sections of rockface rumbled, cracked and tumbled down the Dreadpeak. On several occasions, curious throngs of Chaos warriors, getting too close to the action, were buried in such rockfalls and gorge-burying slides.

Be'lakor swung his sword of sizzling shadow with monstrous force, sending Archaon skidding across the scree of the mountainside before the Everchosen ran back at him, launching from a boulder and smashing his blade down on the daemon. Archaon swung the *Slayer of Kings* down on Be'lakor again and again, each time the daemon prince taking shelter behind the defensive offering of his blade. The furious onslaught cracked the cliff beneath the Dark Master's cloven claws and sent him tumbling down into the valley amongst the thunder of falling rock.

Archaon allowed himself a moment to catch his breath, his plate rattling with the rise and fall of his chest. He knew his best chance of beating Be'lakor was to reach the valley floor fast. In the ghoulish moonlight, Archaon felt the eye of the Dark Gods – the monstrous pantheon – eager to know if their dread choice in

Archaon had been deserved. Half skidding, half running down the mountainside, Archaon made his way for the scree-filled valley. His heart leapt as he saw colossal pieces of rock at the bottom of the collapsed cliff, with Be'lakor's black tail twitching below a titanic piece. Archaon ran about the huge boulder, the *Slayer of Kings* held high. If the daemon prince was trapped, Archaon intended to butcher the monster where he lay. He knew in his dark heart that Be'lakor would do the same. As the Everchosen sidled around, the furnace glow of his daemonblade revealed that Be'lakor had torn himself from the twitching remnant of his tail. The Eye of Sheerian showed the frenzied daemon prince come out from behind another colossal piece of rock just in time for Archaon to get the *Slayer of Kings* between him and the daemon prince's monstrous swing.

Archaon left the ground. He hit the rockface of a mountain across the valley with supernatural force, shattering the rock. Archaon shook his horned helm and tried to extricate himself from the crater in the sheer mountainside. Be'lakor was an abominate shadow, pounding across the valley in great strides. Shaking himself free and with U'zuhl blazing with reproach in the steel prison of his blade, Archaon ran at his daemonic foe. Archaon bellowed and war-cried. The Dark Master roared with inhuman might. It looked as though the two might quake the Worlds Edge Mountain range with the monstrous impact of their blades.

Guided by the Eye of Sheerian and what Be'lakor intended to do, Archaon skidded down through the moss and scree of the valley floor. As Be'lakor turned Archaon threw himself immediately at the daemon. The pair rolled with the momentum, with the Dark Master's stump of a tail thrashing and his wings tearing across the sharp rocks. Archaon sat astride the daemon, smashing him again and again in the face with his sword-clenched fist. Be'lakor grabbed Archaon in a bear hug and pulled the Everchosen to him with all of his infernal might, worming the black dagger in Archaon's side agonisingly through his insides.

As they rolled and separated, Be'lakor could see that the *Slayer of Kings* lay abandoned in the scuffle nearby. The daemon scabbled to his feet and surged at Archaon but Archaon was ready for him. Picking up a small boulder, Archaon launched it at his father-in-shadow, the impact turning the rock to dust against Be'lakor's face. The daemon prince grunted, dazed, but by the time he had recovered himself Archaon had already recovered the *Slayer of Kings*. This time it was the Dark Master's turn to fly – a wing-tangled mess – into the wall of the rockface. Archaon roared up at the night sky as the monstrous daemon tried to

pull himself free. Lightning cut down through the darkness, striking the mountain above and dislodging boulders, scree and a section of rockface with an excruciating crack that rumbled its way down to the valley floor and buried Be'lakor.

Archaon would not be fooled again. He ran through the dark clouds of dust billowing away from the collapse. Sinking the searing blade of the *Slayer of Kings* into mounds of shattered rock and scree, Archaon furiously searched for the daemon prince.

‘Where are you, abominate?’ Archaon roared. ‘Face me!’

The small mountain of scree beside the Everchosen exploded, sending shards of splintered rock everywhere. Archaon was knocked half off his feet. Be'lakor stood there, his wings demolished, his tail trailing ichor and half of one of his horns shattered. The Dark Master came at Archaon like a wild beast, swinging the searing shadow of his blade madly at the Everchosen. It was Archaon's chance and the dark warlord knew it. The daemon prince was unbalanced by his exhaustion, his frustration and rage. Calling on his skill, the murderous passion of his daemonblade and the spectral glimpse of future decimation provided by the Eye, Archaon threw himself into the monstrous clash of swords. Feet scrabbled around. Arms swung relentlessly about and the two blades showered dark sparks of abyssal energy about the Everchosen and his father-in-shadow.

