

WARHAMMER

CURSE OF THE NECRARCH



Against the forces of darkness, he will have vengeance

STEVEN SAVILE

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

**CURSE OF
THE NECRARCH**

Steven Savile

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

*To Marie, For loving me and saying so
For loving me for my faults, not despite them
You make me want to be the hero of my own life.*

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

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

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering Worlds Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever nearer, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

The Last Redoubt
Deep in the Hollowing Hills, Middenland
The Twilight of Humanity, 2032

The smell of old death was heavy in the air. It had its own peculiar reek. It was not sweet and cloying like new blood. It was thicker, rancid, pustulant and more human.

Snow swirled in the air, the wind raising white devils to spin and gyrate across the killing ground between the last redoubt and the death that waited beyond the immense black iron-bound doors of the castle. It was a remote hellhole. The thin air at altitude burned at his lungs, making it a chore to breathe. The caps of the rolling hills were crusted white, the trees burdened and bowed by the weight of the snow. Kastell Metz appeared to stand on an island in the heart of a frozen lake, its bulwarks and bastions dusted with a thick layer of unbroken white. In truth the lake was curved like a horseshoe. A narrow path ran beside the castle wall, skirting the edge of the lake and then ran the length of the skeletal trees before emerging on the plain. From any sort of frontal approach the illusion of the island fortification was perfect.

There were no guards shivering against the bite of the cold as they walked the walls.

There were precious few left to defend it from the dead and every one of them knew that nothing as fragile as flesh could save the living.

The buildings beyond the frozen lake lay in tatters, walls torn down, the clay tiles of the roofs shattered and trodden into the dirt along with the bones of their lives: brothers, sisters, mothers, wives, sons and daughters left to rot in the muck of defeat. It had been a vibrant town no more than a month ago. Like so many remote settlements the town was a haven that had sprung up around the castle to serve the needs of its defenders. For years it had been nothing more than a few wooden buildings. Then little more than a year ago those had been replaced with stone houses, giving the doomed settlement an air of permanence.

Felix Metzger stood on the battlements, a solitary point of calm amid the chaos of the thick falling snow. It settled in his grey hair and across the shoulders of his cloak and his bronze plate armour. Bitterness frosted within him. Down in the small courtyard the remnants of his knights stood over campfires, burning anything the enemy might find useful come dusk and their victory. Five hundred of them had defended the castle; thirty remained. He was immune to the cold, this mortal cold at least.

Another cold had settled inside him ever since he had begun thinking of himself as a dead man walking. It was not in his nature to admit defeat, but this creature with its vile, twisted bramble of a soul had undone him and everything he loved. He was broken inside. All he could think of was one final act of defiance, one last tilt. His home would fall, that was a foregone conclusion. The question now was the price he claimed for it. He had lived with the notion that an army was like a snake, sever its head and another would grow to take its place, but the denizens of death were different, mindless in their devotion to their liege, this accursed Korbhen who clung to the shadows, afraid of honest daylight.

Cut off his head and perhaps they would all fall?

Metzger was a simple man who lived for the people under his protection. He did not crave the glory of combat, the thrill of steel ringing on steel, the frenzy of bloodlust nor the calm that came in its wake. That did not mean he feared death, either, only that he did not seek out the endless winter

night like some men he knew. This new death of the Winter War was different. When the dead did not stay dead, how could the world as you knew it be trusted? When friends rose up at your back, suddenly enemies desperate to feed on the marrow of your bones, how could you look the living in the eye let alone raise a hand to strike down the dead?

His charge was simple: hold the castle and keep the pass open.

Even after all this time fighting them, Metzger understood little of his enemy, and that bothered him. A good soldier knew his foe intimately, and used that knowledge to his advantage, but after years of chasing vampiric shadows he knew as little now as he had on the first day he had taken up his sword. His head swarmed with a flurry of questions every bit as chaotic as the snowstorm that buffeted and bullied him. How did their vile resurrection work? How could they be bound once more to life and yet remain dead? Did Morr relinquish his hold on their souls or cherish them, leaving the flesh to rot? Were they robbed of an afterlife, cursed forever to live a half-death? Could they think and act of their own volition?

There was one question that haunted him more than any other: was there anything left of them, the real them, when they came back? Could they remember? Could they be saved?

Like so many other good men he wrestled with guilt and grief, unable to come to terms with the conflicting emotions that warred within him when he was forced to take up arms against the faces of men he had once called friends. Yet that was the nature of the conflict. Death wore familiar faces.

He watched a black bird of ill-omen battle through the sky thick with snow and alight on the ruined section of what had been the Temple of Sigmar in a flurry of black wings. A pale, cadaverous figure greeted the bird, taking it in its withered hands and holding it up to its face as though listening to the raven's caws. With the snows intensifying, the crook-backed figure shuffled away from view. It was easy to imagine those malignant shapes clawing out across the frozen lake to pierce the hearts of every last man huddled in the dubious safety of the redoubt. His fears were like that now, as insubstantial as shades, worming their way into his mind, undermining his resolve. It was easy to fear the unknown, natural even.

He was not a coward though, no matter how strong fear's grip on him. He was Felix Metzger, Knight of the Twisted Thorns. His strength was the flame-scalloped blade in his hand.

Metzger reached down instinctively for the reassuring comfort of his sword, letting his fingers linger on its hilt.

"Give me strength," he whispered, his words carried away from his chapped lips by the wind. Its only answer was a mocking lament, low and mournful, the voices of all the dead returning to plague him.

He drew little comfort from the knowledge that it would all be over soon, for better or for worse.

Dusk closed in, its darkness more stifling for the swirling snows.

Metzger's men huddled around their lanterns, watching them burn down with dread. Lanterns, bonfires and torches, anything that offered light had become more important than swords now that the hard-faced moons had emerged. Men tended the fires religiously, making sure they did not burn down during the night, for if they did there would be no light. The one thing they knew, without doubt, was that the dark was their enemy's territory.

Metzger shivered; it had nothing to do with the cold. He had never truly understood dread, even though he had lived through all of it, birth and death.

He had crouched beside his own son as he drew that final shuddering breath. His life, the lives of all he cared for, had been reduced to blood and ash. Now, on this gods forsaken castle, within this lake of ice, staring at the ruined walls of the temples, oast houses, granaries and mills, imagining the damned they sheltered, now he understood it. Dread was so much more than fear.

Metzger turned his back on the fallen town and walked back down the narrow stone stairwell carved into the wall to join his brother knights. He was desperately hungry but they had precious little in the way of food left. Like everything else the harsh winter and the drawn-out siege had worn

their stockpiles down to nothing. The conversations hushed, the men looking expectantly towards him.

There were ten faces around the fire, and ten more around the one across from it. Ten more were gathering faggots to feed the flames. They were running painfully low on firewood and had taken to burning anything that would light. The beast was toying with them. Metzger had no rousing words to lift their spirits. His brother knights knew as well as he did what they would face during the darkest part of the night; they had lived most of their lives either hunted by or hunting the beasts. That was the curse of the time they had been born into and that was how he thought of the dead, as beasts, monsters. Metzger hunkered down and rubbed his hands briskly before the low burning camp-fire.

“I want these roaring, lads, I want the fires licking the sky and turning night to day before the hour is out. Anything we’ve got, burn it. It ends here so let’s go out in a blaze of glory. The bronze armour is going to shine like the sun when I walk out across that drawbridge.”

Sarbin, the youngest of the knights, looked up at him. There was no hope in his pale blue eyes. “You’re going to sacrifice yourself, then?”

