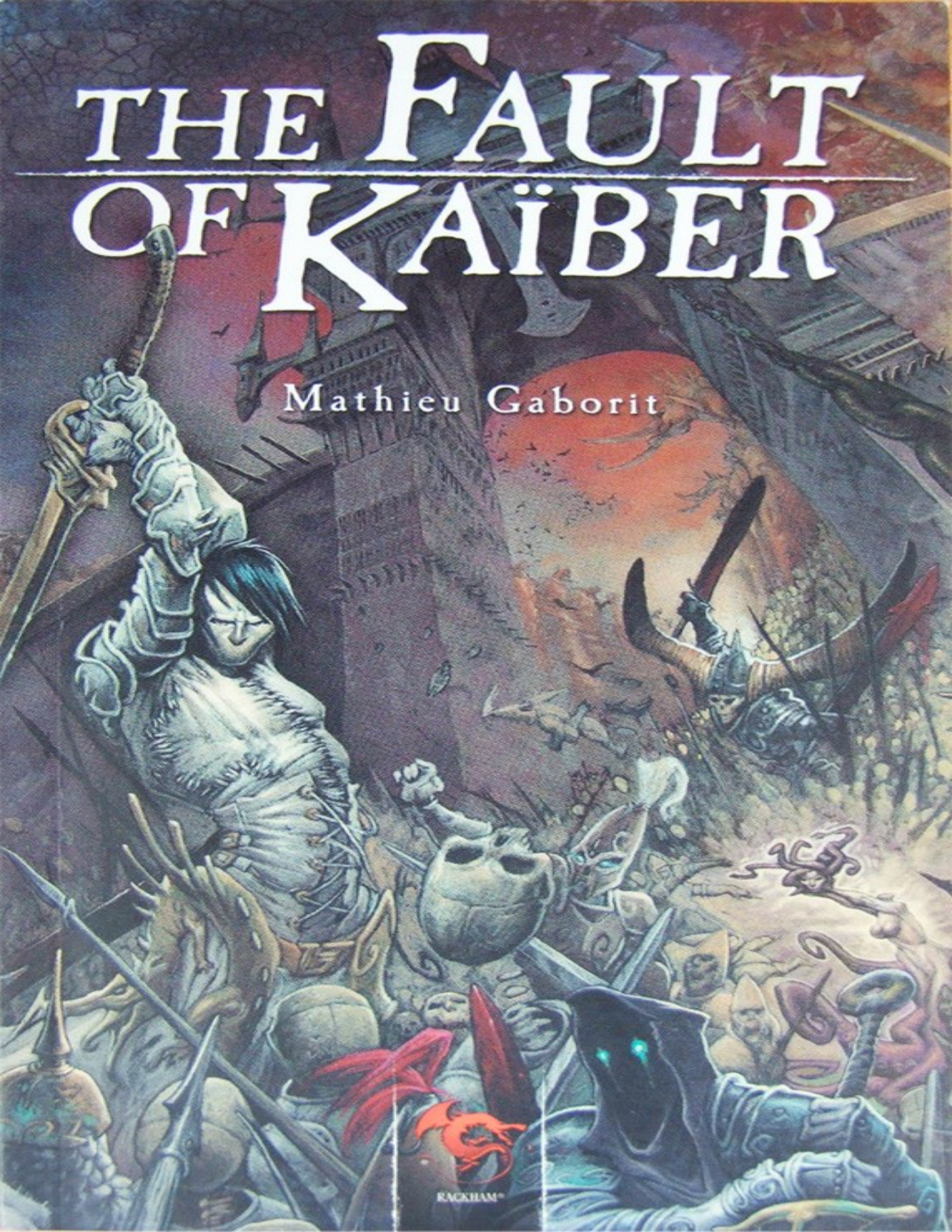


THE FAULT OF KAÏBER

Mathieu Gaborit



RACKHAM®

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~~the~~ Fault
~~of~~ Kaiber

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CHAPTER I

The child's whole body was shaking. He was sitting in the ferns, his thighs brought up against his chest, his face reddened by his tears. He kept his eyes focused on the sky. Nothing could make him look again at the bodies lying on the path, for then he would have to face the vacant eyes of his parents and those, so clear and delicate, of his little sister. She was lying in the ditch, still clutching in one hand the wooden puppet he had carved for her birthday.

The whole event had come and gone in a matter of seconds. At suppertime, they were still a family. There had been laughter, the deep voice of his father and the sighs of his mother. Then shadows had suddenly seemed to erupt from the depths of the forest. Faceless creatures dressed in rags.

Specters.

They were singing as they swooped upon their cart. No, actually it was closer to whistling than singing. They were whistling a screeching tune that sounded almost merry as their daggers plunged into his parents' chests. Screaming, his mother had tried to push Aleya towards the thicket. The small girl had obediently started to run, but her puppet Tita had fallen. She had turned back. She never went anywhere without Tita. And she had died. Her throat slit.

He had no idea why the stealers of life had spared him, nor did he really care. His life was over anyway, His entire universe had just ended here, on this road running along the Moaning Cliffs in the barony of Algerande. All he had left now was to accept death. He was slowly lying down on his side and shuddered when a firm hand suddenly took hold of his shoulder.

"You must live for them."

He had not seen or heard the approach of the man standing before him. In the half-light, he could now make out a tall and slim figure cloaked in dark silk. A finely engraved mask was hiding the man's features. Locks of straight black hair fell on his shoulders. Pale gray eyes were sizing him up.

"Pick up your father's sword, boy."

The voice was deep and steady. Jorin stood up slowly. He was now sure about what he saw: before him stood a Cynwäll elf. A dragon's jaws on his left shoulder gave off a metallic glint. Overwhelmed and unsure whether he should obey or run away, the boy stepped back among the ferns.

"Your parents are dead. So is your sister. If you want to honor them, pick up that sword," the Cynwäll said again.

"But I am not a warrior," the child whispered.

“You are now.”

The young Barhan retreated some more. Despite the fact that they belonged to the Alliance of Light, his father had been wary of elves coming from the land of the dragons. They think too much, he would say. Take a good look at their hands. They have never tilled earth or carved wood...

He took yet another step back. The elf sighed and whispered:

“Are you afraid?”

“Yes... yes, lord, I am.”

“Yet you are a Lion. Your ancestors were once the Kings of Light. Have you forgotten that?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“A very long time indeed, for you to seek escape instead of revenge.”

“Father wanted me to become a woodworker like himself.”

Wrinkles appeared around the elf’s eyes. He was smiling beneath his mask.

“Your father was a fool. Aarklash needs warriors.”

The child clenched his fists and picked up a branch he wielded toward the Cynwäll.

“You have no right to offend him!”

“I give no offense, I merely state a fact.”

“My father was not a fool,” he said with a strain in his voice and on his face.

“That is true, child. Now put that stick down,” answered an unexpected female voice.

The lady who had just spoken to him was leaning against an ancient oak tree, somewhat set back from her companion. She also wore a mask hiding her features, and a crossbow with golden ridges was resting in her left hand. She had long honey-colored hair plaited and tied behind her back.

“Syd. Leave him be.”

The elf did not even look back and gave the young Barhan a stern look.

“Those specters that killed your folks... I have been on their trail for eleven days.”

“He is only a child, Syd. Leave him be, I’m telling you.”

Only then did he slowly turn toward the young woman.

“Be quiet.”

She shrugged and turned to face a third Cynwäll who had just appeared on the path. This one was a monk, an equanimous brother. He was clad in a simple black leather skirt and his skin was covered with countless tattoos, making his body look like a living web. Soïm belonged to the Chromatic Hanse, whose disciples had mastered the alchemical secrets of the Utopia of the Sphinx, a long gone civilization. The inks of his tattoos, permeated with Solaris magic and processed in the crucibles of the Sphinx, gave him access to the path of Mimicry.

His Smooth white mask followed the shape of his skull and the back of his neck down to his shoulders. The monk passed in front of the child who still brandished his piece of wood and knelt down by the corpses to prey. Then he silently rose and started into the forest, following the specters' trail.

"Nelphaëll, follow him," Syd ordered.

She complied and disappeared in the dark undergrowth.

"As for you," he added to the child, "pick up that sword."

The young Lion felt the thinly veiled threat in the elven voice. This was not a request or advice, but a clear order. His jaw set, he put down the branch and replaced it with the bloodied sword.

"Good," said Syd. "You are a warrior now. You must forget the past. It no longer exists. Bury it here with your folks. Then you shall walk on to the next village. You will learn to fight, and maybe one day I shall come for you, if you are worth of fighting in the ranks of the Alliance."

"You mean to judge me? You're not even a Lion!"

Syd came closer to him and drew back one side of his cape, revealing the scales covering his right arm. The dragon's claw quivered when a ray of moonlight touched it. The artifact was not only the weapon it appeared to be, but also a true part of his body, an implant whose fibers, animated by an ancient willpower, were grafted around his muscles and sinews.

"Behold this arm, young Lion. It is called the Echyron, and it combines consciousness with metal. Such is the way of the Cynwäll magic. Moreover, it was used in Kaïber, where your forebears gave their lives to hold back the legions of Acheron. I am indeed not a Lion, so help me our Guide, but I nonetheless belong to Light. I am its servant."

He went down on one knee, his face level with the child.

"We are born in an Age of Darkness. You must acknowledge that to become a man. A while ago, you were watching the sky, but your gods only listen to slaves. You must stare reality in the face. Look for it on this very road. Maybe your gods decided to sacrifice your sister in order to make you choose."

"Then they are cruel gods. Father said that we must not live... to fight, but... fight to live. That's what he said."

"And he was right."

"Then he was not a fool," whispered the child with a shy smile.

Syd ruffled his hair and stood up.

"I used to have a brother like you, young Lion. But he died."

"Why?"

"That's of no concern to you. You look like him, that's all."

"Will I die like him?"

The elf did not answer. Four years had changed nothing: the memories still came back, too sharp and bitter to be overcome. He gave the child a small nod,

straightened his cape, and strode silently into the night.

The forest stopped less than three hundred yards from the coast. Beyond it, the land was barren, a moor worn away by the sea winds and covered only by a scattering of rickety shrubs. The Zephyr Inn was standing on a stony outcrop corroded by the salt. As the years had gone by, its patrons, mainly craftsmen traveling along the coast to sell their wares in the small fishing ports, had progressively deserted the old building. The collapse of the stables six months ago had been the coup de grace. Two horses had panicked and fallen off the cliff, and as the owner of the place, Lilas had had to sell the last of her jewelry to compensate for her customers' losses. Her money gone and moreover her heart broken by the silence now prevailing over the common room she had restored and loved for years, Lilas now waited for the end like a captain last aboard his wrecked ship.

This inn would be her tomb. Every night before tucking herself under her blanket, she would sit in front of her mirror and slowly comb her long gray hair. Then, despite the pain in her stiff limbs, she would wriggle into the red velvet dress she was wearing on the day of her betrothal. She insisted on leaving this world with dignity, and only hoped for the end to come peacefully. She knew the end was likely to cause quite an uproar, but it would be the uproar of her whole life and of the old gray walls crashing down with her to the bottom of the sea. She would often talk to the rock itself as the waves eroded it, praying that it might hurry up, for the silence, and the melancholy it brought, was becoming unbearable. At times, she would settle behind the counter at daybreak and close her eyes, staying there for hours remembering the heady atmosphere of a full house. She missed everything. The smiles as well as the brawls, the children as well as their elders, the craftsmen as well as fishermen who came to enjoy her rabbit stew.

As she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, she reflected on the not so distant time when there never seemed to be enough room. She was slowly climbing with a hand on the banister when a strange noise caught her attention. She stopped and pricked up her ears. The noise was coming from the common room. It was not the wind, but some kind of hissing, like that of a pair of bellows. Puzzled, she turned around cautiously and lifted her candle the better to shed light in front of her.