Archaon knew he had the daemon prince, moments before Be'lakor did. Holding his ground through several shadow-streaming swipes of the shadow sword, Archaon felt the monstrous blade shimmer back to the world once more. Smashing Be'lakor's blade away, Archaon watched it leave the claw of the monster. Turning into a devastating spin, Archaon clutched the *Slayer of Kings* like a knife and in completing the manoeuvre, slammed the daemonsword straight through the black flesh of the daemon's stomach. Be'lakor was lifted off his cloven claws by the thudding impact before falling to his knees before the Everchosen. The Dark Master roared his agonies to the crowded heavens.

‘Just die, you monstrous thing,’ Archaon spat as Be'lakor endured his agonies. Archaon took a step back as the abomination looked up at him with murderous loathing and reared to torturous full height. With the raging blade still stuck through his belly, Be'lakor stomped towards the unarmed Archaon.

*You are nothing*, the daemon howled.

He smashed Archaon into the ground with his claw. The Everchosen bounced off the rock floor of the valley and clattered away. Be'lakor stamped agonisingly after him. As Archaon brought up his helm he saw the colossal shard of rock

moments before it was to hit him. Rolling beneath its unstoppable progress, the boulder would have pulverised him to blood and scrap against the rock wall of the mountain. Another came and another, smashing into the valley floor about him like crashing meteorites. One bounced to the ground below his feet, knocking him over with the impact. Be'lakor was on him immediately and although Archaon saw it coming he could not evade the cloven-clawed kick coming for his helm. The impact knocked him off his feet. He landed some distance away in a cacophony of tumbling plate.

Archaon had barely found his way back to his senses when he realised that the skewered daemon prince was standing over him. Pinning the Everchosen to the ground with his clawed foot, Be'lakor smashed Archaon's helm into the rock again and again with his fist.

*I am Be'lakor – first of the Daemon Princes. Dark Master of the world with the legions of hell mine to command.*

The Dark Master took his foot from Archaon and the Chaos warlord saw in the Eye of Sheerian the horror of what was to come. Hefting a huge boulder above his head, the sword-skewered Be'lakor trembled above Archaon.

'No...' the Everchosen managed.

When it hit, smashing to rock dust on Archaon and his buckled plate, the dark warlord felt himself break up inside. It was like being pulverised between Mannslieb and Morrslieb, clashing about him.

*You are nothing, Be'lakor roared at the Everchosen of Chaos. A twin-bladed sword, who wounds he who wields it. A filth instrument of torture, used by the Ruinous Powers to torment me.*

Be'lakor bellowed through his pain and the frustration of his infernal plans, hefting another huge boulder above his head. Archaon didn't think he could survive another impact. As Be'lakor wavered under the weight of the thing, Archaon tried to clear his pain-addled mind. Coughing up blood that leaked from the side of his thin lips, Archaon spoke the dark words of binding – the incantations the daemon Z'guhl had taught him in the Realm of Chaos. Be'lakor staggered with the monstrous piece of rock while the midnight flesh of his belly burned bright.

'U'zuhl, Skulltaker and *Slayer of Kings*,' Archaon called. 'I release you!'

Be'lakor went to scream something but couldn't. The boulder broke across his back, falling either side of the daemon and almost burying him. He clutched at the *Slayer of Kings* and the daemon U'zuhl, the Skulltaker and Right Claw of Khorne, trapped in the prison blade for as long as anyone could remember,

flooded Be'lakor with its boundless fury.

Archaon staggered to his feet and stumbled away, moving from boulder to boulder for support. His leg was broken and his arm – the same arm – shattered, despite the petrified rock that threaded its way through his bones. Blood leaked continually from his mouth and nose, filling his helm with a coppery smell. All Archaon could hear was his own ragged breathing and the horrific wailing of the Dark Master. U'zuhl was tearing the ancient darkness of Be'lakor's soul apart – desperate to feast on the daemon's malevolent essence and assume his dread flesh.

As Archaon staggered away, half watching, half escaping, he saw Be'lakor fall silent. His shoulders rose and fell with the titanic battle that had raged within his being. The battle was over, however, and Be'lakor had won. As Archaon had resisted Be'lakor so the Dark Master had resisted U'zuhl. Slipping the *Slayer of Kings* torturously from his belly, Be'lakor held it up. The dull blade started to glow in his claw, burning to a rage-filled intensity that Archaon had never known. The Skulltaker had been free but within moments had been returned to his steel prison once more.

Tossing the furious pollution of the daemonblade aside – not knowing if he could repel another attempt by the Skulltaker to possess him – Be'lakor lifted a trembling claw. He levelled it at Archaon.