“No, lad. I’m going into the belly of the beast and I am going to cut its heart out,” Felix Metzger said with all the confidence he could muster. With the elegiac wind cutting across his words they sounded like hollow bluster.

“Then let us stand beside you.”

“No, lad. This is about honour. Men of my line have been charged with protecting this fortress for two hundred years. This is a line that can never be broken. Whether I live or die, these walls are Metzger every bit as much as my flesh is, and my father’s was. I will face the beast alone.”

Leiber rose, a look of utter disgust on his hawkish face. “No. With all due respect, that’s not the way it is going to be, sir. We’ve stood with you this far. We will stand with you at the end. We are not children to be sheltered from pain. We are men of the sword. We pledged our lives to protect this place and its people. If we die trying we die with honour.”

The others grunted and nodded their agreement.

“This isn’t the end, my friend,” Metzger said. He meant it. “Live or die, this wasn’t the end. The vampire’s kind infested the Empire, like rats carrying their stinking pox of unlife into every town and village. This isn’t the last battle. There will always be another beast that rises to wear the mask of evil. Human or inhuman monsters, this world of ours is made for them. When we stop fighting the monsters, that is when we succumb to true evil, my friend. Remember, the sun also shines on the wicked.”

“Yes, but it burns these ones to a cinder,” Koloman said, grinning at his gallows humour. The man’s weasel-like nose twitched, throwing long shadows across his acne-pitted skin.

“That it does. Now I will have no more arguments, you’ll have those fires blazing and that is an order.”

“They’ll burn, but we will not let you take the long walk alone, sir.”

And he knew they wouldn’t. They were good men.

Metzger left the circle, confident they would disobey him. They were brothers to the bone, not merely warriors. More, they were the Twisted Thorns. They would stand together and die together.

He sat alone, gathering his thoughts for a while. The world around him seemed so much more vital now that he had entered his last few hours, the colours more vibrant, the cold of the snow more chilling, the wind in his face brisker.

Metzger occupied himself so as not to brood, for what would be would be. He checked the fastenings of his greaves, methodically oiled the individual joints of his gauntlets and adjusted the lie of his mail shirt beneath the heavy bronze breastplate. It needed no thought; he had done each a thousand times over a thousand nights of conflict during his life. There was comfort in the preparations; they offered the illusion that he was in control of his destiny, that this last night was his and not the beast’s. Last of all, he drew his blade, a mighty flame-scalloped sword, and lay it

across his knees. The blade had tasted the blood of hundreds of men over the course of their time together and not once had the edge failed him. Metzger raised the crosspiece of the bronze hilt to his chapped lips and kissed the cold metal. "One last time, old friend," he whispered.

Behind him the first of the bonfires spat and cackled as the men threw more kindling on it. He saw them hacking up the refectory table and the oak benches, feeding them to the flames along with tapestries and other flammable treasures. The shadows of the flames danced all around him.

Metzger pushed to his feet.

He was an old man feeling every one of his years as he walked slowly through the falling snow towards the huge winch that would open the castle's wooden drawbridge. The ice that had filmed across the ground cracked, the sound rolling around the hills. It was an omen, Metzger decided. The thaw was coming. The snows could not last forever. Two more ravens flew in over his shoulders, resting on either side of the portico. As one, they craned their necks to gaze down at him with their jaundiced eyes. He did not care. The sound of the ice cracking could mean only one thing: the great winter was drawing to a close. The long night of the vampire counts faced the inevitable dawn that humanity had been longing for, and with the sun would come true death for the children of the night. With each successive step Metzger drew himself a little straighter, a little taller, sloughing the weight of the years and the burdens of so many failures from his shoulders.

The light from the fires blazed all around him, orange and red tongues licking at the sky. They lit up the spires of the citadel and the chapel and the length of the high curtain wall, throwing eerie shadows across the parapet walks along the barbican and the drum towers.

Metzger grasped the winch and turned it one cog at a time until the gates stood open, and strode out onto the wooden drawbridge.

He did not need to turn to know that the last remnants of the Twisted Thorns were gathering behind them.

The gatehouse dwarfed him, the keystone of its arch more than half his size again. The bronze plate caught every movement of the flames, transforming him into the sun as he drew the great blade and demanded, "Face me!" at the top of his lungs.

The Knights of the Twisted Thorns emerged from the castle behind him and formed a line, blades drawn.

The wind shifted, skirting the wall walk, bringing back with it the stench of the desecrated town beyond the frozen lake. The stink battered him back a step, but he recovered his balance quickly. He heard the scurry and scuttle of movement across the lake and the rasp and slither of insidious voices. He waited, the snow gathering in the chinks of his armour, squirming down his neck to dribble slowly and uncomfortably down the curve of his back. Visibility was poor but he knew they were coming.

"Face me, coward, one leader to another," he bellowed, sending the challenge at the barred gate. "Do away with the darkness and the shadow. Or are you afraid?"

Behind him one of the knights began to beat slowly on his shield with the flat of his sword. Another took up the beat a moment later. Then another until all of them were beating out a slow taunting rhythm. Metzger raised his sword, taking it in both hands. The flames danced along the length of the blade, bringing the cold metal to life.

Shadows thickened along the expanse of the ice lake. He could feel their eyes on him. The scrutiny made his flesh crawl.

With the snow swirling around him, Felix Metzger walked slowly out onto the ice, the cacophony of swords on shields ringing in his ears.

"Face me," he yelled again.

He saw long, delicate and utterly bloodless fingers reaching out of the snow towards him, black nails thick with crusted dirt. The long fingers became a hand, each fine bone picked out in sharp relief against the slack white skin.

Metzger's breath caught in his throat as the snows parted around the pallid, bald pate of the beast. The vampire revealed itself. It was not the beast he had imagined in his nightmares.

"You would face me, little man?" the creature wheezed, its voice a grating death rattle. It was less, and yet more than he had expected: less monstrous, more human. Bloodless lips parted on crooked and chipped tombstone teeth. The incisors appeared to have been filed to sharp points. "Here I am. Bring your sword and cut me down if you would."

It shuffled forward two paces, crook-backed and wizened.

"Cut me down, hero of the Empire, if that is what is in your heart."

The vampire threw its bony arms wide. The creature's clothes hung on it like rags. Snow devils swarmed around its legs. Clumps of white hair matted at the base of its skull. Only its black eyes set deep in the hollows of its head betrayed any sort of strength or cunning. They were soaked in moon madness.

Metzger stepped forward, licking his lips uncertainly. This was Korbhen? This decrepit thing? The swords of his men still rang out, matching the pounding of his heart. He stared at the beast he had hunted for so long, at a loss to explain its frailty. "Evil wears countless faces," he told himself, peering snow-blind into the darkness beyond Korbhen's cadaverous figure. He was looking for the trick. This wretched thing could not be the vampire that had plagued his protectorate. It could not possibly have the blood of so many staining its ruined hands. There had to be another, some monster with the strength to tear asunder the rules that bound his world together, capable of reaving the veil between life and death, capable of all the evil he had been forced to live through.

The vampire moved slowly, as though age had calcified its brittle bones and even this little movement was tortuous. Metzger stepped forward to meet it, feeling faintly ludicrous brandishing his great sword at such a pitiful creature.

"Death would be a mercy," Felix Metzger said.