The noise stopped. Frowning, she went back down and trod softly around the big room. Age was playing tricks on her: door and windows were all still latched securely. It must have been a sign of the house itself or the wind playing in the cracks on the front wall.

The noise came back the very instant she set foot on the stairs. This time it was distinctly coming from the upper floor. Her heart started to beat faster. She resolutely grabbed the handrail and climbed as fast as she could, reaching the landing without a thought for any potential danger. Her old bones groaned under the strain. She caught her breath and lifted the candle high above her head. She

seemed to make out a slight movement in the darkness ahead and took a step forward.

The darkness seemed to come alive. She heard a whistling behind her and her body started to shake. She entered the closest room and slammed the door behind her. Having fastened the latch, she was stepping back towards the bed when she suddenly realized she had been alarmed not only by the noise, but also by the smell.

Like a whiff of moldy clothes.

A scream died on her lips when the door-handle was jostled about. The door shook and then silence returned. She heard a distant rustling in the corridor and felt the anger overcoming her fear. Someone was playing with her, trying to intimidate her. In a flush of pride, she swapped her candle for a poker resting against the mantel piece. The poker was so heavy she had to use both hands to hold it up before the closed door.

There was another rustling sound. It lasted longer this time, and sounded somehow stranger. She clenched her hands around the improvised weapon with all the might she could muster. Tears welled up in her eyes as she craved for Somak, her late husband, to be by her side now. She held back a sob but the first whistle gave her a start. She turned around, feeling her blood freeze up. A row of shadows was standing right behind her, silently scrutinizing her. The foul smell hit her and she staggered as if she had been slapped. The specters shuddered as one.

A shout of defiance passed through the lips of the old Barhan. With her hair in disarray and her frail arms strained by the exertion, she charged the damned.

CHAPTER II

They had been on the specters' trail since the suburbs of Manilia. Most of them were renegades who had broken their ties to Acheron and were letting their instincts guide them along the magical winds that pervaded this old and legendary land. A blind rage, craving for murder to soothe the pain in their soul, was consuming their entrails like a dark and unquenchable fire. They wandered along the Moaning Cliffs and became dangerous only when they started to band together. This particular pack had developed on the ashes of a battlefield, east of the estuary leading to the Ephren Sea. This pack has sown death along its way, and so far escaped the search parties led by soldiers of the kingdom of Alahan.

Syd had answered the call of the baron of Algerande, the one they called the Diplomat. Syd and his two companions made up a trihedron, an autonomous unit that could operate over all the territories controlled by the Alliance of Light to hunt the damned.

The three had positioned themselves at the edge of the forest. Nelphaëll had just kneeled down behind an oak tree. Both men looked away. Moving slowly, she untied the straps of her mask and exposed her pale skin to the breeze blowing through the branches. Her delicate features stood in contrast with the darkness of her eyes, those two black stones sealed by an oath. She tied her long honey-colored hair in a ponytail and picked up a mother-of-pearl case from her lap. She cautiously unsealed the lid and took the construct from its casing and out into the night light. The creature shuddered a first time at the touch of the fragmented moonlight. The elf lightly brushed her palm against the iridium hairs covering its abdomen, and guided the unfolding of the tail with her index finger.

In her eyes, all the construct's magic was in that ringed tail she had so often studied, examining every symbol-engraved joint under a magnifying glass. The sting at its end was a crystal sphere two inches wide, with a hundred and twenty-two facets.

Like many Cynwäll, she saw the construct as a relay between herself and the world, a front filtering her emotions much like her mask. She put the creature down in the palm of her hand and closed her eyes in meditation. She was purging her mind, emptying it to give the construct access to her consciousness. Her lips were silently moving to the rhythm of the hundred and twenty-two precepts of true Empathy. Gradually, the silence settled around her., The echo of nature merged with the pounding of her heart that beat the time of the enchantment.

The hairs of the construct started to sting her skin. It climbed along her arm, leaving small beads of blood as a sign of its passage, and then paused on her shoulder before climbing on her face. The empathy was dawning, relayed by the creature's hairs picking up her heartbeat. At first blocked by the construct's body, her sight started to come back, filtered through the magical fluid.

The construct had clasped her skull like a giant's hand. Its legs had grown again and now joined at the back of her head. The tail hat settled over her right eye and extended outward like a field glass. Through the crystal sphere, Nelphaëll could see every detail more than three hundred yards away. From now on, she could impart her will to the construct with but a thought, and her aim would always be true.

Weapon in hand, she stood back up and came near Syd.

"Your orders?"

Syd kept his gaze on the moor. At last, the specters had left the forest to reach that old inn standing on the edge of the cliff. This was a perfect dead-end to finish a hunt that had lasted far too long already.

"You will stay here. Stop them from reaching the edge of the woods. The wind is with us, too strong for them to try going against it and down the cliff. I will go in alone, provoke them, and make them come out. Soïm will stay outside. You'll cover us from here."

The monk nodded his approval.

The two elves left the forest behind them and set out in the open. They advanced in long and steady strides, their eyes never leaving the front of the inn. The sky was clear above their heads, with a high and full moon. They passed a wooden fence and split up. Syd alone went up to the porch, a huge terrace of cracked stones. He could hear no noise from behind the building's closed shutters.

The main door had been left ajar. Syd sniffed and felt the stale smell of decay coming from the half-open door sting his nose. The Echyrion tensed and set a wave of sharp pain to his skull. He ignored it and pushed the door open with the tip of his sword.

The common room was in complete darkness. He stayed still, every sense alert while his eyes adapted to the darkness. For him, fear was not a legitimate emotion. It was a corruption of the mind, much like courage. War, be it on a personal scale or on the scale of the world, was waged by the mind. The ethics of lucidity, he had told Soïm on the very day they had created the trihedron.

He trod noiselessly to a supporting beam, put his back against it, and glanced on both sides. The specters were nowhere to be seen, but his dragon's claw felt their presence. The tension in his back made knots in the muscles of his shoulders. A cursory examination of the kitchen revealed nothing. After a stealthy look around, he was convinced the damned had taken refuge upstairs.

He climbed the stairs and paused in front of a narrow corridor flanked by old wooden doors leading into the inn's guest bedrooms. The place was vibrant with evil influence. He grabbed his sword's hilt and went slowly forward. The floor creaked under his boots. From the corner of his eye, he saw a glistening light on the jaws of the dragon covering his left shoulder. This was a warning. Evil was there, very close. Hidden in the shadows. And Syd smiled under his mask when the specters sprang up from the walls. He was up against ethereal creatures, souls torn between this world and the world of Darkness that were pulling themselves out of the walls with a sucking noise, like dead men climbing out of their graves. For them, a Cynwäll elf was a true feast, a materialization of the deep vital energies inspiring the fight of the Alliance. The specters jostled one another with a sound of rustling cloth as they rushed forward, intoxicated by the nature of their prey. Their emaciated hands held their heartrenders, slim blades set with black stones.

Syd smoothly moved to the middle of the corridor and attacked the first opponent to come within range of his sword. The creature was able to deflect the edge of the blow, but the power of the attack savagely sent it back.

Syd had anticipated that parry., The blow had begun the expansion of energy, and the impact was meant to amplify the strength of future attacks. An illustrious knowledge throbbed in his veins. His master-at-arms had taught him the primary art, the one rising from the invisible folds of chaos.

Master it, he would say repeatedly., It holds energy, and that energy holds strength. For only one second, there are as many futures as there are blades crossed. Your will must be like metal, Syd. Remember however that willpower never forges chaos; it is the opposite. Always the opposite.

The deflected sword dived to the ground, leading on of the specters to believe the elf had lost his advantage. Syd used the Echyrion's super natural strength to reverse the trajectory of his own blade. It cleft the air from bottom to top, tearing the damned apart on its way. There was a howling, a shrill that linked for an instant both parts of its torn soul. Under the slit hood, Syd saw a breach appear between this world and the Kingdom of Darkness, an insubstantial gap sealing forever the fate of the wandering spirit. The tattered clothes that had covered the creature fell to the ground.

Syd turned about to confront two specters appearing behind his back. His sword had turned with him and now fell back like a cleaver between them, separating his opponents. Chaos may be foreseen, his master would assert, but the sum of chaos may be perceived only at the edge of Noësis.

For a brief moment, he lost his upper hand. The fabric of the damned he had just slain was permeated with Darkness that weakened the dragon's claw. His move was not as efficient as he had hoped; the sword met only empty air. He felt a bite on his thigh and gave up two handed swordsmanship. The Echyrion became a weapon in itself. Its bare hand turned aside a heartrender in a shower of dark blue sparks and

went for the creature's head. There was a slimy feeling, as if he had put his hand in decaying seaweed. He fiercely rummaged about the black void beneath the hood, shredding the specter's consciousness. The others swept back through the corridor's walls.

Syd caught his breath and elicited the joints in the artifact, which answered from the shoulders down to the wrist. His hand felt heavier and was slower to respond. The dead soul between his fingers had numbed the mana animating the artifact. The fight, however, had answered his wish. He was not here to take on the entire pack. Just to stir them up, give them a taste for an easy prey. He went back down and crossed the common room without a glance for the shadows that were beginning to surface between the beams of the ceiling.

Soïm was waiting outside. He was sitting cross-legged in front of the door with his eyes closed. A drizzle was falling on his torso, every drop tamed into following the curves of his tattoos.

"They are coming," said Syd.

The equanimous brother nodded and silently unfolded his legs.

The specters appeared through the inn's front wall.

From the edge of the forest, Nelphaëll was watching the proceedings thorough the prism of her construct. A plum-colored filter emphasized the contrast of the shadows and underlined the presence of Darkness. Evil incarnate took on a purplish-blue shade that already marred the front wall of the inn, where large brown spots like stains of dried blood were appearing.

Nelphaëll stopped breathing and chose a target among the damned that were still halfway through the wall. Her finger brushed lightly against the trigger of the crossbow. The quarrel burst out of the undergrowth and whistled above the moor. A specter had its torso almost entirely exposed to the rain when the shot went right through the void in its hood. The quarrel came out dragging along a clinkering of stringy black dross. The damned died in the heart of the stone.

By Syd's side, the equanimous monk leaped into the fray, gliding like a shadow in the middle of the maddened specters. Under the light of the moon, his tattoos had become mirrors. Refracted images of his surrounding appeared on the surface of his almost invisible body. He reappeared only to strike, his lips moving to the rhythm of his martial prayers. His fists seemed to come out of nowhere to pluck out the evil hoods like ripe fruits.

Five specters were down when Syd saw their line waver. A distant noise was coming up from the sea and approaching rapidly. This was a sound the Cynwäll knew better than anyone else and could not fail to recognize. A remarkably low and continuous rustling, evoking the sound of a leather sail in a gale.

A dragon.

Nelphaëll was the first to make out his stately figure when he sprang up from behind the roof of the inn. His wingspan was close to twenty yards. He had long silvery scales and seemed like a titanic snake driven by the ancient energies of Aarklash. His undulating aerial motion was like a sacred dance. A crystal crest jutted out above a head whose jaw could close on an adult horse, a crest made of pointed stalagmites that left a powdery and sparkling wake behind it.

She could now see the dragon-knight riding the creature. His name was Myldiën the Sensible.

The mentor of the trihedron was coming to his disciples.

The dragon dived toward the specters to join a one-sided battle. The specters tried to steal away by sliding over the moor. Syd sheathed his sword and kept a bitter eye on the merciless ballet. The Sensible was stealing his prey. For day after day, the trihedron had struggled against their weariness to harass the life stealers and bring them to a last stand on this ancient piece of land in the Algerande barony.

He felt Soïm's hand on his shoulder.