*Now... you...*

The Everchosen of Chaos limped away, staggering from one boulder to another. All the Eye of Sheerian could show Archaon was what Be'lakor might do. The Dark Master was so insane with infernal fury and mindless vengeance that even he didn't know what he was going to do. The ground trembled beneath Be'lakor's step. He seized Archaon around his armoured neck and slammed the dark warlord into the rockface. He smashed him again and leaned in. Archaon could feel the claws of the daemon prince buckle the cursed plate about his bruised neck. Be'lakor was going to crush his throat. Archaon smelled the rank sulphur of the abomination's breath.

*I shall wear the crown. I shall be Everchosen of the Chaos gods and stand once more in the warmth of their destructive radiance and favour. None shall stop me. No god. No daemon. Not you.*

Archaon felt the vice of the daemon prince's claws close about his throat and the hell-forged plate give. He knew he had but seconds left. Scratching at the punctured plate at his side, Archaon got a trembling gauntlet around the hilt of the claw-crafted dagger. His eye rolled over, white with the agonising pain of its

withdrawal. He felt the blade's darkness cut through not only his butchered flesh but also his pantheon-pledged soul. His eye rolled back as the crooks and curves of the wicked blade were freed.

*For you are nothing. Nothing begotten of nothing and to nothing you return. You are a footnote in the history of a world destined to burn. Yours was my story to tell and I choose to end it now.*

'I'm your son...' Archaon hissed through his father-in-shadow's murderous embrace.

*You think that will stop me?*

Archaon looked for the Ruinous Star burned across the Dark Master's broad chest. He looked for the chink in the daemon's armoured hide. The cleft Archaon had found in the Forsaken Fortress. The mark of a piercing blade – thrust by one of the Dark Master's many foes – that had yet to complete its journey.

'You... don't... have... the... heart...'

Archaon brought up the dagger and with a single, merciless stab, hammered the claw blade into Be'lakor's chest. A monstrous gasp escaped the daemon. The Everchosen fell down the rockface and crumpled as the Dark Master released him. Stumbling away through the boulders and debris, Be'lakor clawed at his punctured heart and the pumping ichor that gushed from his ruined chest. The abominate's cloven claws suddenly seemed no longer to support him and the beast crashed to the ground in a growing pool of his own steaming darkness. Archaon watched as his father-in-darkness – the twisted daemon prince who had for so long been the source of dread, woe and affliction in his life – died before him. In his final moments of panic, the Dark Master reached out for Archaon, the claw of one hand a pleading emissary of doom. He shimmered with crackling shadow, unnatural energies arcing and sizzling about the daemon. In a last ditch attempt to survive the horror of the wound Archaon had inflicted upon him, Be'lakor was phasing between forms. Between the insubstance of shadow and the last moments of a fell, ichor-coughing existence. Archaon grunted with dark satisfaction. Being crafted from a part of the daemon prince itself, the dagger-claw was doing the same, making it impossible for Be'lakor to escape his doom, as he might a sword swung through the sizzling shadow of his form.

As the pool of liquid darkness grew and Be'lakor sank into his own daemoniac gore, the Dark Master steamed away. His clutching claw scraped along the rock with final defiance before slipping back into the obsidian pool. Archaon watched the darkness drain down through the valley floor. Looking up he saw the distant blaze of torches as his monstrous army poured into the valley. The immense

moons of Mannslieb and Morrslieb were setting over the Worlds Edge Mountains. Above them the twin-tailed comet that was herald of the doom Archaon was yet to bring blazed across the sky.

Archaon limped through the draining darkness of his father's grave and with difficulty picked up the *Slayer of Kings*. Slipping the daemonsword into his scabbard, Archaon stared back at the spot where Be'lakor had died. The word seemed to ill fit the daemon prince's fate, for the Everchosen knew that he had simply banished the enormous being – the bane of his existence – back to the Realm of Chaos from which he had sprung. Every smashed and aching bone in Archaon's body told him that Be'lakor would be back. He would return as he had many times before to plague the world and the enemies that walked it.

'I'll ensure that there will be no world to return to...' Archaon told the steaming grave. He looked up into the dark depths of the heavens. Thunder rolled in the distance. He knew that the Dark Gods were watching. They would not have missed Be'lakor's failure – the daemon's delicious demise – for the world. 'You hear me?' Archaon roared up at the sky, his threat intended for the fell gods whose soul-devouring existence depended upon the world and its mortal plague as much as the daemon prince they had made an eternity of tormenting. 'Only ash and darkness. An oblivion in which to starve. Choke on it, you monsters...'