"What would you know of death? Have you lived in its shadow for so long that you claim to know it?" Korbhen reached out a filthy fingernail and tapped it against the burnished bronze breastplate, matching the rhythm of the swords hammering shields behind Metzger. Each light touch placed a deeper and deeper chill in his heart. The vampire leaned in close, its bloodless lips grazing Metzger's ear as it whispered, "You think you can stop me with your big sword?" The vampire's malevolence saturated its voice. Metzger felt the chill thrill of the beast's sharpened teeth graze the skin beneath his ear. He lurched back to the sound of the creature's mocking laughter. The sudden shocking intimacy of the gesture chilled his blood more thoroughly than the snow or the wind ever could. Sickness clawed at his craw. He had thought he was prepared. He had been a fool.

The sound of drums intensified, taken up within the anonymity of the snow out over the lake and back towards the ruined town. They grew louder and louder in his ears with every heartbeat as the creatures sheltering within the snow hammered on the ice with fist and claw, drowning out the efforts of Metzger's men.

"You think a little fire and noise frightens me, Metzger? Yes, I know your name. I know all about you, Felix Metzger. The dead whisper to me, telling their tales, but then they fear me. The dead fear me. Can you comprehend the power instilled in these old bones?"

He saw them, indistinct shadow-shapes, leering faces, hungry eyes glittering in the swirling snowflakes, twisted and deformed. Not one or two, but hundreds of them writhing in the shadows out on the ice. Some of their faces bore the marks of their deformity, the skin slipped, eyeless sockets hollow, the cartilage of noses rotten away. With others it was less obvious, limbs shrunken, claws instead of hands, spines twisted, feet clubbed. The creatures lurking in the ward were truly monstrous.

"What are these monsters?" he breathed, his question barely a whisper.

"You have your soldiers, I have mine," Korbhen said, licking his pale lips.

The creatures came out of the snow, moving with shocking speed, their vile visages twisted and brutal as they hurled themselves at the line of knights. The Twisted Thorns surged out onto the ice to meet them.

The vampire's gaze held Metzger apparently incapable of movement as some wretched mesmerism gripped his muscles. By sheer force of will the old knight broke free, bringing his flame-scalloped blade up. He lunged at the vampire's heart.

The creature moved with a speed and force that belied its apparent frailty. The bones of its face contorted, the line of its jaw distending as the beast's thin, bloodless lips curled back. Even as Metzger buried his blade deep in the vampire's gut, thrusting up beneath the ribs spittle frothed from its mouth, silvered by the moon, as the vampire bared its fangs. In that moment, the hollow nothing between heartbeats, Felix Metzger saw the beast for what it was, but by then it was too late. The vampire threw itself further onto the knight's sword, teeth tearing out Metzger's throat with shocking savagery even as the warrior's blade missed its heart by the merest fraction.

Metzger lost his grip on the blade. It did not fall to the ice.

The sound of drumming on the ice drowned out the bronze knight's screams while the necrarch fed with barely controlled frenzy.

CHAPTER ONE

Beneath the Bone Garden

Kastell Metz, Deep in the Heart of the Howling Hills, Middenland

The Autumn of All Our Fears, 2532

“Peace! I want peace! Is that so much to ask?” Radu raged against the dying night. He clawed at his skull, raking the mottled flesh of his scalp with thick crusts of nail and then turned and slammed his clenched fists against the wall. Had there been blood in his veins it would have run from the deep graze he tore into his skin.

Radu’s footsteps haunted the vast subterranean chamber as he paced back and forth, back and forth, beneath the spectre of failure.

He wore a tattered black cloak over a close-fitting, brown, tailored topcoat and a blood-red cravat that covered his throat. The cravat was held in place by a five-pointed black iron pin, its head worn down by years of thoughtless caressing while the vampire worried through a conundrum. The cloak was spattered with smears of blood and alchemical treatments that had seared holes in the coarse fabric. The topcoat was of a cut that had ceased to be common centuries before, worn ragged at the cuffs to expose flesh that had rotted through to the bone.

A pustulent reek pervaded the creature’s lair with no breeze from the world above to stir it. Thin ribbons of turgid water dripped through the grave dirt and fell fifty feet to the floor, drip, drip, drip, leaving stagnant puddles to gather across the hard stone.

As Radu walked behind the single source of light, an oil burner, he cast an emaciated silhouette against the distant wall. As he stalked around the rim of the two great pits in the centre of the chamber his shadow stretched out, thin fingers growing impossibly long, ears taking on a bat-like sharpness to their shape even as all the strength seemed to be hollowed out of his form.

Every inch of the walls was covered in mad intricate scrawls in countless languages, pictograms, and numerals. There were drawings, far more complex than any cave drawing, rendering concepts as art in a struggle to capture the essence of their meaning. Snatches of enchantment and incantation were inked in beside precisely rendered alchemical formulae. It was all packed so closely together that the walls had ceased to make any sense to anyone but their creator. So many secrets, so many discoveries, had been blotted out by Radu’s hand as more ideas began to take root in his diseased mind.

“Why do you vex me so? What is so difficult to understand? This noise! This noise! How am I supposed to concentrate with this infernal racket? There is always so much noise.”

The chamber was shrouded in complete and utter silence.

The ceiling, fifty feet above his head was a vast writhing mass of leathery bodies, bats nesting in the chill confines of the cavernous enclosure. Moonlight leaked in through the vents the bats used for their passage to the world above.

“Go! Now!”

His two thralls, Casimir and Amsel, ever faithful, shared a look and emptied the bones they carried into the great pits. Then they shuffled out, leaving him alone with his despair. Radu was not to be reasoned with.

More bones were gathered in piles spread out across the granite floor, hundreds of thousands of them of all shapes and sizes. Decay had set in, leeching the marrow from the largest. Porous craters speckled the balls of the joints where calcification had already begun to occur. They had been in the

dirt too long with nothing to preserve them from the ravages of the elements. Radu picked up one the size of his forearm and hurled it at the mocking shadows. It shattered on the painted wall.

“Must you always weep, woman? Day and night, so much wretched sobbing. You wear my patience thin. Were you not already dead I would give you a reason to sob your heart out.” He turned away from the wall to face the spectre of a girl, a maid, standing in the centre of the largest pile of bones. She was naked and clutched at her chest, which still bore the savage wound that had killed her. The place where her heart should have been lay empty, her ethereal torso stripped back to bear the empty cavity. Tears streaked her cheeks, and her blue eyes were haunted by a melancholy so deep and profound that even without the wound to bear witness he knew she belonged to the dead of this place, bound still by grief or hate. She crossed her arms over her breasts when she saw him leering.

Hopping from foot to foot in a mad caper, Radu snatched up another bone and hurled it through her shade, cackling madly as he did so. She threw up her arms amid his rising laughter, losing substance and solidity before his eyes. He hurled a third bone, through her tears. “Now, go woman, lest you would have me reeve your soul, shred it and banish it to that darkness from which there is no haunting? Go, you are disturbing my work!”

She was already gone and only the ragged whisper of her weeping remained.

Grinning fiercely, Radu scattered the bones at his feet, dropped to his knees and began to paw through them, discarding some and stacking others reverently. He scrambled forward, pulling a piece of charcoal from his pocket and began scraping it across the hard stone, trying to record an idea that flowered fully formed in his mind. The charcoal stick snapped under the insistent pressure of his urgent writing. Cursing, Radu hurled a piece of the broken stick away in disgust and bent down again to continue, only to have lost the thought. He stood and scuffed his feet over the half-finished drawing, knowing that whatever it had been, the notion was lost to him now. It would return, in time, or it wouldn't. So many ideas didn't.