"Calm down, my friend," the equanimous brother said.

Syd remained silent, his eyes riveted on the dragon finishing off the last of the Acheronian renegades., The icy fangs mowed them down, and soon all that remained were a handful of wind-blown rags.

CHAPTER III

When Myldiën set foot on the ground and whispered a few words to his mount, Syd felt his artifact react to the dragon's presence. A warm and soothing caress went from his shoulder down to his fingertips.

His mentor came to him with open arms. He was relatively small for a Cynwäll, with a lively demeanor. He wore a wide tunic of gray silk and old brown canvas trousers tucked into worn ankle boots. The sheer beauty of his brass and mother-of-pearl mask dashed with the slovenly attire he actually cultivated with an accomplished flair for provocation.

"So, my boy!" he shouted cordially. "Here you are, out of your predicament at last!"

"I did not need your rescue."

"Did you not?" he said with a friendly chuckle.

"This was our fight."

"Yours, was it? I didn't know the war belonged to anyone..."

He passed Syd, giving him a pat on the shoulder and came to a stop in front of Soïm.

"Greetings, monk," he said.

The equanimous brother saluted and stepped back to show his disapproval.

"Still the same chatterbox, then? But where is sweet Nelphaëll?"

"Here she comes," Syd grumbled.

The young elf had indeed left the woods to join her companions.

Myldiën's eyes were sparkling with mischief. When she was level with him, he grabbed her hand, turned it around slowly and, through his mask, laid a kiss on her palm.

"Magnificent child..." he whispered.

He bowed before turning back to Syd.

"I must talk to you," he said in a suddenly serious voice. "You two, stay here."

He went into the inn and grumbled in the doorway.

"It stinks here. Moreover, I am cold. Build me a fire, will you?"

With a sigh of contentment, he fell into a chair and unbuttoned the collar of his tunic while Syd was building a small stack of logs in the hearth set in the center of the common room. The first flames sputtered and swept the darkness back a bit. Myldiën turned his chair toward the fireplace and extended his legs to warm his soles.

"It does me a world of good. Exactly what I needed. Thank you, boy."

Syd had taken a chair to come and sit with him.

"How is she?"

That question had been on his mind ever since he had seen the dragon coming out of the sky. Myldiën cleared his throat.

"Better, I believe. Some think she might soon walk again."

"What about her..."

"Her mind? It's as solid as a guide's. Her nightmares are coming more rarely. She spends time out of her room and discussing with the monks."

"Is she still writing?"

"As always. She writes mostly poetry nowadays. And quite often the poems are about you."

"Have you brought any?"

"No. She refused. They are for her, for her healing."

"All right."

"She calls for you, Syd. You could have come to visit."

"I lacked the time."

"Stop that!"

His voice was harsh and uncompromising.

"Don't say that to me," he went on. "A lack of time? Rather a lack of courage, admit it."

"I admit it. But it's not as simple as that."

"Of course. But then she is your mother."

"You have brought me news of her on a regular basis, and I thank you for it. For now, that is enough for me."

"But it's not enough for her."

"I would not risk it," Syd said while fiddling with the knuckles of the Echyron.

"Do you realize it's been four years, lad? The trauma is long past. This artifact is yours now, you rule over it. No harm could come to her."

The memory came back. He clenched his fist, powerless. By night or day it came, like thunder striking the surface of his consciousness.

First the stench. So foul. The stench of a limb heavy with necrosis hanging from his own shoulder, like a malevolent excrescence. The soaring pain. And the mad, frantic run through the twists and turns of Kaïber, his eyes red with tears.

And the hatred.

Pure, impervious to reason, set as deep in his heart as would a bullet from a Griffin fusilier.

He tears down the stairs, bumps into guards who make way for this unmasked elf, his arm consumed by Darkness and his armor red with blood. He enters the sacred towers in the Cynwäll quarters. He stumbles, leans on the wall to stay

upright. He can feel his muscles withering under his skin, his veins drying up like rivulets in summer. He thinks he's going to die.

He hopes he's going to die.

His mother, at last. Beyond this endless corridor. She runs to him, her face stricken with grief. Her short red hair is a beacon of light in the shadows of the stronghold. He falls into her arms. She whispers to him that he must live. He whispers back his hatred. "No, my son, no ... " she repeats like a prayer. Her disciples have come to help her and carry him to the Workshop. Syd only hears her voice, now firm and under control. He is stretched on a big oak table. He turns his head right and left and sees the elusive coppery shapes of the constructs coming to assist the Helianthic Mother. A clinking and purring dance that soothes and reassures him while his mother fastens strange apparatus on his chest. She encourages him to live. Words of love come warped and slowed down to his ears. The Darkness gnawing inside him is getting ready to surge upon his heart. The pain makes him writhe and twists his body.

Then comes the soothing warmth, as the young monks declaim in one voice the Noësiian litanies that will help his mind resist the pain to come.

The rest is a mad dream, blood red and bent out of shape by the pain, with foremost the grinding noise of the saw that amputates him to the rhythm of the tears falling on his chest. His mother is crying silently. She cries over the betrayal of Kyrô, commander of the Cynwäll troops in Kaïber. Kyrô, who is also her husband. And a man who condemned his sons to die.

Syd opened his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Myldiën asked.

"Yes."

"Sleep for a while if you want. We'll talk later."

"I'll be all right."

"Take off your mask."

"I'd rather not."

Myldiën bent down to stir up the fire.

"It wasn't easy finding you. I have orders for you three. Well... mostly for you alone."

"I thought the Guide valued our independence."

"You have had orders, in the past."

"Our trihedron was young. We needed guidance."

The mentor turned to him.

"What part do you play here? With those two outside. Have you ever asked yourself that?"

Syd frowned.

"We hunt Evil. Under all its guises."

"Impressive," he said with a doubtful scowl. "Is that all?"

“What do you mean?”

“Is that your only use?”

“That is enough.”

“Your vista is shrinking...”

“Unless you know more than I do, we are killers. Not artisans, not diplomats either. Merely hunters on the tracks of Darkness. Free to go where we please and free to choose our prey. We are supposed to be the best.”

“Ah, the best...” he exclaimed with a smile. “Of course, you are! Yet a Cynwäll must consider carefully his place in Creation. And I am not satisfied with yours. Neither is our Guide.”

“Does he think I’m not up to it?”

“Up to do what exactly? Up to tracking down a handful of specters? Do you think that will matter in the scales of the universe? That the Alliance will owe you its salvation?”

“No, I don’t,” he answered with his jaw set. “But the alliance owes us some respect. We carry out a shadow fight, not the kind of great battles that will earn the favor of our historians. Ours is a daily fight, relentless and genuine. You of all people should know. You were the first to tell me that war was truly won or lost under the moon, out of sight.”

Myldiën sighed and drew himself up to lean against the mantel piece.

“You are right, Syd. Me too, I have believed our heliasts, our leaders, our guides, and all those who ponder and theorize about the war. The trihedrons were a clear and sensible answer to the forays from Acheron. Small parties of hunters and killers, chosen for their courage, their strength, and their dedication. An elite sanctioned by its peers and scattered throughout the Alliance territory. A fine dream, is it not?”

“Are the trihedrons being challenged in Lanever? Do the diplomats want more perceptible victories?”

“Do you know what matters the most in war?”

“Initiative.”

“True. And the Alliance never managed to take it against Acheron. Never. We contained them, but we were never able to attack and threaten them on their ground.”

“I know all this.”

“What you do not know about initiative is that not only is it now beyond consideration for us, but also that it is a threat that might doom Kaïber itself.”

Syd lifted an eyebrow and sniggered.

“Kaïber will never fall.”

“Kaïber is not indestructible. Nor is any stronghold in this world.”

“That’s an academic point of view. Acheron may harass Kaïber, but not destroy it.”

“Well, it can now.”

There was a pause, broken by Syd’s sharp tone.

“They want to break up the trihedrons, don’t they? And melt them down in the blasted crucible that is Kaïber..”

“The rumors are concurring. Acheron is no longer on the attack. No skirmishes, not even a few morbid angels prowling above the outposts. Nothing at all. Darkness is saving it all for an onslaught that will exceed any other. To crush Kaïber.”

“Our dragons will stop them.”

“Lion and Griffins have begun to strengthen the walls. I stopped there before coming to you. The men are afraid. All the might of Acheron will be thrown at us in the coming battle. And this time they mean to win, to break the dam, and surge over Alahan. If this were to happen, the Alliance of Light would be torn to shreds.”

“According to what you say, the future is decided at Kaïber.”

“It partly is.”

Syd also stood up, routinely checking the straps of his mask and straightening his cape.

“I have listened to you, but my answer is no. Tell those who sent you that I will not go to Kaïber. Neither will my trihedron.”

“Sit down, I am not finished.”

“I am. Goodbye for now, mentor,” he said from the doorstep.

He was about to close the door behind him. Myldiën had not moved and was still intently watching the embers in the fireplace.

“If you leave now, the monks will kill her.”

His hand on the door handle, Syd turned slowly around.

“You have heard me very well,” Myldiën said with a nod.

“I have indeed,” he replied with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“You’re letting your heart speak. Even a young Lion would have more self-control than you.”

“Black mail, then...” Syd said as he came back inside, his hand still on his weapon.

“Just an incentive, so that you remember your duties to our nation and to our Guide.”

“I won’t go. I might however head back to Laroq to protect her.”

“I thought you did not want to risk it.”

“I’m no longer so sure she should stay in your hands.”

“Those are also your hands. You are Cynwäll, son of Kyrô and Ahelen. You are the one condemning her by running from Kaïber.”

“I do not run from Kaïber. I only refuse to take orders from a murderer.”

“He is your father.”

“No. A father would not have sacrificed his sons for a whore’s embrace.”

“Yet it was the same heart that loved those sons.”

“Also, the same that made him a betrayer.”

“All right, all right,” he said while lifting both hands in appeasement. “That’s not what I came here to talk about.”

“Myldiën, I have lost a father to Kaïber. I have lost a brother too. And four years later, my mother is barely able to walk again. Kaïber is a tomb, a curse. I shall never pass through the Gate of the Righteous again.”

“Listen to me, Syd. I have not come to suggest you should go. I have come with orders signed by the Guide himself.”

A heavy silence drew the elves apart. Syd let go of his sword. Under his mask, his lips were muttering.

“Esneh, our Guide?”

“Yes. You have no choice in the matter.”

“And yet you know what happened.”

“This is not about serving under your father. He failed. He is only the shadow of the great Kyrô he was for almost thirty years. There is now only one left to command the Cynwäll in Kaïber. Esneh, our Guide, has appointed you. You are expected in Kaïber this very night. To take your father’s place.”

Charcoal gray clouds drifted like flotsam in the sky. Sitting on the edge of the cliff, Syd thought how those same clouds had been a fixture of his childhood, in the gloomy canopy where the mark of Kaïan Draghost, the dragon of Darkness, could still be seen. He had never grown used to the storm permanently rumbling above the stronghold and raging with the coming of the armies of Acheron. Primagic had sculpted those clouds and was strongly unsettled when the clash of arms came up from the pass.

He is twelve and his brother Melehän has just turned nine. They have both hoisted themselves up through a narrow hatch leading to the top of the tower, to a dark timber attic where they find shelter when the storm rages over the stronghold. A downpour floods the horizon. Up above their heads, they hear the heavy drops splattering on the slates with a dizzying noise. The narrow skylight is their favorite. Behind the frosted glass, they can discern the neighboring dragon towers. They are standing on tiptoe, scrutinizing the rooftops in the hope of catching a glimpse of those they find the most fascinating: the magicians.

“I think I see one over there!” Syd says.

“Where?”

“Right there! Look!!”