## EPILOGUE

*'And so the end it came to pass,  
Archaon the Everchosen –  
at the head of an army vast –  
his storm of Chaos yet to come.'*

– Necrodomo the Insane, *The Liber Caelestior (The Celestine Book of Divination)*

*The Borderlands  
The Worlds Edge Mountains  
Die Zeit der Stürme IC 2519*

The Everchosen brought his daemon steed to a stop on the mountain pass. Dorghar's furnace breath clouded on the chill air. He had arrived. As the Worlds Edge Mountains dropped away before him in frost-shattered supplication – peaks becoming foothills and foothills disappearing into thick, dark forest – Archaon knew he was home. To the north he could see the hard lands of the Tsarina: Kislev, ever ready for the dark hordes of Chaos to descend on their desolate land. To the south, however, Archaon cast his far reaching gaze across an Empire ripe for ruin. The Empire – nestling safely in the bosom of civilised



lands. Pathetic. Weak. Like a new-born baby: soft, unknowing, defenceless. The victim lands upon which Archaon himself had been forced. As infant. As dark warrior. As doom. The Empire was a festering wound on the surface of the world. Hot to the touch with its weakling gods, its emperors and principalities – lost in the self-importance of its past and delusions of its endurance. Below the spoiling surface, in the empty hearts of its cruel men, the forlorn hopes of its women and fears of its sickly children, it was a land already broken – begging for the blade and the flames of its future destruction. Archaon would be the answer to the Empire's dark and secret prayers. He would be the dark dream of its undoing come true. If the world was to end – and it was – then the Empire, the unhallowed site of Archaon's dread birth and many miserable deaths, was the perfect place to start.

The Worlds Edge Mountains shook. Not with thunder, titanic battles or the wrath of a daemon prince vanquished. Archaon's dark horde – his army of ruin and ending – had grown. The twin-tailed comet, which still scarred the skies with its fierce progress, hung over the Empire like a fearful portent of the horror to come. It led the way to ash, darkness and destruction as it had led so many to the dread coronation at the Dreadpeak. Colossal hordes of Hung maruders and tribes of Kurgan horsemen, savages pledged to the ruin of the world, their countless number shaking the ground with their passage as shamans and chieftains followed the comet up into the mountains.

At the glorious sight of the comet, warring northmen set aside their tribal enmities, their petty raids and berserker invasions of the hinterland Wastes. Behind bloodthirsty champions in spike and fur, they trudged south through the mountains, along the spine of the world, to find the Everchosen of Chaos: a warlord worthy of their butchery and talents. Half-breeds and beastmen arrived in droves, emerging like a shaggy plague from the depths of dark forests. Then there were the warriors of Chaos. Exalted champions of the Ruinous Gods. Dread sorcerers. Siege engines and wagons. Dark knights in cursed plate, astride monstrous black steeds. New Swords of Chaos to ride beside Archaon into battle and bloodshed. A torrent of pollution, flowing down through the Worlds Edge Mountains like a black river – a cacophony of Ruinous plate, hooves and flesh-flayed banners dedicated to the coming darkness.

Monsters thundered through the peaks, attracted by the unmistakable stench of doom and horror approaching. Horror to which they instinctively wanted to belong. Giants. Abominations of the Wastes. Packs of rabid scavengers, predacious chimeric fusions and hordes of gibbering spawn.

Like the effluence of the world, the degenerates of the Wastes flooded south to join Archaon under an apocalyptic banner of death and destruction. Some followed their dark instincts. Others followed the dread omen of the twin-tailed comet. Champions who saw significance in such a dark sign. All had been pushed before the storm. The endless army that had marched, shrieked and slaughtered its way south, vomited forth from the ruined gate at the top of the world and pantheon-pledged to join the Everchosen of Chaos. They were the world's nightmare. A monstrous host of daemons and infernal princes the likes of which history, even in its darkest hour, had never witnessed. Horrors of the beyond. Things of blood. Of plague. Of dread desire and sorcerous madness. Things of darkness that barely had form, with Ruinous behemoths of greater malevolence and monstrous infernal royalty to lead them. The legions of a thousand hells unleashed. A vast army of calamitous destruction and darkness, like an unnatural disaster that was Archaon's to visit upon the world.

Flooding every pass, crowding the slopes of every mountain, looking down on the victim lands of the distant Empire, Archaon's monstrous host – his dark storm to lead – were amassed along the edge of the world. Their harnessed madness waiting for the Everchosen's signal.

A figure jangled up behind Archaon. The warlord turned to see Gorst, the flagellant trudging forth, pushing through Archaon's abominate ranks. He was skin and bone dressed in scraps. The ancient dragged rusted chains and his head, still caged, stared up at Archaon through the age-eaten bars. As ever, Gorst said nothing. He had followed Archaon across the known world, through unknown realms and followed him still – into destiny. Gorst. The last of a ghostly collection of fading memories. Dagobert. Oberon. Giselle. Archaon was no longer that man. He was more than just a man now. He was doom. He was dread. He was darkness incarnate. He no longer had need of such memories. He was beyond the love of a loyal friend or the placed puppets of infernal betrayal. He was Archaon.