He sat amid the bones. The stench of the swamp still clung to them. The creature had been dead for so, so long, but the bones remembered. He let his crooked fingers linger, stroking the length of a single vertebrae almost half his size. “My beautiful one... you will rise again in majesty. You will soar.” As his fingers touched the bone an image of the creature swelled in his mind, the mighty beast owning both land and sky. “Soon, my beauty, soon.”

The greatest of all the bones, the skull of some enormous beast with its massive ridged brows and over-sized canine jaw, stood like an altar at the far side of the chamber. Even stripped of scale and flesh it had a daunting presence. Beside the skull row upon row of dusty tomes were stacked haphazardly, some open on cracked spines, others bound in human skin so brittle that he dared never open them lest their secrets be lost for eternity. Such knowledge had been amassed beneath the graveyard: words unspoken since antiquity, ancient wisdom, glimpses into the darkest arts, thoughts and philosophies from races long since lost to the world. Radu whispered the words of a simple incantation, causing one of the countless bones to rise up, separated from the rest, only to fall as his concentration slipped.

Screams filled the room, echoing off the walls as a coterie of spectres shambled through his workshop, none of them whole. Each bore the deformities of life, though in the shadows the illusion of wholeness survived. As they passed through the light the glamour-flesh failed and the wounds that undid them, noose burns, knife-wounds, gaping holes, hideous burns and the bloated rot of decay was exposed. They dragged ruined limbs, remembering the agonies of life.

“Begone!” Radu screeched, cursing the damned even as they fled his wrath. The shades disappeared into the charcoal-smearred walls.

Someone coughed behind him; an absurdly polite gesture. Radu wheeled around to see that Casimir had crept back into the subterranean chamber. His face bore none of the ruin that marred Amsel's, but death was new to Casimir. His long white hair, cinched in a ragged knot of string at the nape of the neck, had lost the lustre of life but had yet to flake away with the desiccated skin of his

scalp. Like Radu, he wore an immaculately tailored suit that had seen better days. Moths and maggots had eaten clean through the wool weave in several places. The leather of his left shoe had rotted through, baring pallid white flesh and thick ridges of bone.

“What?” Casimir shuffled uncomfortably. Radu enjoyed his uncertainty. “Speak up, man. What do you want?”

“I had a thought about the work, master,” Casimir said not meeting his eye.

“You had a thought about the work? How splendid. A thought. Did you catch it and write it down or did it flit like a bat out of your little brain?”

“It is about the bones, master,” the thrall said, and there was something almost sly about the way he said it that rankled with Radu.

The necrarch sneered, “The bones?”

“Yes, master.”

“Well are you going to share this thought of yours or am I going to have to pry your tongue out and have it whisper in my ear all by itself?”

Casimir tugged self-consciously at his ear and shuffled from foot to foot. Radu smiled, appreciating the deference. With his rotten cheeks the expression was far from friendly. Casimir craned his head towards the skull, speaking sotto voce, “If bones are like stone, is it possible they absorb the memories of things that happen around them?”

“Possible,” Radu mused, intrigued by the notion that a skull might retain the memories of the departed.

“If we can cause those memories to stir, perhaps the beast can remember itself.”

Radu’s smile turned cruel. “You think it falls apart because the beast cannot remember what it was? Preposterous.”

“No, master,” Casimir said his tone shifting again, wheedling, “not precisely. May I demonstrate? It is far more effective to see than to hear.”

Amused, Radu gestured towards the pile of bones. “Go ahead.”

Casimir drew back the ragged sleeves of his topcoat, like a prestidigitator undertaking the simplest legerdemain. He took a small alembic from the depths of his pocket. It contained some sort of cloudy white distillate. Casimir uncorked the tube and began to chant slowly, the rhythm of his words building momentum as he agitated the liquid. He crumbled something in his fingers and added it to the alembic, causing the liquid to shift from white to chartreuse. Next, as his incantation intensified, he withdrew a fragment of glass, which he crushed and flaked into the mixture. The chant took on speed. His words were precise, each syllable clipped so that they did not run into one another. He knelt, still gently agitating the alembic, and drew a small bone-handled knife from the same pocket he had taken the glass tube from. His eyes had rolled into his skull, the pupils disappearing. Still his hands moved with uncommon surety, as he deftly peeled away slithers of bone from one of the larger vertebrae. The bone went into the alembic, the final ingredient.

Radu watched with barely masked fascination, quite perplexed by Casimir’s trance. The distillate had turned perfectly clear before Casimir ceased shaking it. Then, with surprising aggression, the thrall shattered the alembic in the centre of the bones and raised his face to the distant ceiling. The bats above mirrored the agitation below, their leathery wings astir as one by one they woke from their graveyard sleep.

“Rise!” Casimir shouted, all meekness vanishing from his voice. At the sound of his cry hundreds of bats burst into shrieking flight, their shrill screeches deafening in the confines of the subterranean chamber. Curious acoustics made the noise move around them in the same tight spiral as their wild flight. “Rise!” Casimir commanded again, driving the bats towards the vents and out into the first shadows of twilight.

Radu was not watching the bats. He stared, rapt by his thrall’s theatrics as Casimir beseeched the bones to miraculously come to life. He wanted to laugh, but he felt a frisson in the stale air that had

not been there a moment before. Something was happening. Casimir punctuated each new word with a sharp flick of the wrist, urging the bones to rise. No, not the bones, Radu realised, captivated by the genius of his underling. It was no mere reanimation. It truly did appear as though Casimir's invocation conjured the memories out of the bones, his exhortations willing a vaporous ghost of what once had been into the air so that, for a moment at least, the great beast's skeleton dominated the huge chamber.

Radu gazed upon it with nothing short of awe, though he masked it well. It disturbed him that his thrall had rendered the physiognomy of the wyrm so beautifully. He moved forward, reaching out to touch the ghost-light as the memory of each bone came together to complete the whole. Just as it was no mere reanimation, it was no mere illusion either. Radu's calloused fingers thrilled to the touch, the energy flowing from the ghost-light through him as blood once had. "She is beautiful," he breathed, captivated by the thickening of the memory. The longer Casimir maintained the invocation the stronger the memory of the bones became. The first red muscles coagulated around the sheen of bone and then the fatty white of sinew and more, huge pulsing sacs of lung and pounding heart within the cage of bone, and still more as Casimir's words gave it body.

The more the great wyrm remembered itself, the more Radu forgot himself.

The ghost of fire roiled in the guts of the beast.

Sinew and tendon slowly plated over with ethereal scales.

The ghost-memory was so real that Radu turned to look back over his shoulder at the huge skull still on the stone floor at the other side of the room. The wyrm dwarfed him, standing almost ten times his height, barely caged within the huge chamber, the remembered wings spanned tip to tip two hundred feet, and were furled up at the beast's sides as it lowered its massive head to stare at the jumble of broken bones before it.

"Beautiful," Radu said again, and the ghost opened its jaws to breathe fire. He stood unmoving in the heart of it as twin gouts of flame seared the air around him, but there was no heat. The flames roared, turning everything to blood. Radu stared as the unforgettable fire coiled around him, cradling his corrupt flesh in what should have been a cleansing flame that stripped him down layer by layer, from flesh to bone to soul. Then the fire in the beast's heart burned out, as though it understood that its shade was no match for its true form, that death denied it might and majesty, and the last lingering lick of flame played with his outstretched hands.