Melehän squeals and claps his hands. Apart from his mask, the mage has stripped to the waist. His arms are lifted toward the sky. The shuddering of his body

and the jerky motions of his hands and face fascinate both children. This is a trance, a purifying ceremony.

“I want to be like him...” Melehän whispers.

“Father will never allow it,” Syd replies sternly.

“That’s what I want to do,” he persists in a sullen voice.

The mage has opened his consciousness and offers his body to the heavy drops loaded with Primagic falling from the sky. Syd knows from a young equanimous disciple that Noësis is a discipline of the mind, like a door that can be opened and closed and through which the magic pervading Aarklash can be perceived. Unlike Melehän and for no clear reasons, the idea frightens him.

“Hey!” his brother cries out. “Look! He fell.”

The magicians trance has reached its highest point. The elf has collapsed and stopped moving.

“Come on, let’s go,” Syd says.

“What? No way, wait. I want to see him rise again.”

“Come on. You know Father doesn’t like it when we watch them.”

“So, what?”

The elder brother shrugs and opens the trapdoor that leads back down into their room. Melehän does not try to hold him back but stays riveted to the small window. Syd’s heart is heavy. He would so like to be like him, bold enough to sneak into the corridors at night, to go as far as the great library and spy on the magicians studying there. But each time he stays curled up in bed, for fear of disappointing his father.

Syd was considering the cynicism of his masters. Myldiën had been clear enough about it. He could turn down the order signed by Esneh; disobey the first of the firsts... In Cynwäll memory no elf had ever considered challenging the Guide’s authority. His fate, however, was not important. His mother’s fate was what worried him. The threat stated so clearly by his mentor summed up the inescapable will of the Cynwäll command. His insubordination would condemn her. The monks who cared so devotedly for her would not hesitate one second before killing her if they received that order.

He smiled despondently. His hatred was a weapon of choice in the eyes of the Guide. The scheme was cruel and clear-sighted. If, as Myldiën implied, his father was no longer able to command the Cynwäll of Kaïber, then his own son was the most uncompromising of successors, who would spare him no shame.

If he was able to control his hatred. His masters were putting the stronghold in the hands of an elf tormented by a heavy and impregnable emotion, chained to his heart like a ghost. He had contained his hatred so far because of an oath he had made to his mother. That there would be no revenge, only oblivion. Far from Kaïber, far from the storms and the towers where the magicians showed in mana.

There was a brushing against his back, and Nelphaëll sat down by his side. He thought he saw a look of sympathy he didn't like behind her honey-colored mask.

"Are you all right?" she asked, laying the crossbow down on her knees.

"I think so, yes."

"You must be proud. The Guide chose you."

"Of course," he sneered.

"It's been nearly four years for us both."

"For the three of us," he corrected.

"That's funny. I never thought we'd part like this, so quickly."

"We have no say in this matter."

"Maybe you have. I always thought you would go back to Kaïber eventually."

"I did not."

"Nevertheless, you were trained for it. To succeed him."

"That was before."

"What happened during that night?"

"Nothing that's of any concern to you."

He had hurt her feelings. So remained silent and slowly rotated the crossbow on its axle.

"What is it you want to hear?" he asked. "That I am sorry for the trihedron? Yes, I am sorry. The trihedron had style."

"After all this time, do you even know who I am?"

"Yes."

"No, you don't. You have never even asked me why I was here with Soïm and yourself."

"That's your story, not mine."

"You have a problem, Syd."

"Do I?"

"Yes. You are sinël, an egoist. There is only you, and this past you continually hark back to. You never care about anyone else, not even Soïm or me. In your eyes. I'm no more alive than my construct. I hate to tell you this, but I will miss you. Your heart is withered but you are a good warrior and true Selsÿm. I have enjoyed serving under your command."

"Thank you."

"Take care of yourself. I don't know what'll happen over there, but Myldiën seems worried, and I've never seen him like that."

He nodded with a grunt.

"Do you know what's to become of us?"

"I convinced Myldiën. Others will come for you and bring you to Kaïber."

"You want to save the trihedron?" she said, obviously surprised.

"I'm thinking about it."

"I think I'm entitled to decline then, am I not?"

“In that case you’ll be assigned to another trihedron.”

She remained silent for a while, slid the crossbow behind her back, and stood up with a sigh.

“I would have preferred if you had asked us beforehand.”

“Would that have changed anything?”

“It would have for me.”

She moved away. He did nothing to hold her back. She was right. His life had been a headlong flight for too long already. The trihedron was an excuse, a road to oblivion. For four years he had turned away from the only battle that deserved to be fought, a clash between a father and his son, a true confrontation. He had promised his mother he would spare him. Now he held in his hands an appropriate revenge, a revenge that was almost too perfect.

The challenge was breathtaking. He would have to retake the mantle of his inheritance, force his will on veteran troops right when Acheron seemed to prepare an unrivaled attack, pace the corridors of a stronghold viewed by many as the womb of the fiercest warriors of Aarklash. In a matter of hours, he would command the Cynwäll garrison of Kaïber, and that prospect did not frighten him. There was however another thing he did fear. The blank and unreliable future that lay behind the crucial instant when he would come face to face with his father. There was only one question in his mind: how would he manage not to kill him?

CHAPTER IV

Kaïber.

At night the stronghold looked like a constellation. Torches and braziers twinkled like so many stars and sketched a dotted outline of its cyclopean layout. Out in the first line was the Castle of the Lion, a fort built in the middle of the pass and back on to the great wall called Grey Barrier. This wall blocked the pass from one side to the other and was supplemented on both sides by counterforts built up along the cliff faces and surrounding the castle from above.

Behind the Barrier was the heart of the stronghold: A tangle of countless buildings that had risen with the years, so much that some now culminated at about six hundred feet from the ground. A network of stairs and bridges meandered through this chaotic clustering and allowed the Lions, Griffins, and Cynwäll to live self-sufficiently inside this city-sized fortress. Syd knew the place better than anyone did. As the son of Kyrô, he had been raised for that purpose and initiated into most of the stronghold's secrets to be able one day to succeed his father.

He predominantly remembers a succession of trials orchestrated by Thalsö, his Noesian master. Blindfolded and barefoot, he had to cross Kaïber from the north to the south, so that he would "hear its soul": sensing the vibration in the ground, staying attentive to the noises rolling like waves from one tower to the next, being able to choose landmarks with a touch, and finding his way through the maze of alleyways. Seven times he had failed and passed out from exhaustion and hunger. On the eighth try, at last, he had been able to go from the Gate of the Righteous to the Gate of the Brave, earning the respect of his master.

He looked upon the Cynwäll quarters and their dragon towers rising above the stronghold. Each of the round and slim towers marked the existence and the struggle of one of the peak dragons through life and until death. When a dragon died, his remains were displayed on the summit before his tower was closed for good and it became his tomb. Only the dragon-knights were then allowed inside to meditate, and sometimes one would even choose to die there to join his companion on his last journey.

His hair flying in the wind and his body chilled by the biting cold, Syd could hear the distant murmur coming up from the pass, the monotonous and muffled noise every warrior learned to live with. The hammering in Kaïber's smithies was like the heartbeat of the stronghold, and it never stopped.

The dragon began his descent and glided toward the Gate of the Righteous.

"Back in the old country, my lad!" Myldiën shouted over his shoulder.

They landed carefully on top of a tower. They were expected. Ten dragon-knights in light armor bowed to Myldiën and saluted Syd. It was a polite but distant salute. Right now, he was only a renegade son and a stain on the honor of the Cynwäll.

Following their escort, they went down a stair clinging to the side of the tower, crossed a bridge, and entered the Exianth, a huge library managed by Noesian monks. The crescent-shaped building held one of the most prestigious collections of war literature in the world. Day and night, the luxurious recesses were occupied by officers who came to study by candlelight. Despite the late hour, some were still working and raised their eyes on the retinue crossing the main hall. Some were Cynwäll who recognized him and whispered behind his back.

They took a vast marble stair leading to the private rooms in the upper floors, where sliding horn panels sheltered many informal consultations between representatives of the Alliance. Ten years ago, Syd had liked to take refuge here, in these muffled surroundings. He would sit cross-legged and lose himself in contemplation, staring for hours on end at a candle to practice the teachings of his master, who claimed that the essence of combat could be deciphered in the chaotic movements of a candle flame. The wax is your opponent's body, he would say. Its his energy, his strength, and his flexibility. As for the flame, it is a trajectory, the curb of a sword, the clear line of a moving blade. Learn to anticipate the flame's moves and you will anticipate the moves of the sword.

They left the rooms behind them and went through an array of corridors blocked by aloof and silent guards. Syd knew that at the far end would be a door leading into the Alderion, the prestigious residence where Cynwäll commanders received their most renowned visitors. Its only access was through a windswept stone bridge standing four hundred and fifty feet above the ground and linking the library to the single room built atop a wide pillar.

The escort stopped in front of the door leading to the bridge. Myldiën came behind Syd and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Your father is expecting you."

Syd gave a slight nod and opened the door. An icy breeze was blowing over Kaïber. Now he was alone, in the heart of the stronghold and in front of his father. Feeling the stiffness in his muscles, the dragon's claw intervened to appease him. He felt a wave of warmth spreading to his chest and relaxing his tense shoulders. His gaze fell on the harmonious curve of the Alderion. Inspired by the lore of the Sphinx, the globe of opaque glass streaked with metal lines was standing like a sword's pommel on top of a high pillar plunging into the abyss. Small beetle-shaped constructs were ceaselessly scampering along the metal lines; they had been taking care of the maintenance of the place for decades.

Upon crossing the threshold, the contrast with the outside was flabbergasting. Inside, the silence was absolute. Wide armchairs covered in red silk were positioned on a single stage of clear wood that cut the sphere in two. A well-stocked black crystal chandelier was hanging from the top and basked the room in its warm glow.

Kyrô, commander of the Cynwäll of Kaïber, remained motionless when his son entered. He was sitting deep in one of the armchairs, wearing a light armor under a brown woolen cape. His sword, the faithful Sashem, was leaning against an armrest. He held his mask in one hand, revealing his uncovered face. His once finely chiseled and pleasant features had sunk, leaving hollowed cheeks and wrinkle lines as deep as knife cuts. His wide brow had acquired a waxen complexion that clashed with the absolute whiteness of his hair falling in unruly locks over his shoulder.

He had grown old.

Struck by the fallen face, Syd advanced slowly and removed his mask as well. His father's sapphire eyes were watching him intently.

"My son..." Kyrô whispered.

The image of his father and the vision of the assassin merged in that deep and steady voice. Syd's fingers brushed against the hilt of his sword, and he had to fight against the impulse ordering him to draw and strike that haunting face.

"Do not kill her," Kyrô said. "Through me, its your mother you would condemn. Our fate is decided in Lanever. You are the only one left... to represent our family."

"I no longer have a family."

Kyrô shuddered and pointed his finger at him.

"You have a name, whether you want it or not. My blood flows in your veins."

"And the blood of Melehän flows on your hands."

"Your brother died in battle."

"You sacrificed him; you sacrificed us both to save your whore."

His father's hand clutched the armrests.

"I forbid you to call her a whore, this is beneath you. I do love this woman, whether you like it or not."

"Then you'll love her in exile. You are leaving the stronghold this very night."

"Kaïber does not belong to the Cynwäll alone. The Lions have invited me in their quarters."

"You want to stay here? I want nothing with you. I owe you nothing."

A smile split his father's face.

"You owe me everything, son. The Guide chose you because I taught you what I knew."

"I have dreamed of this moment for a long time, you know. Being here, in front of you, and killing you."