In a slick and devastating move, the Everchosen of Chaos slipped his daemonsword out of its scabbard. Executing a merciless swing of the sword, he cut Gorst's head from his miserable shoulders. The head, still in its cage, bounced before Archaon and his army before it rolled down the slope towards the Empire. Gorst had almost made it home.

Sheathing his sword, Archaon sat in the saddle, his dread plate a hell-forged glory. Dorghar, Steed of the Apocalypse, kicked at the stone floor of the pass, eager to lead on. The *Slayer of Kings* burned furiously in its scabbard. The

warlord waited. He soaked in the world as it was in that moment, while the Eye of Sheerian and his monstrous crown showed him the world as he was to make it. Instead of forests, fields, towns, villages, principalities and bloated cities there would be black deserts of ash. Mountainous pyres of bodies burning, scorching the thunder-filled skies. A god-empty darkness in which even those monstrosities that had heralded the apocalypse had fallen to the blade. Monstrosities like Archaon, Everchosen of Chaos and Lord of the End Times.

‘This world and all those beyond it will end,’ he called through the valleys and vaulting mountains. Archaon dug his armoured heels into the sides of the daemon steed, prompting Dorghar on into the Empire, the Ruinous hordes of darkness at the Everchosen’s back. ‘That end begins... now.’

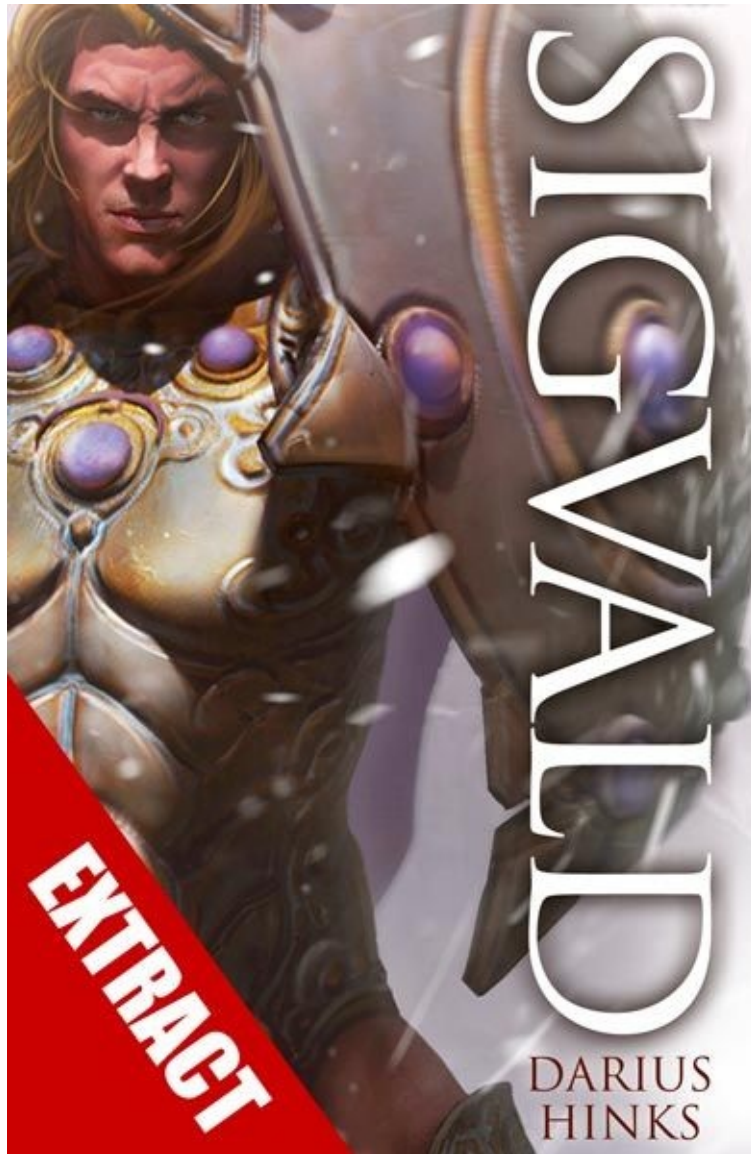
*'Mortals are free to do as they will. The gods give them no choice.'*

– Imperial proverb

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rob Sanders** is the author of ‘The Serpent Beneath’, a novella that appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the Warhammer novels *Archaon: Everchosen* and *Archaon: Lord of Chaos*, the Warhammer 40,000 books *Redemption Corps*, *Atlas Infernal*, *Legion of the Damned* and various shorter tales for the Horus Heresy. He lives in the small city of Lincoln, UK.