The great door slammed behind him, the sound resonating through the stones of the floor and walls. The unexpected noise disturbed Casimir's concentration, causing the memory of the bones to unravel as quickly as it had come together. The thrall shrieked his pain as the flame vanished from around his fingers, leaving the flesh untouched. The breaking of the spell brought Casimir to his knees, hands pressed against his temples as the backlash of magic tore into him. Radu had no pity for the thrall's failure. He turned to see Amsel shuffling into the room, the crook-backed thrall dragging his lame foot. He clutched a large sack of bones.

His eyes glimmered with the last moment of the memory's reflection. He dumped the bones into the nearest pit. "The master is strong in death magic."

Radu looked from Amsel to Casimir; he was right, he was strong in the ways of the death wind, but Casimir had just done something that he had never even imagined.

He recalled the sly tone that Casimir had used before raising the memory of the bones. Hearing it again in his mind it sent an icy shiver down the length of Radu's spine.

He watched his thrall with distrust as he gathered the remains of the alembic from within the pile of bones.

"The distillate, of course. Yes, I had ventured such an invocation months ago, but judged it little more than pretty lights. You disappoint me, Casimir, I had hoped you had something of interest to show me."

"Sorry, master," the thrall said, but this time Casimir defiantly met his eye.

CHAPTER TWO

Deeper than Bones

Kastell Metz, Deep in the Heart of the Howling Hills, Middenland

The Autumn of All Our Fears, 2532

Amsel sought refuge in the darkness.

He moved slowly, dragging his ruined fingers across the stones.

“Casimir, Casimir, Casimir, always Casimir: master’s favourite, master’s lickspittle, master’s chosen. Casimir the ugly, Casimir the liar, dirty stinking Casimir with treachery in his heart. Why can’t the master see like we can? How does the traitor blind the master to his ambitions? How can the master not see?” And at the root of his grief, “Why does the master ignore us? Why? How have we wronged the master? How have we disappointed him that he chooses to ignore us in favour of that damned Casimir? What of us? What of Amsel, oldest, most loyal, what of me?”

The dark was his friend. It did not judge. It did not mock. It did not flaunt its superiority.

There was so much secret darkness hidden within the castle: chambers long sealed away, lost to cobwebs, spiders and ghosts; passageways that reached out like wizened fingers beneath the lake into the belly of the hills; the warren of cells that had housed the screams of countless fallen foes banished into that same darkness that Amsel craved; the crypts with their sarcophagi and effigies, stacked with rotten grave goods; and then there were the true secrets, the places only he had found, deep in the foundations of the castle where the stones rooted into the hills; the walls that were not walls, that slid and moved beneath his touch, their mechanisms rusty but still serviceable. These were the dark places he returned to again and again. Some were shown to him, others found. He had not yielded up all the secrets of the castle to Radu, some he kept for himself.

He dragged his lame foot behind him, his gait a lopsided shuffle-drag, shuffle-drag. As he moved down the claustrophobic passageways he breathed a single word again and again, snuffing out the alchemical globes that stubbornly held some trace of light in their glass hearts. The globes were Radu’s creation, meant to be used up above, to light the hovels of the coterie of the damned that they had gathered to them. He had stolen a few, using their long light to help root out more nooks and crannies where he could be alone to think and scheme.

His footsteps echoed their peculiar echo. He heard the mockery of eternity in them, the deformities of his flesh that would stay with him forever and beyond. His flesh was a cloak that even in death he could not cast off, a weakness he could never be free of. He loathed it, just as he loathed all flesh.

In the darkest places of his mind he imagined stripping the world of its flesh, turning the perfect footsteps of the living into a haunting reminder of their mortality, and draining out the sustenance that was blood from their veins and scorching the meat with hideous fire until nothing of the flesh remained. He kept those thoughts behind his wretched face, secret, hidden for now.

The master would not overlook him for long. Oh no, Radu the Forsaken would see him as he finally shed the shadows. Until then he would find peace down below, deeper than bones, where the others never came. Radu had made the vault beneath the cemetery his haven, and rarely left, living in the filth of his experiments. Casimir clung to the high places, tending the ravens and laying his plans to oust them all. Only Amsel truly understood the nature of the castle, but then he had lived there longest.

The passage ended in a stone wall that was not there. Amsel closed his eyes as he stepped into and then through the false wall. Beyond it lay a thick door that still bore the vestiges of the familial crest of the first inhabitants of Kastell Metz all those centuries before.

It was a sigil he associated with the first master of the castle, Korbhen, though it was not the great necrarch lord's mark but one he had stolen from the castle's inhabitants.

The mysteries of Korbhen's horde had lain hidden behind that door for so long: pages written in the blood of his sire, on pages cured from his flesh and bound in his skin as he moved towards ascension, unburdened by the bonds of flesh. Those pages contained all the wisdom of the creature that was Korbhen's father in death, and such secrets they were. Precious few remained.

He would make the new master value him. He would bring him a treasure such as his greed could only imagine. The thought thrilled him. The master was wise. He had foreseen all eventualities, even this, the arrival of a rival. His fingers went to his throat, feeling out the vein where once his pulse had been so strong. He wore the wound still that had welcomed him into this second world of ghosts and shades where blood meant so little.

Unlike so much of his life before, he remembered still the heady tang of the blood kiss as if their lips had just parted. His entry into a second life had been so much sweeter than his entry into the first, his mother squatting in an alley, amid a mulch of rotting cabbages, cauliflowers and seed potatoes that had been thrown out from the market the night before. She told him later that she had almost abandoned him to the animals and let them eat their fill, but something had stayed her hand.

It was not love, for she had never loved a thing in her life, not even the men she rutted with; not compassion, for the life she cursed him too was worse than death at the jaws of the dogs. Perhaps it was hate, because she surely hated him every day of his stinking life. In comparison his second birth, into death, had been tender despite the pain. He would do anything for the master who shared his blood, and to think that he had first turned up at the gates of Kastell Metz looking to kill him. Amsel opened the door.

The familiar smell greeted him before he set foot inside. The pages retained the perfume of their maker even after all this time. He stood in the doorway, breathing it in. There were two low shelves in the centre of the room, and glass cabinets against one wall. Where there had been so many treasures now there was only broken glass and empty shelves. The wonders were gone, save for the single sheet that lay beneath the glass of the last one. Korbhen had pillaged most of the arcane treasures before abandoning the castle in search of von Carstein's book, lost all these years since the fall of Drakenhof at the end of the Winter War.

He looked down at the single sheet of sun-cured skin in the last cabinet. The bloody ink had paled to the point of illegibility.

Amsel cleared the splinters of broken glass away with great care and lifted the skin of the great vampire out. He handled it reverently, but still it was brittle beneath his clumsy fingers. A fragment from the edge crumbled away, taking half a word with it. Amsel could not read the text; it had taken him three centuries to learn his letters and how to inscribe his own name. These words were older than any language he had mastered in the years since. All he knew was that this one page contained secrets so great that they would damage Casimir in the new master's eyes, restoring his reliance upon Amsel. The master had promised him.

"The master is wise," Amsel crooned, cradling the page to his chest as he left the hidden chamber. He walked slowly. He did not breathe light back into the alchemical globes. There was no need; he knew every twist and turn intimately and he preferred the darkness.

"What is this, fool?"

"I found it, master," Amsel said, still not showing the blood-inked side of the cured page to Radu.