"I know. But you did not do it you never answered any of my messages. You refused to talk. For the last four long years, you have done exactly what you held

against me: you listened to your heart. I have also been blind, but in my case, it was love, not hatred, that drove me to this decision. The hardest and most terrible decision I ever had to live with. I did not sacrifice you. Never... my son. I never stopped hoping. For every second of that agonizing ordeal, I prayed for a falconer to come and report that you had returned safe and sound."

"We didn't have the slightest chance."

"Chance had nothing to do with it. You did come back, didn't you?"

"Melehän did not."

His father's shoulders sagged.

"Melehän did not..." he repeated in a murmur.

Syd bent over him and put his mouth a few inches from his ear.

"Why can't I just kill you? Tell me..."

"Because you know we're already dead, we are warriors and our lives are snatched away in a whirlwind we cannot control. I found some respite, son. A very small measure of respite, with this woman. I had forgotten what it was like to be something beyond a warrior, and in her arms, I remembered. I'm alive in her, son. I'm alive."

"But Melehän is dead."

Kyrô frowned as he laboriously stood up.

"I am too tired. Exhausted by our struggle, by death taking away my old companions, by the blind obedience I owe to Lanever... I do not ask you to understand what happened. You would not be able to if you have never loved. Love is the most simple and most noble thing there is, my son. Maybe it is too simple in the eyes of our people, too simple in the face of the Rag'narok. War is a harsh mistress, a woman who is due everything. Oh yes, my son, I am tired... in my flesh and in my blood. I want only to sit down, at last, and stay by her side for what remains of my life. Nevertheless, we must think about Kaïber now. My bond with the stronghold is broken, but yours has just been weaved."

Syd stepped away from his father, his mind muddled. He could not stand hearing this man talk about a woman other than his mother. He could stand no more of his weakness, his confessions, and above all, his surrender. He had hoped to find him furious and ready to do anything to preserve his rank. However. This time he faced an enemy who yielded without a fight.

"I understand what you feel," Kyrô whispered. Think only about Kaïber now, my son. You are still a Cynwäll, while I, your old man, am no longer anything but an elf. You must stay clearheaded and unbiased. This is a dangerous time, son. No one here realized the extend of the peril threatening the stronghold. The Guide felt the danger. The troops of Acheron are not coming to try and test us this time. Every clue we have points to that. The damned want to see Kaïber down. They want to surge over Alahan. And you, Syd, are here to stop them."

"I know."

“Tomorrow we’ll have a succession ceremony and...”

“There will be no ceremony,” Syd interrupted.

“That would be a grave mistake. Our warriors need to understand what’s happening.”

“They will understand tonight. I will see them before daybreak. We’ll take care of the proprieties and decorum after the battle.”

“Syd saw a glimmer of pride in the eyes of his father.”

“So be it. As of now, you command this garrison. I stand down and withdraw.”

“Withdraw forever. Be gone from our lives.”

“I accept that, my son,” he concluded in a dignified tone.

CHAPTER V

A bell had tolled midnight before Syd, accompanied by Myldiën, swept into the Cynwäll quarters. Each step carried him on the tracks of his childhood and brought back painful memories of his brother to the edge of his consciousness.

After leaving the Alderion, he had spent a short time alone to meditate. He needed to channel his emotions, to push the contradictory feelings that assailed him in the background, in order to be ready for the task at hand. He did not know exactly what was expected of him, but he had the trust of the Guide. He was coming to reorganize a diminished garrison on the eve of a battle that would seal the fate of the Alliance of Light, and maybe even the fate of Aarklash.

He knew he was a pawn among pawns, thrown into an open war he had disregarded for years as he was devoting himself to the shadow war played far behind the front line and the ramparts. He believed, however, that a mere pawn, no matter how small, could carry some weight in the outcome of a battle.

Armed only with this conviction, he began his tour of inspection.

The Cynwäll quarters drew a half-circle around the Map Room that was considered the heart of the stronghold. To the north was the huddle of towers administered by the dragon-knights. To the west were the broad and heavy buildings occupied by the heliasts, while in the east the vigilant equanimous brothers were dwelling in the entangled network of vertical monasteries designed and built to promote silence and concentration.

Syd knew perfectly well the place of the Cynwäll in the strategy of the Alliance. They had been viewed for very long as an elite excelling in the art of command, and Kyrô, his father, had perfected that tradition. His people were meant to be the spine of Kaïber.

Syd had inherited from his mother a marked predilection for the heliasts. Though their inventions, their constructs and the artifacts of the Sphinx they put at the Alliance's disposal, they played a major part in the chain of command as they provided the tools necessary to make it work efficiently. Although officially under the joint authority of the three pillars of the Alliance, the Map Room was the best example of this, and Syd hoped to hold a war council there with his allies as soon as possible after he had finished sizing up his troops.

They were few compared to the Lions and the Griffins. About a thousand in all, all of them seasoned veterans who had made an initiatory journey to the gates of Laroq, to meet the Guide and earn his approval, before they had been allowed to serve permanently in Kaïber to honor the Alliance. Syd left the Exianth to follow the

tracery of stairs threading its way among the equanimous monasteries. Myldiën followed him silently, a few steps behind him. Syd went to the gates of the Hermitage, where the masters of every monastery congregated on a regular basis. He was in a hurry to meet and check on these wise elves renowned for their impartiality and perspicacity. The respect they held within the Alliance was a double-edged weapon. Syd remembered perfectly the long days his father used to spend here, in the Hermitage, to compromise with them and secure their unwavering support.

The monks on vigil inside the building had to yield to the facts: Syd had not waited for an official ceremony to replace his father. In a few minutes the Hermitage was in an unprecedented turmoil. Syd demanded that a council be held in the following half-hour and waved aside all the excuses they offered him to postpone it until the morning. Eventually the monks had to give in to the silent stubbornness of the new commander, and they hastily sent young disciples to go and fetch the masters in their monasteries.

Myldiën was watching the proceedings with a smile.

“You are jostling old traditions. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

The council was held in a dimly lit round room. Syd was sitting in the center of the room and could barely make out the gaunt shapes that slowly assembled in a circle around him. The lack of light was deliberate, to assist the concentration of the members of the Hermitage and to assert their unity when they would speak in one voice.

Syd was now subjected to the impassive gaze of fifteen ancient elves whose martial lore was a fearsome asset in the hands of the Alliance. These old, wrinkled and bony sages were the leaders of a dreaded elite of fighters entrusted with their ancient combat techniques. Their disciples were deployed in battle to fill the gaps in the defense, as soon as those were identified by the Map Room commanders. They were the mystical binders of the ranks, respected by all, who could step in to rally the troops scattered by an enemy attack. They were the fighters who under any circumstance would never yield, for they had no concept of fear.

Syd on the other hand, knew fear. He had sensed it in the depth of his soul, he had felt it gush in his bowels and seize his heart. It was like an icy hand, colder even than the winds blowing over Laroq. Fear had humiliated him. Over there in the dark valley, it had branded him like a slave. He hated it for the same reason he hated his father, because it revealed his helplessness.

The Sages were waiting for him to speak. He cleared his throat and saluted each master.

“The Guide has chosen me. I am now your commander. I expect from you the same obedience you used to grant my father. Am I being clear?”

"You are," a master said.

"I have two questions. I want to know why my father is regarded as a failure. I also want your thoughts about the upcoming battle."

"Your father is ill," a master answered. "His behavior defies our simulations. We think he is controlled by his emotions. We think he is no longer reliable."

"To command?"

"To fight in the name of our Guide. We think Kyrô is no longer a Selsÿm."

"Why did you allow it? Why didn't you separate that woman from him?"

"We cannot interfere in the Lion circle. That woman is Barhan; she cannot be reached without offending our allies. Furthermore, we have only partial and inaccurate intelligence about her, and despite our research, it seems she is nowhere to be found. We thought the death of this woman was desirable. We have suggested that the Guide might entrust her assassination to our disciples. The Guide refused then, and we see now that his decision was as always the best one."

"Did the Guide explain why?"

"He reckoned that love was not the only emotion involved. We initiated simulations after adding shame, and then remorse. We think those feelings are compatible with your father's irrational behavior. We think your father could not handle the emotional entanglement of your brother's death, your departure, and your mothers sacrifice. We have noticed a gradual deterioration of his sense of judgement, too marked for his experience to compensate for it. We consequently think that your father is a threat to Kaïber.

The tone was restrained, almost monotonous. The masters really did speak in one voice, but the voice sounded almost disembodied.

"I strictly forbid my father from entering the Cynwäll quarters. Do you approve that decision?"

"We approve but we also suggest the Helianthic courts be given enough evidence to arrest and execute him."

There was a long silence before Syd spoke up again.

"I have other priorities."

"We concur"

"I do not want to be his executioner before the battle. Our troops and our allies could think there was revenge where there is only justice."

"We concur."

"Do we still have relay constructs at our disposal among the Barhan troops?"

His mother had hinted at how some of the constructs detached among the Lions could sometimes be used to spy on their allies and sound out their resolve.

"Yes," a master corroborated.

"Then I shall ask the heliasts to keep an eye on him."

"We approve."

"What can you tell me about Acheron?"

“We think the worst is yet to come. We estimate that the banner of Darkness may soon float over the ruins of Kaïber. The analysis of the reports from the Alliance’s scouts suggests that the Houses of Acheron are considering a war of annihilations. We are concerned about the risk of an unprecedented alliance with the order of the Ram. We perceive an unusual and extensive activity in the Realms of the Abyss, culminating around the portals linking both worlds.”

“Do you think our troops are ready?”

“Our monks are ready, but the repeated carelessness of your father has considerably weakened Kaïber’s commandment.”

“Be more specific.”

“Your father insisted that the dragon-knights be excluded from the decision process in the Map Room. He granted them the freedom to come and go where they please on the battlefield without consulting our allies. There are other troubling decisions your father took without heeding our advice, but we suggest you acquaint yourself with the details from the First Helianthic Court.”

“I will.”

“We now have a question for you. How do you plan to win the respect of our troops and allies? We know for certain that your command will be disputed, maybe even denounced by our officers or allied dignitaries. Our simulations show that your name and your father’s teaching have granted you a temporary status, but that most of the ranks are afraid of your return.”

“They expect me to prove my worth.”

“We concur.”

“I will have an opportunity at dawn. I intend to join a reconnaissance party and go scouting out the Valley up to the Old Wall.”

For the first time, Syd felt distinctly that the sages were knocked off balance. There was some whispering in the dark before a master spoke.

“We think you take a major risk, but it could be beneficial for the relations with our allies. The Cynwäll, however, will not approve this decision because by dying senselessly you take the risk of tarnishing the aura of the Guide who has chosen you.”

“Time is of essence here. I have no other choices. Myldiën told me he estimated an attack from Acheron could come as soon as in a month. Do you confirm that?”

“No. New reports brought yesterday to the Map Room show advanced preparations. Our most optimistic simulations foretell an assault in two weeks. A one-week delay is in fact much more realist. We think Kaïber must be entirely ready and operational then to have the slightest chance of resisting the enemy.”

“One week... and you think Kaïber is not operational now?”

“With the way things are right now, the Cynwäll command would not be able to coordinate the Alliance’s resistance. If you have not secured that command in a

week, Kaiber will fall.”

“Is this another of your simulations?”

“No, this is absolute certainty.”

“Wake up your monks. All must see my mask within the hour.”

“We concur.”

Syd Decided to end there the improvised council. He did not want the masters to sway any more his view of Kaiber. He now knew their opinion, but he wanted to consult also with the heliasts and the dragons before he took the much-needed decisions.

The council was promptly adjourned. The masters withdrew and took the necessary measures to enable Syd to meet the two hundred monks scattered in the fifteen monasteries of the stronghold. The visit was conducted at a run, to the rhythm of the Cynwäll salute, palm against palm. The disciples were bothered by the contact with the Echyron, but Syd precisely wanted each and every one of them to know they would now serve a heliasts.