[An extract from Sigvald.](#)



Far in the distance, beneath the grumbling black belly of the sky, a triangular star had appeared. It had not been visible from the other side of the valley, but now it was unmistakeable: a glittering bauble, hung low over cruel, magisterial peaks. The baron massaged his sunken cheeks and leant forward in his saddle, peering out across a vast, frozen lake; hypnotised by the flickering light. For nearly three months he had led his men north; into regions of madness and endless night, and all the time, his determination had been ebbing away – leeches out of him by the appalling visions he had endured. Now, with less than six hundred men left and his body ruined by starvation and cold, he wondered if his mind had finally gone. There were no stars in the Shadowlands, only eternal darkness. Yet, when he rubbed his eyes and looked again, the light was still there, taunting him.

He looked down at his wasted, frozen limbs and wondered if, even now, he might find what he came for. ‘Could this be hope?’ he whispered.

He pointed the light out to his men and they nodded weakly in reply, steering their dying horses after him as he clattered across the ice.

The soldiers climbed the other side of the valley and after a while they realised it was not a star at all. They shook their heads in wonder as they saw that the light was a beautiful castle, hanging impossibly in the sky. The building flashed and glittered in the moonlight as immense banks of snow spiralled around it. It was made entirely of gold.

The baron urged his horse to pick up its pace, but then, with the building just half a mile away, he hesitated. He saw it quite clearly now: a vast, domed palace, drifting on the icy breeze and defying all laws of logic. He shook his head, still doubting his eyes. Even on the ground it would have seemed a miracle: a bewildering forest of turrets and towers, peopled with armies of leering grotesques. The scale of the construction was unbelievable. Every soaring pinnacle was succeeded by an even taller spire, until the eye grew utterly bewildered and returned, exhausted, to the huge front gates. A broad stair swept down from the palace in great serpentine curves, resting on the snow like the stem of a colossal gold flower.

The baron dragged his gaze from the fantastic building as one of the other

riders called out to him. The snowdrifts nearby had gathered into jagged shapes, like sheets draped over a corpse. He signalled for his men to investigate and, despite their obvious fear, they dropped from their horses and struggled awkwardly through the snow. Upon reaching the mounds they began to dig, using swords drawn from within their oiled cloaks. The men gasped as they revealed a block of dented gold. Avarice gave them strength and within minutes they had uncovered a toppled statue. Like the palace hanging over them, it was cast entirely in gold, but it was not the lustre of the metal that took their breath away, it was the artist's subject. The statue portrayed a young man, a noble, clad in plate armour and roaring with laughter as he pointed up towards the palace. The face was so handsome and full of joy that the men lowered their swords and backed away in awe. Dents and scratches covered the metal, but the statue's eyes shone with vitality and humour. A lusty energy poured out of it. The men had never seen such a blissful, beautiful image of fulfilment. As they studied the lines of the face they found themselves grinning idiotically.

For a few moments the baron was silent, staring at the statue with the same inane expression as the others. Then he shook his head, closed his mouth and waved at the other shapes. His men rushed to obey and soon uncovered dozens of identical statues, all laughing and pointing towards the palace. They had all been toppled, like the first, and some had clearly been attacked – limbs and even heads were missing in some cases – but all of them were utterly beautiful. Faced with these smiling, divine figures, the baron overcame his doubt and dismounted, marching through the snow towards the floating palace.

The other soldiers followed suit: tethering their horses to the foot of the stair and climbing after the baron with dazed, gleeful expressions on their faces.

As his boots clanged up the gold stairs, the baron's emaciated body regained a little of its former strength and dignity. He dusted the ice from his beard and turned up the ends of his wide moustache. All trace of exhaustion dropped away from him as he followed the wide curves of the stairway. He did not seem to notice that the steps were as dented as the statues; or that many of them were slumped and buckled, without any sign of repair.

There was a screech of grinding metal. The baron looked up to see a door opening beneath a grand, latticed portico. At first it seemed like the door had opened by its own volition, but as he and the other soldiers reached the top steps, they saw a group of figures marching out to greet them. The baron's eyes glittered with excitement as twelve gleaming knights clattered out. They wore sculpted purple armour and each of them carried a sword and a circular, mirrored



shield. They were almost as dazzling as the statues: tall, fair and perfectly poised as they formed a phalanx in front of the door.