"You disturb my studies to show me something you found? What are you, some kind of child needing my approval? A kitten bringing me a gift? You should be more like Casimir. He applies his

intellect to the problems we face, he does not squirrel himself away in the dark, making his home down with the rats. Show me this treasure, then and let me judge its worth,” Radu said with disgust. Radu had been in a vile temper for days. The beast refused to rise; no matter what invocation he applied, the bones remained bones.

The threshold of death was not so great or daunting that it could not be crossed. Something stymied the necrarch’s work, some piece of wisdom he lacked. Ignorance made a monster of him. He paced the perimeter of the workshop, scratching out formulae and pictograms as his anger and frustration rose. An entire stretch of wall was now solid black, whatever had been beneath it lost forever, and as he scrubbed out the writing he raged. Amsel moved quietly, creeping through the detritus strewn across the workshop floor soundlessly; soundlessly because he heard the vile name Casimir trip off the new master’s tongue.

The way Radu said it, the syllables dripping with acid as they left his mouth, brought pleasure to Amsel’s withered heart. He lurked, hoping for more, a hint as to the reason behind the loathing, but Radu fell silent, scrubbing and scrubbing at the charcoal erasing all traces of the words beneath. When he hadn’t uttered a sound for the longest time, Amsel dared approach with his prize.

Still the master vented his scorn upon him.

“Paper? You bring me paper? Does it have words on it, this miraculous paper, or is it blank?”

“It is not paper, master,” he said, holding it up before his face and inhaling to emphasise his point. “You can still smell the fragrance of the man beneath the skin.”

“Cured flesh? Well it isn’t the best writing material, the ink fails to take to it, over time it fades. I suppose that is why it is blank, anything interesting must have soaked into the flesh. Here, let me have it.”

Amsel lowered the page from his face and gave it to Radu. The necrarch turned the page over in his hands. His eyes betrayed nothing as he saw the faint scratchings of the dead language that remained. He mirrored Amsel, lifting it to his nose to inhale the essence of the man who had sacrificed his flesh for the word. Still his dead eyes showed no hint of pleasure as he breathed deeply of the brittle skin.

“There is nothing remotely interesting about this find of yours. You bother me with trifles. The markings are gibberish, the man himself of no consequence. I am disappointed, Amsel. I thought more of you than this. Go, and do not bother me again unless you have something of worth to say.”

Amsel held out his hand to take the page back.

“Oh no, I shall keep this, I think,” Radu said. “I am sure I can get some use out of it. I can bleach the remnants of ink from it and use it again to record one of my own formulae, perhaps.”

“The master is wise,” Amsel said, leaving Radu alone with the page and its hidden secrets, satisfied that he had planted the seed of curiosity no matter how vehement the necrarch’s denials.

Alone, Radu examined the page.

He did not recognise the script, which in itself piqued his curiosity. He had mastery of thirty-seven tongues, more than even his own sire. He had dedicated decades of his existence to the accumulation of languages, of graphology and syntax, the similarities so many tongues had at their roots, showing a common heritage, and so much more. Yet here was a page unearthed in his own home in a script he had never seen, bearing no similarity to any of the tongues he was familiar with.

Which, he surmised, meant it was no script at all, but if not a script, then what?

The blood used to ink it had faded to the point that some symbols were obscured, and around the edges of the page decay had claimed more than a few others.

There were several repetitions within the markings, the same brush strokes rendered again and again, where other symbols appeared but once. Curiously, a few of the symbols were misplaced on the page, slightly above the line of the rest, or slightly below.

The penmanship was so intricate that it was difficult to imagine that the displacement was due to carelessness, which meant it was almost certainly deliberate.

“A cipher,” Radu mused, guessing the nature of the page, but what secrets did it unlock? And more pertinently, how could he ever hope to possess those secrets even after deciphering the page?

Secrets within secrets? His mind raced with the possibilities.

Some of the symbols were relatively simple, intersecting lines, spheres and hemispheres, others were more intricate. The repetitions would be the key. In any language certain double letters revealed the intent of the cipher’s creator, but without somewhere to begin it would prove if not impossible, then incredibly difficult to work any meaning out of the greater text.

His fingers lingered on the cured skin, recognising the stench of death upon it. Though it possessed no magic of its own, this was no mere page that Amsel had rendered unto him. He needed to know more about the page, and where the thrall had found it. Had Amsel recognised the taint of the blood kiss that still clung to the skin? Radu crouched over the page, inhaling its intoxicating perfume once more. He imagined the layers of fragrance hidden just below the most pungent: the streets the vampire walked, the flesh he tasted, his desires and discoveries all seeped into that single page so long ago. He would have done almost anything for the chance to inhale them, drawing the essences of all those forgotten memories into him that he might learn from them.

Laying the page aside, he went in search of Amsel.

Considering the underground labyrinth and the above ground sprawl, the castle was huge, with countless hiding places for the lame thrall. That Amsel knew it far better than anyone else, having lived all of his life within the walls, exploring its dark and deep places, made him almost impossible to find if he did not want to be found.

Though they all had chambers within the towers, Amsel was a nester by nature and had several nooks and crannies that he had feathered for comfort out of the life of the castle, all below ground. It would take him the best part of the night to track down the errant thrall if he had to traipse to even half of them. The alternative was to have the others look for him.

Loath to leave his workshop with so much undone, Radu chose the lesser of two evils. He pushed open the great double doors of the workshop, for a moment wearing their shadows like ethereal wings, and stalked out. He would have Amsel brought to him in the high tower, close to the soothing radiance of Morrslieb and Mannslieb, and as far away as possible from the places where Amsel felt so comfortable.

The workshop was annexed to the old cells, hollowed out from the rock beneath the graveyard, and linked to the main keep by a narrow twisting passageway. Damp seeped through the smooth stones, lending them a gloss that caught the glow of the alchemical globes. The ceiling was low, barely clearing the height of Radu’s bald head, and the floor sloped upwards as it neared the cells, causing him to hunch slightly as he walked. The texture of the stones changed, as well, from natural stone cut away to inlaid blocks used to hold back the weight of the dirt. The new material brought with it new odours, most redolent the musk of the grave dirt it held back and the brackish water that stagnated in it.

He found two lost souls in the cells, Rakeh and Rane. The twins looked at him with the disturbing cataract-filled white stare they shared. It was the only thing they did share: Rakeh was thin to the point of emaciation, hollow eyes and sallow skin, his long greasy hair pure white, while Rane was rotund and ruddy, with spikes of ebon-black hair greased into points.

“Find Amsel, and when you do, bring him to the Galas Tower. I shall be with the ravens, enjoying the moons.”

“As you wish...” Rane said, dusting off his meaty hands on his coarse apron, “...master,” Rakeh finished.

The wind carried the dreams of mortals, spilled by twitching sleep-fevered lips and whipped away.

Radu braced himself against one of the machicolations, the twin moons casting his twisted shadow down to the abutments below. A few of Casimir's ravens slept with their heads beneath their oily black wings, creating the illusion of a row of headless guardians ringing the tower. They were not his chosen watchers; the carrion eaters lacked the finer qualities of his beloved bats who could find their way unerringly without sight, using echolocation to sound out the landscape they needed to navigate. Yet many of his kind craved the company of the death eaters, seeing them as some sort of kindred creature. They did make a better meal, he thought, looking at one of the fat-bellied birds.

The hills were laid out before him like waves crashing up against the shore of his home. The lake, alive with small ripples agitated by the breeze, had taken on a sickly green pallor from the moon's glow.