The bell tolled the third hour after midnight as he was leaving the equanimous quarter with Myldiën.

CHAPTER VI

He had not slept for too long and felt deeply weary. The Echyron instinctively stepped in to supply him with a burst of energy.

The council with the equanimous masters had made quite an impression. Rumor now preceded the new commander and curious faces appeared in the windows to follow his silent stride through the alleys of the huge Helianthic quarter.

By tradition, he should have gone without delay to the tribëns of the First court. The Cynwäll magistrates were the administrators of everyday life for the elves in Kaïber, and they theoretically received every newcomer arriving to serve on the walls of the fortress.

Syd, however, decided to go first to the Workshop his mother had managed for so long with a skillful mixture of firmness and benevolence. For him, the true power was there, among the artisans who devised the constructs and taught the complexities of using the artifacts of the Sphinx.

He admitted to Myldiën along the way that there was a bit of vengefulness on his part in this deviation from custom. Despite the exceptional circumstances that had driven his mother to use the Echyron, the Helianthic courts had dealt out punishment without trying to untangle truth from falsehood. For them the guilt was obvious and unforgivable. The Helianthic Mother did not know the artifact well enough to use it. The Cynwäll cautiousness in this regard was an absolute rule. Such artifacts were too rare and powerful to be activated without a perfect and comprehensive knowledge of their works and mysteries. The Echyron had not yet yielded all its secrets. One of them, however, had been enough for his mother to decide to use it to try to save her son. The poison flowing in his veins had to be stopped, and the arm shattered by the edge of an axe of the damned had to be replaced. Although the courts had refused to take it into account, the Echyron was the only artifact available to accomplish such a miracle.

Syd understood their decision, but he would never accept it.

The Workshop dated back to the first age of the stronghold and spanned almost every lower floor of the Helianthic quarter. As time went by, its denizens had taken possession of the ground floors of the adjacent buildings, replace the walls by broad supporting pillars.

Syd went inside, his heart fluttering, struck by the unique smell that pervaded the place. It was a mixture of dampness, sweat, and oil that came in hot bursts from the forges and workshops scattered inside. Ocher hangings were used to partition

sectors according to the different crafts. From the northern end came the dull echo of metal-hammering artisans. Syd pricked up his ears and heard coming from the south the discreet staccato of the cogs and wheels handled ever so cautiously by the chronosiarch-masters.

He took a few more steps and raised his eyes, a smile upon his lips: under the ancient vaults, the sapharante spiders were ceaselessly spinning their webs of light that illuminated the artisans working below.

The sight moved him more than he would have liked. Melehän and he used to take refuge here on a narrow catwalk along the southern walls of the Workshop and watch for hours the hypnotic ballet of the spiders.

“You know...” his brother whispers, “I’d like to have a sapharante outfit one day... Can you picture that, a gown of light! Maybe it would even be possible to keep spiders in the pockets to darn the holes!”

His brother is here, right by him, his eyes wide open. He’s pointing at a spider hanging from the ceiling and gently swinging at the end of the golden line cutting through the gloom.

“Go on, catch it!” he breathes while pulling on the sleeve of his tunic. “Please!”

“No, Mother wouldn’t approve.”

“You’re scared!”

The memory is roughly snatched away. Melehän’s face has been replaced by Myldiën’s worried features.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“I think so, yes... It was just an old memory. Forget it.”

He started again through the twists and turns of the Workshop, troubled by the incident. For an instant, the dream had seemed so vivid he had thought he was back in that long-gone time. He felt an unpleasant tenseness in his muscles, as if the Echyron was also responding to the phenomenon. His eyes fell on the dragon’s claw and he wondered how much it felt the magic pervading this place. His mother had often told him how the spells used by the heliasts left gleams, traces some artifacts were very sensitive to. You might get a glimpse of them one day, she used to tell him with a smile. They are the reflections our magic scatters about like dead leaves. Sometimes they settle down on an object and if you are very careful, you can see their glittering. It brings luck, so be very careful. Syd had tried the experiment several times with his brother, but they had never seen such gleams.

People were beginning to notice his presence. Some gave him lingering looks, others averted their eyes. Familiar masks sometimes appeared unexpectedly and, after an instant of surprise, saluted him respectfully.

Syd came at last to the heart of the Workshop, where the most daring experiments were conducted under the supervision of the heliasts. Here the constructs came to life; here the artifacts of the Sphinx were probed until they gave up their secrets. Dressed in wide togas, the magicians here wore complex masks extended by metal boughs that went down around their bodies like some form of armor. This elaborate mesh was permeated with the essence of Solaris. In his youth, the gems of Light sliding along the boughs had captivated Syd. They are like planets revolved to the ringing of Lahn and his solar power... a mage had once whispered to him mysteriously.

Syd took a long look around the wide room. Delineated by darker hangings, the place was bathed in diffused light. The sapharante spiders were gone and had been replaced by simple candlesticks set on the long tables of white marble.

The magicians were weaving light and giving life. The complex cogs and wheels of the constructs set before them were put into motion by the touch of the Solaris beams. Inert components were being slowly raised above the ground, linked together by glittering strands of light, while others were merging to fashion strange bronze puppets. Syd saw swarms of creatures as small as insects buzzing around their creators, and others scampering along from one table to another, carrying precision machinery in their flanks. He also saw those intended for the ramparts, the streamlined and shielded constructs designed for war, or the messengers with crystalline wings that would soon fly throughout the lines to transmit orders from the Map Room. Syd knew that almost every single creature was unique piece, bearing the double signature of the artisan who had designed it and the mage who had animated it. They were of so many different shapes and uses that keeping track of all the models was nearly impossible.

Within the floor, he saw the heavy stone trapdoors that led to the Workshop's basements, where the in-depth examinations of the artifacts were performed. His mother had once come rushing down one of those stairs to snatch from the magicians the Echyron that was to save her son.

The Embalmer was an old elf with a bushy gray beard and a gaunt and gnarled body, dressed in a simple toga of pearl-gray silk. His shoulders were sagging under the weight of an enormous mask that had grown over the years, an accumulation of small parts obtained from artisans and mostly from the constructs in his charge.

Horlënn was watching over a museum, a living memory of the Helianthic losses and failures. His sanctuary was a deep pit surrounded by shelves crowded with heaps of broken constructs recovered from the battlefield, aside with all those discarded as a result of either design problems or magical failings.

Perched on a broad ebony armchair held by a beam of light, he was floating in the middle of the pit, his legs covered by a thick woolen blanket.

Syd had to bend over the pit to find him hanging in the air like this. An articulated limb fixed on an armrest was holding a desk laden by a heavy register covered with finely fashioned handwriting. Horlënn was feverishly writing while casting quick glances now and again at the burnt remains of an artifact stored in front of him.

“Another dead body?” Syd called from above.

Horlënn did not even raise his eyes and answered with a grunt.

“You don’t salute your commander?”

The Embalmer slowly raises his mask toward the top of the pit, let out a sign of surprise, and with a simple motion of his hand caused his seat to rise along the light beam.

“Let me embrace you, my boy!”

Syd leant forward to hug closely the only elf he regarded as a true friend.

“I have missed you,” he admitted in a voice thick with emotion.

“Me too... Commander.”

He quickly unfastened his mask and took it off with relief. Syd helped him get up and cross the ridge of the pit. Both elves sat down crossed-legged on the bare floor, and Syd also removed his mask.

“You have aged,” said Horlënn forthrightly. “How is your arm?”

“Fine. Don’t worry about it.”

For a short while, they were at a loss for words. They had separated four year earlier, during a night they had both tried to forget ever since. Horlënn had kept a ghastly recollection of this race against death, of the sense of impending tragedy that prevailed over the Workshop as he had been the first to join what was to become the procession headed by the Helianthic Mother to put pressure on the mages defending the door leading to the Echyron. The tears had come only three days later, when he had accidentally found a long-dead gem of Light forgotten in his pocket. He had offered it to Melehän six months earlier, so that he could familiarize himself with the relief of the stone. The boy had kept it like a most precious treasure, convinced it would bring him luck in becoming a great magician, until one day the talisman had slipped from his pocket and been lost, in the very place where Horlënn had first retrieved it and later burst into tears when he acknowledged the boy’s death.

He loved both boys like his own sons. Under their mother’s watchful gaze, he would often hoist them up on his knees before going down into the pit to show them his best pieces.

“I managed to get news of the Mother,” the old elf whispered suddenly to cut short the flow of memories. “She is better now, making progress. I hope to visit her soon.”

“I don’t have much time,” Syd said, dodging the topic. “I need you to consult the construct.”

"What are you talking about? Which construct?"

"The Ekerym. The one that led us to the outpost."

"Syd..."

"It's my only lead to find again the place where Melehän died. It was night. We had wandered for hours before they caught up with us. We were wounded and exhausted... Ill never be able to locate the place by myself."

"This is insane. Why go back there? Anyway, that construct was destroyed. Well, it was..."

"Locked up. I know, you whispered it in my ear."

"I was convinced you would have forgotten."

"Horlënn, I have dreamt of Melehän almost every night for four years. I'm not sure yet but I think the Echyron is playing a part in all this. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I heard very distinctly what you told me then. That I did not have to worry because one day you and I would find back Melehän with the help of the Ekerym you claimed to have hidden and kept alive."

The Embalmer's eyes blurred.

"I only wanted to help you cling to life, Syd."

"I believe you. And I trusted you. Is this Ekerym still alive?"

"Why? What are you hoping for?"

"I do not hope for anything. I just want the right to hear the earth where my brother fell."

"That earth is dead. You will learn nothing from it."

"I want to see the place where he died. I cannot remember it."

"I thought that your dreams..."

"I have no recollections, not the haziest image. Only an echo, as if I felt his blood flowing between my fingers without being able to open my eyes or hear what's happening around us. I need to see, do you understand? Just to see for myself the place where he died and be allowed at last to put it out of my mind."

"Is this all that matters to you, then? You've not come to help us, to help Kaïber, or even the Alliance. You've come... to sleep better at night to appease your soul, even if it entails disavowing our Guide?"

"I will serve the Alliance if I am able to kneel where he died. You love him like our own son. Why do you pretend not to understand?"

"He was our brother, Syd, and yes, I did love him like my own son. But if I had to choose between him and our stronghold, I would always choose Kaïber."

"Then I'll tell you plainly. I will leave at dawn, whether the Ekerym has spoken or not."

"You are still as stubborn as you were."

"Help me."

"You're wrong, Syd. You are not alone. Many Cynwäll are glad that Kyrô is giving up his post at last, and that you, his son, are the one succeeding him. You are

not alone, and you must acknowledge it. The choice of our Guide is not just an opportunity to settle your old scores.”

“I know that.”

“Come back in one or two hours. The Ekerym shall be ready.”

“I will need at least two hours to calm down the tribëns.”

Syd saluted and made to leave. The Embalmer held him with a worried look.

“Your father betrayed you and you don’t trust us anymore. But you must not confuse him with every Cynwäll.”

“I trust you.”

“I am nobody, only the Embalmer. You must trust our Guide, our warriors, and all those who have come here to defend Kaïber.”

The tribëns were watching him severely. They had greeted him cautiously and accompanied him into a private sitting room adjoining the First court, a secluded room where they had all settled in a heavy silence. The tribëns, unmasked and hairless, wore wide garnet-red robes belted at the waist and leather boots, and carried the staves of judgment that were the symbol of their neutrality among the Cynwäll. To the clear sound of the staff they sometimes used as a weapon, each of the twenty-three tribëns dealt justice and ensured that the three pillars of Cynwäll lore struggled in harmony toward a common goal. The heliasts, the equanimous monks and the dragon-knights were all duty-bound to obey unquestioningly the decision and judgments of the tribëns who embodied the wisdom of the Guide.