Then the baron's smile faltered. He dropped a hand to his longsword as a robed figure stooped beneath the doorframe and lurched out into the moonlight. The knights were all over six feet, but the hooded figure that followed them was half as tall again. Even its great height did not seem to tell the whole story: its dirty, sackcloth robes were stretched over long, knotted muscles and a humped, ridged back. It was obvious that if it could have stood erect, the giant would have been even taller. It resembled a sack, filled with long sticks and animated by an invisible puppeteer, who steered it clumsily towards the riders, keeping its head down and its face hidden in shadow.

The baron dismounted and stood proudly to attention, signalling for his men to do the same.

The giant lumbered towards them and came to a halt a few feet away. As it loomed over him, the baron noticed dozens of tiny shapes, scurrying beneath its robes. The sound of laboured breathing came from within the folds of its hood, followed by a low growling noise. It seemed as though the thing were trying to speak.

'I'm Gustav Schüler,' said the baron, thrusting out his stiff beard and pulling back his shoulders. He looked like a reanimated corpse. His blistered skin was stretched horribly over his protruding cheekbones and his lips were cracked and blue, but the baron carried his breeding like a badge of honour. He strode through the snowstorm, determined to appear undaunted. 'I demand entry.'

Another stream of rasping vowels emerged from within the hood.

The baron shook his head impatiently. 'I can't understand.' He turned to the stony-faced knights. 'I can't understand him. Is he a daemon? Are you all daemons?'

The knights gave no response. In fact, they did not even seem to see the baron, so he turned once more to the hooded giant, raising his voice even louder in an attempt to be heard over the wind. 'Can you understand me?' His voice was edged with fury as he stepped closer. 'We're dying. We have nowhere else to go.'

The hooded giant looked down at him in silence for a few seconds, swaying slightly, as though struggling to balance on its long, crooked legs. Then it spoke again. The words were still little more than a guttural snarl, but they were now in a language the baron could understand. 'Then you have my pity,' it said, slumping to one side and waving the baron towards the open door.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said the baron as he limped down a vast hallway. The long journey north had replaced several of his toes with blackened stumps, and every step sent needles of pain into his feet, but the grandeur of the architecture drew him on. The vaulted ceilings were so high that he could barely make them out in the torchlight. If it wasn’t for the distant glitter of ribbed gold, he might have been walking through the night sky. The giant gave no reply as it led the baron onwards. This was the fourth long hallway they had passed down, and it had maintained a stony silence every step of the way. They were utterly alone and the baron burned with questions.

‘What about my men?’ he asked. The baron had allowed the knights to lead his exhausted soldiers away without a word of protest; it had seemed quite natural to entrust his men to such noble guardians, but now, as his thoughts began to clear a little, he felt a terrible rush of guilt. What had he been thinking? He looked anxiously over his shoulder but could see no sign of the entrance.

The giant still gave no reply and the baron shook his head, ashamed at how easily he had been distracted. ‘What could I have done?’ he muttered, tugging anxiously at his beard and stumbling to a halt. ‘There’s no fight left in any of them. They’re at death’s door.’ As he looked up at the faded grandeur of the palace, he realised that whatever happened now, all of their fates were in the hands of its master. He must be either saviour or executioner, for all of them.

The baron hurried on, shaking his head in disbelief as he left the first building and approached another. Rather than being just one palace, as it appeared outside, he now saw that this was a collection of palaces, each larger and grander than the one before. The further he went though, the harder it was to ignore the decay; the buildings seemed abandoned. This far in there was no trace of a breeze and a thick layer of dust had settled over the gold, painting everything a maudlin grey. Mirrors as tall as trees lined the walls, but many of the gilt frames were broken and great cracks had spread across the glass. Alongside the mirrors were huge portraits of the grinning figure whose statue the baron had seen outside. Each vast image portrayed the young noble as he overcame a series of monstrous foes, and each one was painted in most incredible, vivid colours. Decades of dust had settled over them, however, and the noble’s face looked out from behind a curtain of cobwebs.

After an hour of marching in silence, the baron began to hear sounds. As he stumbled down another endless corridor he realised it was music. He tilted his head to one side and strained to hear more clearly. There were voices too, dozens of them, echoing around the soaring arches and columns. The hooded figure led

him into another passageway. This one was markedly different: it was much smaller for a start – only wide enough to accommodate four of five men side by side – and it had clearly seen recent life. The mirrors that lined the walls were still clouded with ancient dust, but the carpet was indented with footprints. The heady scent of lilies filled the air and the baron sighed with pleasure as warmth began to seep through his furs. The music was now unmistakable and he paused to enjoy the sound of harps playing a sinuous, elusive melody. The voices were clearer too. The baron could not place the language, but the snatches of polite laughter brought a faint smile to his lips.