The waters had risen, effectively isolating the castle. A peculiarity of the mechanisms he had devised caused the tidal ebb and flow of this land-locked lake high in the Howling Hills. It had been no huge feat of engineering but rather a subtle enchantment of the subterranean waters, causing them to swell with the rising of the moon, and the water level of the lake to rise just as a real tide would.

Behind the curtain wall, the castle's ward teemed with its own peculiar life. From his vantage they looked like ants marching in chaotic lines, intersecting but somehow never colliding. He spent so much of his life below ground, wrapped up in his experiments that he sometimes forgot about the coterie Amsel had gathered here, offering them refuge in the anonymity of the mountains. They were damned, one and all, deformed children cast out by bitter parents, bagged and thrown in the rivers to drown, culled by shanks and left to die in the dirt, wretched creatures tainted by sickness and deformity to become freaks in their parents' eyes. The castle was their sanctuary, Amsel the one they followed. Radu suspected it was his thrall's club foot that made him sympathise with the freaks, styling them as his own coterie of the damned.

The trapdoor opened behind him.

Without turning, Radu said, "You found him?"

"Huddled..." Rakeh answered, his reedy voice betraying his eagerness to please.

"...in the crypts," Rane finished.

"Excellent." Radu turned to face the three of them as they emerged. "Now leave us."

"Yes..."

"...master."

The wooden trap closed behind them, fitting snugly into the chiselled stone. Like so much of the castle the fit was precise, the craftsmanship undeniable. Alone with the birds, he said to Amsel, "These tortured souls you collect, the deformed urchins unwanted by the rest of the world..." and left the sentence hanging.

"Yes, master?" Amsel said, shuffling towards the stone crenellations.

"Why do you tend to them? Are you thinking, perhaps, of turning them against me?"

"No, master."

"Are you sure, Amsel? Do you harbour ambitions? Do you look at me and think perhaps you might usurp me?"

"No, master."

"Then, why do you seek out the sick and the lame and bring them to my door?"

"Not the sick and the lame, master," Amsel said, staring down at his feet as though the worn-smooth stone beneath them was the most interesting thing in the world.

"No? When I look at them that is what I see, the freaks of the Empire given refuge. What are they then, if not your private army?"

"Tainted," Amsel said, as though that one word explained it all.

“Tainted?” Radu repeated the word, his inflection more quizzical, as though the word explained nothing.

“Their deformities mean they are less than human.”

Radu turned back to the edge of the battlements and peered down at the shuffling legions of wretched souls that had erected hovels within the ward of the castle, at the filthy tarpaulins that covered them, forming a tent-city where the stables and latrines had once been.

“Good. Never forget, your freaks exist under my sufferance, not yours, Amsel. Like everything in this place, they are mine.” The moon bathed his white face with its deathly pallor as he craned his neck, leaning in threateningly. “Tell me, do you plan on making a study of the degeneration? It could prove interesting... useful even. Study, dissect, find the secret and replicate it. Perhaps you should look into harnessing some of the more interesting taints as they manifest.”

“Yes, master.”

“Good, good. Now, this thing you brought me...” Radu said, leaving the rest of the sentence hanging.

“Yes, master?” Amsel said, shuffling towards the stone crenellations.

“Although it is quite worthless, it intrigues me. I would know more of its origins. Where did you happen upon it? Somewhere within the castle?”

“Yes, master.”

“That was an invitation to tell me more about your discovery, Amsel.”

“Yes, master.”

Radu swallowed down his frustration. “I will try again. Where did you find it? Describe everything to me, leave out no details, I would paint as full a picture in my mind as may be painted from words alone.”

“Yes, master. It was in one of the old places my sire used to haunt, master. There are many such troves, now plundered, within the roots of the main keep.”

“Indeed,” Radu mused, “and you just stumbled upon it today?”

“Yes, master, or no, master,” Amsel said, enigmatically. He twitched visibly, casting fretful glances left and right as though distrustful of the open sky. Radu enjoyed his discomfort.

“Well, which is it? It cannot be both,” Radu said, impatiently.

“The inference was that I knew it was there all along, master. To that, the answer was no, master. The words themselves suggested I happened to find it by accident, to that the answer was yes, master.”

“Are you playing games with me?”

“No master, I am being precise, as you taught me. I sought to please.” There was something about the way the thrall said it that suggested a different truth hidden within his subservient words.

“So this was the first time you had been in this hidden chamber?”

“No master, not the first, but the first time I had fallen through the wall.”

“You are making no sense, Amsel.”

“I would show you, master. The old walls, many of them are not what they seem.”

“Show me,” Radu said, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Gratefully, Amsel opened the trap and led him down into the old tunnels, down and down, deeper than the bone yard, deeper than the crypts, deeper than the very first stones of the keep, and still down.

He followed the cripple to a dead end, only to see Amsel shuffle through what appeared to be solid stone and disappear behind the illusion.

“Follow, follow,” Amsel’s urgent voice said, apparently from nowhere.

“Curious,” Radu muttered, reaching out tentatively. He felt the familiar tingle of magic as his fingers penetrated the wall. It was not strong, but it was effective. Even this close, the stones

appeared solid. He brushed the illusion aside like a spider's web and stepped through to the other side. The passageway continued another dozen feet, ending in an open door. "And you say you simply stumbled through the wall by mistake?"

"Yes, master," Amsel said, turning his face away from him. Radu did not believe him for a moment. He approached the door, noting the sigil carved into the heavy wood. It was a crest he was intimately familiar with.

He pushed the door fully open and walked inside the room. With a single whispered command he brought a faint bluish light to life in his palm. Its radiance, though meagre, was enough to see that there was nothing left but broken glass and empty shelves. He walked through the debris slowly, his long fingers lingering over every inch of bare wood and shattered glass as though his touch could be enough to draw back some of the knowledge the room had once held. The light emphasised every crag and crease of his bald head, ageing him centuries with its callow caress.

"And there are more such rooms?" he asked.

"Yes, master, many more, hidden away by the old families of the castle."

"And you know them all?"

"Oh, no, no master, not all. A few, I have found a few."

"And they were all pillaged like this one, or did they perhaps have something of value left?"

"Nothing, master. All looted like this."

"Korbhen," Radu muttered. It was the only logical solution. "Well there is nothing here. It is all a waste of time, like the page itself."

"Yes, master."

CHAPTER THREE

Shadow Tongues

Kastell Metz, Deep in the Heart of the Howling Hills, Middenland

The Autumn of All Our Fears, 2532

Radu retreated to his rooms to be alone with the page.

He pored over the symbols, certain that the clues to cracking the cipher lay in the raised letters and the dropped ones. The flaw in the scribe's work seemed far too deliberate to have been anything else. Laying a fresh vellum beside the page Radu recorded each of the raised letters first, curious to see if they made any more sense removed from the clutter of the text. He repeated the process with the subscript letters, scratching carefully on the blank page, each symbol rendered in smooth script, and utterly meaningless. The second set of symbols, released from the rest, made no more sense.

A different language perhaps? A substitution code?

Could it actually be as simple as that? He counted the symbols he had just copied, but there were twenty-nine different ones, too many for the alphabet.

Just one word, a single one, would give him a place to begin.

He looked for matching pairs of symbols, reasoning that they must represent double letters, but even with that it was a long stretch to even interpreting a four letter word from the apparently random twists and squiggles of bloody ink.

Frustrated, he sent the pot of ink sailing across the room to explode in a Rorschach stain all over the soft white stones of the wall. He stared at the stain for a full minute, looking for some kind of fortuitous pattern hidden within it, but there was no such divination waiting to save him from the torments of ignorance.