“What kind of game are you playing?” the eldest said abruptly as Syd was taking off his mask. “What gives you the right to deny the principles around which Kaïber was erected?”

Syd raised an eyebrow, puzzled.

“Your principles?”

“Your arrogance puts us in an awkward position.”

Syd settled himself deeper in his armchair and crossed his arms.

“Father Selim, do you remember the day you took me by the hand and showed me around this courthouse?”

“Perfectly well.”

“You explained to me on that day that the Rag’narok alone would eventually separate the dignity of some from the downfall of others. I did not understand at the time, but since then I had the opportunity to put your advice to use. The face of the enemy doesn’t matter as long as we remain standing. It is the enemy that brings us together, not the war. A warrior earns dignity through the strength of his commitment, the moment he denies his own life to offer it to his people. That’s what I’m doing. I am not a heliasts fundamentalist. My principles are those that war demands, and I will take up my duties accordingly. I respect the proprieties that

strengthen the friendship among warriors, not those of the backrooms that sentenced my mother to exile.”

“Those backroom proprieties, as you say, are the foundation of the Cynwäll nation. If we were to start using the lore of the Sphinx without restriction, we would be condemning ourselves.”

“How do you know that?”

“Your impudence is horrifying. Are you one of those who would entrust the Alliance with weapons of unknown power?”

“I know the Guide claims these weapons may be tools of domination, but they would be only in the wrong hands.”

The tribëns exchanged worried looks. Elīm’s delicate features hardened.

“I don’t like you, Syd. None of us do, actually. You are a dangerous individual, mistaken and blinded by unhealthy emotions. The First court has been extremely lenient with your mother and even more with you. I had called for your execution and I still wish I had obtained it. The Echyron, despite the fact that our knowledge of this artifact was far from completed, saved you. You are an error, an offense to the wisdom that rules the fate of the Cynwäll. Your name saved you at the time. However, make no mistake about it: I obey you only out of respect for our Guide’s decision. As soon as Kaïber is clear of the present danger, I will do everything in my power to remove you from command. You are a mad and heinous dog. You belong with your mother, in a monastery, under the close supervision of our equanimous brothers. I do not understand the purpose of our Guide. Your presence here is a great danger than the coming of Acheron’s armies.”

“Are you finished?”

“For now, yes.”

“I don’t like you either, Elīm. You are the embodiment of that dusty old guard shaking with general fear of progress, having lost all daring for a pretense of lucidity. You have lived too long curled up behind the walls. I am a realist. I feel sorry that the powers of the Sphinx are so neglected when they are within our reach.”

“So, the end would justify the means...”

“I am thoroughly convinced of it.”

“Are you still a Cynwäll?”

“What about you all? Have you forgotten we own the return of the dragons to the first battle of Kaïber? They heard the call of the blood; they heard the call of the Rag’narok. I am convinced that the Guide sees through me a new Cynwäll age, the beginning of a wholehearted harmony between our people and the heritage of the Sphinx.”

Consternation was apparent on the tribëns’ faces. Edayön, who was renowned for his integrity, solemnly stood up and spoke.

“What I have heard is very serious. I cannot tolerate any more of it and I refuse to serve as a tribën under your command. I ask for your permission to fight on the

walls as a simple soldier.”

“Granted...” Syd said. “If others among you want to follow him, let them say it now.”

After exchanging glances with his peers, Elim leaned forward.

“We will stay because you need us. As long as Kaïber is threatened, we will serve you as faithfully as we served your father.”

The tribëns withdrew to the sound of rustling silk. Syd remained alone for a while, listening to the sputtering of the candles. He felt he had gone too far and too fast. He had given in to an urge and explained too bluntly what he deemed to be the only practical future for the Cynwäll nation. Yet he had the proof right there, in himself: despite the tribëns’ uncertainties, the Echyrion had indeed saved him.

CHAPTER VII

The Embalmer was distractedly stroking the tip of his beard that prolonged his helmet. Deeply set in his chair, he had just extracted from a lump of metal a sphere of crystal and bronze twelve inches in diameter. Syd was standing next to him, balanced on a stepladder.

"This is the one all right," the old elf whispered.

Syd agreed. He had recognized the crack covering half the sphere, a coarse mark left by the voulge of a dwarf zombie. The gutted construct revealed an intricate combination of glass, gearwheels and precious stones. Most parts were bent or broken, but a dim light still emanated from the heart of the object.

"A comatose consciousness," Horlënn whispered.

He raised the sphere to eye level and followed its outline with the palm of his hand. Mana arabesques glittered in the half-light of the pit and wrapped up around in ribbons around the construct.

"There is a residual magic here and there," the Embalmer said, pointing to two small sapphires that were slowly spinning around.

"Can you get anything out of it?"

"I don't know I haven't inspected it for a very long time. But I had done some good work back then. Look, I had sacrificed the levitation mechanisms and diverted the consciousness beams to the gravitation stone."

"Which means?"

"This poor Ekerym could no longer fly, but it should still be perfectly able to assess its location."

"What about its memory?"

"Be patient. You must realize one thing: I healed the darkness on the top crack, but I had to amputate there... and also here, very close to the Mnemoce."

Syd pulled a face. The Mnemoce was a kind of crystal gem the heliasts constantly tried to duplicate as well as possible, and it held a frail and unstable magic.

"Can you do something?"

"It would be dangerous. I'd have to blindly establish a link between yourself and the Mnemoce."

"How do you mean blindly?"

"If its damaged or contaminated, you might be beset by... uncontrollable mental pictures. Do you remember Eldekin? He tried the same kind of experiment, and now he is left with about the same free will as a zombie."

“There is a more straightforward solution: I could use the Echyron.”

Horlënn raised his head.

“You like to play with fire.”

“I’m in a hurry.”

“It’s your decision. It’s not the Mnemoce you’d be in touch with, but the heart of the construct, the diamond I showed you. Either you bring it out of its lethargy, or...”

“I strike it dead.”

“The mana animating the dragon’s claw is infinitely more powerful than the mana in this construct. I don’t know what would happen if the Echyron killed it.”

“Could it affect me?”

“The energies in the artifacts and the constructs are streams from the same mountain. What would happen if an artifact “assassinated” a construct, frankly I have no idea. I’d have to check through my books to see if something similar has already happened. And anyway, if I have to set a link magically, it’ll need at least two or three days.”

“That’s much too long. I’ll use the Echyron.”

Both elves had come back up and were settling down around a quiet table.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Horlënn asked in a whisper.

Syd didn’t answer. His eyes were set on the bowels of the sphere. The faint gleam of the diamond was in effect the only light left to guide him on the path to his brother. He hesitated for only a split second. His hand slipped between the lips of the wound and closed around the heart of the construct.

The night, cold and unfriendly. Their feet sinking into a putrid earth the color of ashes. The stagnant ponds. The mud, and the cold again. Always the bone-deep cold, slipping in between the chain mail armor, freezing the leather and numbing the hands. In the shadows, the hardened trees have become a leaden forest creaking in the wind. The treacherousness of the knotty and pointed branches, of the bushes with tormented thorns. With no landmark except for the skeletons trapped in this corrupted environment, the squad trudges on, straight forward, hoping for a glimpse of the lights of Kaïber on the horizon.

Hunted down and worn out by a night of forced march, a handful of elves hears the pack closing the circle around them. The howls of the banshees tear the silence and lead centaurs who draw nearer with each passing hour. One of the wounded hangs back from the party. Her name is Jehel, and she hides the ignominious stigma of the black blade under her bloodied cape. Her pain has reached its highest point, yet she remains silent. She staggers to a branch sticking out of the ground and kneels right before it. The need to die and stop delaying the company has become

painfully obvious. With clouded eyes, she leans forward and almost gives up when she feels the cold tip pricking her skin.

“I will help you,” a voice suddenly whispers right behind her.

She had not heard him coming, but here he is, kneeling by her side, a bitter smile frozen on his face. He runs his fingers through her hair and abruptly pushed on her neck. She flinches and dies.

Syd stands up and catches up with the squad. He knows his men are at the end of their tethers. If they don't have a clear sight of Kaïber in the next hour, they will to make sure they die with the same courage Jehel demonstrated.

They are now entering a crevice that will shield them for a while from their pursuers' sight. Syd is holding his brother up by the shoulder. He is tormented with worry about Melehän's wounds: a cut to the temple, and another one, deeper, on his back. A zombie's scythe flayed him from the waist up to the shoulder. The strips of fabric tied around his chest are sticky with blood. His face is white and contorted with pain, but he soldiers on, encouraged by his brother's voice egging him on each time he staggers.

The squad is drained and made up only of a handful of dragon-squires, thirteen in all, with half that number wounded. Their tattered suits of armor bear witness to the ferocity of the skirmishes they fought on the previous day. They had been sent by the Cynwäll command to help out a party of reapers who risked being surrounded by the enemy. They had engaged a mere handful of zombies barring the access to Kaïber. However, those were only the vanguard of a much larger troop, which had hit them pretty hard and forced them back while the reapers, who had gone through the opening, could no longer assist them.

The enemy was all around and furious about the escape of the Lions. They attacked relentlessly with no regard for losses, and little by little, the Cynwäll had been pushed back northward.

Toward the barony of Acheron.

Up to now, Syd had hoped for an opportunity to turn east and make their way back to the mountainside, but scavengers always cut them off, though they did not even give chase. Syd now admits the enemy does not intend to fight them but only to push them forward like game in a battle. He concentrates on his footsteps, on the breath he saves to be able to hold Melehän a bit longer. No one has slept, or eaten, or even sat down to catch a breath. They have to go forward, always. Not turn around, not give in to despair, and not throw themselves on a branch to stop hearing the wild shouts of their pursuers.

However, they still have one chance. Before the pain became unbearable, Melehän was able to concentrate long enough to use magic and, with the help of a squire, to modify the Ekerym that levitates in front of the company. The construct is now emitting a signal in the tainted sky, an echo vibrating on the grounds surface in

the hope of reaching Kaïber's dragons. Melehän had been adamant: the call is so weak there is almost no chance it can be heard behind the walls. Except if they survive until the storm. "Lahn in the zenith," Melehän mumbled. "The storm will draw back the night. It will help us... we must hold until then, the signal will be amplified..."

The enemy is here, so suddenly that they take another few steps before realizing they are surrounded. The low ground they hoped would protect them has turned into a deadly trap. Dwarf zombies in large numbers are massing on both flanks of the crevice, crowding together and sniggering gutturally. Despite the darkness, Syd can see the dented shapes of their vouldges raised against the sky. Scavengers are gathering behind them in a number large enough to cut off any hope of retreat. Their mounts, horses consumed by malevolence, snort and whinny shrilly.

The enemy is waiting for something. Syd has put Melehän down against a tree stump and is arraying his troop in a defensive formation. His four last archers entrenched in the middle of the circle composed of the warriors who are drawing their slender swords. The likely outcome of the fray does not shake their determination. They have acknowledged long ago that they would die here, on this dead land far from their own. They are happy to fight at last. To be granted an honorable death with their weapons in their hands rather than to keep running away until exhaustion.

Syd has felt a formidable strength holding back the assailants crowding around them, and he feels only an indistinct resignation when he sees right in front of them the silhouette of the Crâne warrior. The five Wolfen zombies of his personal escort stand aside before him, their scythes on their shoulders.

Syd has recognized the warlord's sword. There are many tales about Bitterness, the sinister blade holding the soul of his lover and linking him for all eternity to the Dark Principle. Bearing the seals of the Ram, Alderan is holding his weapon with both hands as he treads heavily forward. An atrocious smell precedes him and turns the elves' stomach. Onyx sinews quivering in unison are apparent under the putrid flesh, like the strings of a fiendish harp. Despite himself, Syd is fascinated by the power emanating from the damned body, by the horns extending out of his skull glazed by the breath of the Dark Gods. His sharp hooves crack the ground, releasing clouds of dust.