His hooded guide paused as it reached a final set of doors. It was obvious from the volume of the music that they had reached their destination. The giant placed a long, bandaged hand on one of the door handles and then hesitated, turning back to Schüler. After a few seconds of gasping and spluttering it spoke. ‘You may still leave,’ it growled, straining to wrap its thick accent around the words.

The baron scowled at the delay and gestured to the door.

For a long time, the figure studied the baron from within the deep folds of its hood, then, finally, it nodded and shoved the door open.

The baron stepped back with a gasp. The room beyond was a kaleidoscope of light and movement. Crowds of dancing figures were spinning back and forth through banks of scented smoke. He shook his head in astonishment. The dancers were dressed in iridescent silks and sparkling brocades and they moved with such grace, that they seemed little more than smoke themselves. ‘So beautiful,’ he muttered, but he could not fully hide the tremor of fear in his voice. ‘What are they? Gods?’

The hooded figure shook its head. As it ushered him into the room there was a note of amusement in its voice. ‘No.’

As the baron’s eyes adjusted to the flickering light, he saw the room a little more clearly. It was an absurdly grand throne room. Tiered, scalloped balconies lined its walls and ranks of fluted columns divided it into a series of arcades. The walls and ceilings were made of polished white marble, crowned with elaborate, golden cornices and between each of the columns hung crystal chandeliers; each the size of a stagecoach and shimmering with hundreds of candles. The flames pulsated with a multitude of different colours, washing over the ranks of spinning figures and revealing the strangeness of their costumes: towering masks of plumed feathers and wings of scarlet silk, all trailing through the smoke in perfect synchronicity. Above them, the balconies were filled with crowds of musicians, playing instruments of such strange design that they looked more like

elongated limbs than pieces of brass or wood. As the baron stared at the incredible scene, he realised that not all of the lights were fixed in one place: dozens of birds were flitting around the room, swooping and diving in frenetic bursts, and trailing tiny lanterns from their tail feathers.

Beyond the dancers, there was a raised dais and a throne. The room was so long and the smoke so thick, that the baron struggled to make out the throne in any detail, but as the lights ebbed and throbbed, he saw that the chair cradled a slender figure, slumped idly in its deep cushions. He felt a thrill of excitement. This must be his host. Even with their faces hidden behind their masks, it was clear the dancers' gaudy display was intended for the amusement of this one person.

'Whose palace is...?' began the baron, but as he looked back, he saw that the hooded figure had vanished. He scanned the crowds and saw its swaying shoulders a few yards away, stumbling in and out of the dancers. He moved to follow, but it vanished behind a wall of smoke and whirling silk. He shrugged and looked back at the distant throne. It was obvious whose palace this was. Drawing himself erect, he strode confidently down the central arcade. As soon as he neared the other guests though, he faltered. He felt as though he had entered a hall of mirrors. The figures' costumes were even stranger when seen close up: bestial masks leered down at him and serpentine limbs sprouted from beneath bodices and cloaks. He began to doubt if all of the strange shapes were even costumes at all, they seemed so horribly animated. But it was the size of the figures that finally brought him to a confused halt. Some of the dancers towered over him, like willows, while others scampered beneath his legs. He clamped his eyes shut and pressed his hands over them, trying to block out the torrent of warped faces and impossible shapes. Awful realisation washed over him in a dizzy rush. 'How can they exist?' he groaned. As he stood there, trembling with delayed shock, the baron felt something shift, irrevocably, in his mind. He shook his head and hurried on, trying to fix his eyes on the throne. As he rushed through the dance, delicate fingers brushed against his face and breathy, foreign voices whispered in his ears: urging him to join the writhing crush of bodies. An intoxicating mixture of terror and arousal gripped him and he broke into a sprint.

With a sigh of relief, he reached the broad dais and stepped away from the dancers. A cerise carpet led up to the tall, baroque throne and, at its feet, a group of lithe, semi-clad figures were slumped in languid adoration of their monarch. The light here was a little clearer but the baron frowned, doubting his eyes. The figures that turned towards him had eyes as black as coal and flesh the colour of

virgin snow. Their beautiful, elfin faces were full of mischief as they rose to greet him, with forked tongues flickering from their pouting lips. To his shame, the baron found himself smiling coyly as they pressed around him. He could not even be sure if they were male or female, but as their long, elegant limbs entwined him, he felt a fierce rush of lust. Gentle fingers traced over his blistered skin and the baron closed his eyes with a moan of pleasure. After months of brutal war, his body yielded gratefully to their tender embrace. Soft, moist lips brushed against his ears and warm, voluptuous bodies pressed against his hands.

The baron was finally defeated.

His legs gave way and he collapsed gratefully into a forest of welcoming arms.

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