He turned back to the page yet again, convinced there had to be something in it he had overlooked, something so painfully obvious that he had dismissed it in search of a deeper meaning.

There was nothing.

The symbols were not alchemical. They were no language he had ever encountered. Were they perhaps numerical? No, a base of twenty-nine was a nonsensical counting system, so not that.

"But what?" Radu railed at the document, his gnarled fingers inches from tearing the page up in frustration. "WHAT?"

Why go to such extreme lengths unless you are trying to hide something truly valuable?

Nights of obsessive study did nothing to illuminate the text. Radu cracked his knuckles, drumming his thick dirt-crusting nails on the wooden surface of the writing table. Radu cracked the bones in his neck, rolling his crook-backed shoulders. He dreamt of the page, the symbols blurring and moving, lifting off the page and rearranging themselves to taunt him. He heard the whispered voices of the night gaunts promising the truth if he burned the page, and laced in and out of the hallucinations, a face conjured for the skin and blood to own, a face to demand answers from.

He awoke on the sixth morning in a tangled mess of sweat, the inside of his coffin lid bearing the frantic scratch marks where during his slumber he had tried to claw his way out of the box.

It wasn't until he walked back into the workshop to see Casimir hunched over the scattering of bones that it occurred to him there was more than one way to skin this particular cat.

"I have a task for you, a test."

"Master?" Casimir asked, looking up.

“I have prepared a challenge, to evaluate your learning, Casimir. You show signs of aptitude, but signs are not always correct, omens turn sour, hope fades. I would see how well you apply process to a conundrum. If you fail me, your time here is done. Is that understood?”

“Yes, master,” Casimir said, standing and brushing the bone-dust from his hands. “You are wise, master. I shall not fail.”

“I trust not,” Radu said, smiling callously. “You will accompany me to my tower. I will watch your methods with interest.”

“Of course, master.”

* * *

Radu stood by the empty fireplace, watching as Casimir pored over the sun-cured skin. His cheek ticked every time something struck him as interesting, Radu noted, wondering if perhaps the same tell would give away more truths in different circumstances. He chose, very deliberately, to remember it.

As he expected, Casimir approached the problem much the same as he had, noticing the irregularity of the script.

“It is a key of sorts,” Casimir said eventually. “Indeed it is. Good. Is that all you have gleaned from it thus far?”

Casimir touched the skin for the first time, lifting his index finger to his lips and licking the residue off.

“No, master. It was not made this day, or any day recently. The blood is old.”

“Very good. Tell me more.”

“I believe the page is cured skin.”

“It is.”

“Old blood and cured skin, testaments and revelations were often made on such, were they not?”

Radu nodded, the thought had crossed his mind, but surely if the page were part of some religious revelation it would have been at least vaguely intelligible. What was the point of the gods using mortals as conduits if they did not record their wisdom in a way that was readily open to all?

“The symbols appear to mean nothing, but I suspect they must or you would not have set the challenge.”

“Indeed,” Radu said.

Casimir raised his index finger to his nose, inhaling its fragrance as though it held the intoxicating tang of martyrs’ blood still on it. “Could it be that the blood itself is the key?” He looked at Radu for encouragement. With none forthcoming, he touched the script, tracing his fingertip over the curl of symbols. “*Yes!*” he said, breathing the gift of death in to his lungs. “Most curious. Not a religious revelation then, given the nature of the blood.”

“Your reasoning?”

“There are few instances of blood rites recording written words, and bar a few of the darkest practices, none are particularly religious in nature. The presence of blood, a poor substitute for ink at the best of times leads me to believe that there is more here than a few words of worship.”

“Indeed,” Radu said, his smile genuine this time. “So if not the wisdom of some deity, what?”

Casimir placed his hand flat on the page. “It will take me a few hours to prepare the alembic, but I believe you seek to test my skills and more than merely reading and reasoning.”

“Perhaps I do,” Radu said, excited by the possibility that his thrall was indeed fathoming a path through the riddles of the page that had eluded him these long days and nights. “The path to wisdom entails many obstacles that must be negotiated, and not all of them are obvious.”

“Skin and blood, not so different from bone.”

“An interesting notion. You intend to replicate your experiment from before?”

Casimir nodded, "Who better to tell you the secrets of the book than the book itself?"

"The writer, perhaps?" Radu said, a trace of irony in his gravelly voice.

"What is to say we can't learn one from the other?"

Radu nodded slowly. "We might find a home for you here yet, Casimir. Go, prepare your alembic. I will meditate on your progress. Take caution, the test is not yet passed. In every achievement there is failure, in every failure the seeds of achievement."

Casimir returned with the rising moon. He cradled the small glass tube of distillate in his hands. He laid it down on the writing table beside the other gewgaws of his invocation.

Without waiting for permission he broke away a tiny piece of the page that contained both skin and blood, and crumbled it into the alembic.

Radu watched, eagerness etched into the deep crags of his vile face as Casimir powdered the root and the glass and began to agitate the tube, taking it through the transitions of colour and clarity until it became pure. The invocation was subtly different this time, the emphasis on the words shifted from syllable to syllable, the tonal quality of his voice more demanding as he called forth the shadow of skin and blood, urging it back to the flesh.

Radu breathed deeply of the Amethyst wind, Shyish, feeling it surge all around him. Casimir's mastery of the wind of magic was undeniable. His voice rose and fell, altering fractionally as he threw his arms wide, urging the wind to gather within him, its dark majesty to recall the man from his parts, bringing back the soul that had flown so that it might sing one last song.

Casimir hurled the tube down between his feet. The distillate splashed across the floor and over the ruined leather of his shoes.

"Return," he whispered, and more forcefully, "return!"

It came first as a single wisp curling up from the shattered remains of the alembic.

That one strand thickened, coalescing into a ribbon. A second ribbon curled around it, and a third. The window panes, streaked and bubbled, buckled and shattered to let the sighs of mortal anguish in with the gusting wind. Sorrow was its name. Radu leaned heavily on the support of the fireplace as the sharp-edged splinters of glass cut at them both, swirling and slicing. None bit deep, but they stung.

"Return!" Casimir commanded, bullying the reticent spirit back into shape and form so that it might answer their demands.

Radu tasted its bitterness on the wind, its loathing. He opened his mind to it, drinking in all the grief it cared to share. The sheer unbridled power of it was intoxicating. He revelled in the death wind, losing all sense of self as the vastness of nothing threatened to overwhelm him.

Between them the winds merged with the mist, adding substance to it.

"Return!"

Casimir's bellow brought the first faint features of a hook-nosed face out of the swirling mists. A broad, atavistic brow and cruel teeth followed, sheering the veil as the ghost of the dead man tore and snapped at it, desperate to be free. Its eyes blazed madly, the depths of hatred infinite and vile as the memory of life reared. Radu felt the malfeasance blazing blackly from it.

This was the thing that had given its flesh and tainted blood to create the page; Radu recognised its kind. It was a mortal so degenerate, so far gone that it lived in the filth of the graveyard, so far gone that it fed on the cold blood of the dead, like poison to the children of darkness. The ghoulish entity taking shape before him bared little resemblance to any human that had ever walked the world; it was bestial, a hunched monstrosity driven blood crazy. It was neither the guardian of any great secret nor the creator of the cipher, it was merely a victim. Radu swallowed the bitter bile of disappointment.

Casimir was not so easily deterred, however. He stepped forward, dangerously close to the rending talons of the beast.

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