Syd stands apart from the troop and walks toward the creature. He bites his lips until he tastes blood to prevent his hands from shaking on the hilt of his sword, and calls in a strong voice:

"Alderan! I am Syd, son of Kyrô. Withdraw your troops or die here."

A smile appears on the skull of the warlord.

“Syd... Bitterness likes your name. If you fight well and I enjoy your death, the necromancers will make you a lieutenant in my guard.”

Syd turns around and goes slowly back to join his companions.

“Squires, try to break through to the north. Sayem, I entrust you with my brother. Take good care of him. May the dragons inspire your fight.”

The Cynwäll salute him silently, regroup, and set off as one toward the scavengers. Syd dashes in the opposite direction. His heart beats like a drum as he runs in strides toward his executioner. He has left his fear behind and feels lighter, certain as he is that he will die without betraying the Alliance and after having done all he could to save his brother.

Alderan receives the first onslaught with an apparent surprise. He stares with enjoyment at the long notch across one of his chest plates and turns around to face the Cynwäll. Bitterness quivers in his putrefying hands.

“You are thirsty, my sweet,” he whispers to the blade.

Syd has checked with a glance that the Wolfen zombies standing a few yards back are not about to interfere. He is fighting a creature far more resilient than he is and he knows he must make the most of his quickness. He whirls around hits opponent and harasses him with small jabs to fathom his movements. Every body has its own language, even those of the damned. The warlord discloses himself with a smile. He even lays himself open to attack and sniggers when the Cynwäll sword slides along his armor, throwing sparks into the night Syd quickly understands that such a creature will never grow tired, and that he has to strike a deadly blow or give up and die.

He is saving his strength and dodging the ponderous blows of Bitterness without finding an opening in the Crâne Warrior’s guard. The fight has lasted for almost four minutes and Syd suddenly catches sight of his troops thrown back by the scavengers. There are only seven squires left, standing around Melehän. Brought to a stand in the center of the crevice, they now struggle against the mod of dwarves that has rushed down the slopes to engage them.

He sees the Ekerym flying haphazardly before being suddenly struck by a voulge and falling down in a burst of broken glass.

The end draws near among clouds of swirling dust.

Then there is a rumble in the distance. Syd feels a drop falling on his neck and raises his eyes. The eternal night of Acheron is receding before the storm. In the crevice, he cannot see his brother anymore. He slips away and runs to the fray. A dwarf zombie tried to stop him, and his head explodes with a wet sound. He dodges a blade, catches a glimpse of a squire’s body carved by angry teeth, and then another who dies disemboweled by multiple voulges.

He screams his brother’s name, leaps among the bodies alive and dead, between daggers and the axes.

Melehän is right there, on the ground. A dwarf has climbed on his back and is pulling his head backward while grunting in pleasure. Syd decapitates him with a backstroke of his sword and grabs his brother's motionless body.

The rain has broken out; a bolt of lightning splits the horizon. Dizzy with exhaustion, Syd starts to climb on one of the sides of crevices and stumbles on the sodden earth. He let go of his sword and raises Melehän in his arms. He climbs, yard after yard. A dwarf passes them without taking notice in the downpour. He keeps going and finally reaches the ridge.

"We're getting out of here, believe me," he croaks.

He stumbles forward. He feels lost and terrified, prisoner of a dream from which he can't ever wake up. The mud sticks his feet to the ground. Each step is a victory. Comes a time when his legs give up on him. He collapses and takes Melehän in his arms.

"It's over, little brother... Forgive me..."

He removes his mask and lets the rain fall on his face. A new bolt of lightning, very close, basks the area in fleeting light.

Alderan has followed him and is coming closer. He stares for a long time at the two Cynwäll at his mercy. The Wolfen are waiting behind him, watching the clouds worriedly.

"Him first," he says as he thrust Bitterness into Melehän's chest.

Syd screams as he sees the taint on his brother's torso, the tender flesh shriveling up under the onslaught of Darkness spreading through his veins and trying to subdue him. The Wolfen are restless and point something out to their master. The warlord growls and strikes again. His sword swoops down on Syd's shoulder. Pain explodes in his skull and overwhelms him.

Horlënn was bent over him, holding his head upright. That hand... it took Syd a while to separate the past from the present and to make sure he was in the Workshop with the Embalmer, far from Acheron and from Alderan.

"You fainted," the old elf said. "You also yelled."

"I was there. With him."

A teardrop went silently down his pale cheek. He brushed it away contemptuously and stoop up on shaky legs.

"I saw Bitterness."

"The sword of Alderan?"

"Yes."

"The dragon-knights who rescued you could never be sure. So, it really was him..."

"Bitterness did not kill Melehän, it contaminated him. It turned him into one of them."

The Embalmer nodded without showing any surprise.

"That was to be expected."

"How could I forget? I saw his eyes. They opened when the sword went into his chest. It was like he was coming back to life."

"Your brother is dead like you thought, you know. This changes nothing. This is the fate of our companions here. Many have seen a lost friend or relative turn up and had to kill them again because they knew the Dark Principle was the only thing holding them up."

"To think... that maybe he serves Alderan."

"It is only his body, nothing but a soulless envelope."

"I know. I only hoped to put the past behind me, once and for all. A pilgrimage to bury him over there in those cursed lands, and here too," he said as he hit his chest. "Now I don't even know if I still need to go there... What would you do?"

"I would honor his memory."

"To fight in his name and offer him a victory."

"At last I recognize you, Syd."

Me too, my friend, I recognize myself... at last."

Dawn was about to break. Syd was exhausted. His eyes red from weariness were focusing on the report transmitted fifteen minutes earlier by the tribëns. He had withdrawn into a room in the workshop Horlënn had given him for the night and was enjoying his first moment of silence in a long time.

The calm of this bare cell was perfect for him. He had turned down a proposal to move into his father's old quarters and had favored a more familiar comfort to replenish his strength.

Myldiën was lightly sleeping on a stool in a corner of the room, close by a fireplace where a few logs were burning. The flames' reflection played across his mother-of-pearl mask. Syd went to put a blanket on his shoulder and was surprised by the tenderness he felt for the old dragon-knight. Within the frame of his gray locks, his wrinkled face seemed disturbingly ingenuous.

Syd covered him with the blanket and realized he had never bothered to thank him. Yet he had pleaded the trihedron cause in Lanever, on more than one occasion, in order to reconcile the official orders with the freedom his disciples demanded. Syd had paid him no heed and had remained wrapped up in his anger, this blind and cold anger that was now slowly losing its meaning by the light of Kaïber.

He went back to the pages scattered on the oak table. Despite their open hostility, the tribëns had accomplished an excellent work and had unflinchingly summed up the lapses of Cynwäll command. The report was very hard on Kyrô and brought to light many instances of negligence on his part. The commander had denied his responsibilities and given away his authority by bits and pieces. It seemed the one who had to combine harmoniously the Cynwäll strengths had lost his faith. His frequent nonattendance had also driven a wedge in the trust among the Alliance and left the field clear for ambitious men.

There was no doubt as to the conclusion of such a report: the Cynwäll no longer had a commander. For about a year, Kyrô had given up his mission for reasons that remained unclear to the tribëns. They suspected his lover, and Syd recalled the strange talk they had had under the vault of the Alderion. Maybe love had defeated him, after the armies of Acheron had failed to do so.

He gathered the pages and threw them into the fire. He knew the future would be decided tomorrow in the Map Room, with every senior officer in the Alliance in attendance. If he failed then, the fall of Kaïber would carry his name.

CHAPTER VIII

The scales of the dragon appeared progressively in the light of the braziers, like a river of molten lava. Caer Maloth was hugging the walls of the tower in order to be able to fit inside and leave some space for the dragon-knight who watched over her.

Syd was gazing at the scaly surfaces rising around him. Caer Maloth surrounded him with her might and peered at him from behind heavy lids. The sleek muzzle of the dragon bore the stigmas of her fight on Kaïber's front lines, predominantly a long scar doing diagonally across the right eye, an onyx line that went as far as the ear, and which had never healed.

Caer Maloth brought her head close to the young elf who had paid her a visit and let him put the palm of his hand on that scar. Syd had used his left hand, no wanting to use the Echyron, the better to feel the exceptional link woven between the Cynwäll and the dragons of Lanever. The scales under his palm throbbed and gave off a friendly warmth. The cuts from the enemy however left an unpleasant feeling, like the touch of an icy blade.

Her left eye fascinated him. The bronze pupil was a gateway to ancient mysteries no Cynwäll would dare uncover. The dragons were not some kind of tame or dominated force in the elves' service. Those precious allies were their own masters, and their origins were a long-lost secret dating back to the ancient struggle between the Ophidian Alliance and the Utopia of the Sphinx.

The voice of the dragon rose, clear and lively.

"Caer Maloth is happy to see you again."

Syd kneeled deferentially before the creature.

"Stand up, son of Kyrô. And speak to Caer Maloth."

"I have succeeded my father. I come to you to secure your support."

The dragon's long nostrils trembled.

"This succession is cruel. Caer Maloth loved Kyrô like a brother."

"Do you accept me as his successor?"

"Caer Maloth needs not accept or reject. She will judge reality."

"Which one? The reality of the coming battle?"

"That one and all the others. Your willpower alone shall establish the realities for Caer Maloth to judge."

"Do you blame me for having forsaken the way of the dragons in favor of the heliasts?"

"Caer Maloth knows the son of Kyrô has yet to choose."

"I am a Helianth," Syd insisted, raising the Echyrion.

The dragon's eye clouded.

"Syd is only what he does and proved to his people. The artifact is in the shape of a dragon. Refrain from certainties. So far, the Workshop has not tasted the sweat of your work, only the blood of your body through the will of your mother. You are the son of Kyrô and you are Cynwäll, but you are not heliast, like you are not dragon-knight."

"I came back. And I will follow in my mother's steps."

"Such is your right. But it is for Syd to decide, not for the Echyrion."

"Don't worry about it."

"Caer Maloth liked the child, but so far she knows not the adult. The son of Kyrô has lived four years far from us and from Kaïber."

"Nothing has changed, except my father. And the Echyrion has made me stronger."

"Caer Maloth wonders about the use of this strength, not its worth."

"Will you lead the dragons by my side when the time to fight is upon us?"

Small flames crackled on the creature's flanks.

"The dragons will fight by the side of the Cynwäll."

"That is not what I asked."

"If your decisions agree with the reality of the battle, Caer Maloth and the dragon-knights will obey your orders."

"Good. I also wanted to notify you that my father is no longer allowed access to the Cynwäll quarters. You shall not see him again."

"Caer Maloth knows this, but she invites you to weigh up Kyrô's suffering."

"Weight it up? I can never forgive him."

"Caer Maloth knows the son of Kyrô is too young to forgive, but she asks that he listens to his fathers suffering, and that he understands it before he condemns it."

"You stand up for him in defiance of reason. The Guide has reckoned him unfit to rule the Cynwäll of Kaïber. What's the use of trying to understand?"

"Can a son take no notice of a father's suffering?"

"He made his choice. He sacrificed us to save her."

"Does the son of Kyrô think that love can be measured like a combat skill? You are distraught because you are a Cynwäll, and you do not understand your own emotions. Father and son are much alike; they have the same courage. Kyrô chose the most dangerous path, the one that could have condemned both sides of his love. Kyrô could have held his sons and condemned his wife, but he ran the risk of losing all."

"She is not his wife," Syd whispered in a badly controlled tone.

"Does the son of Kyrô blame his father for not loving his mother anymore?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't Syd know that emotions cannot be commanded?"

“The heart is blind and deceitful.”

“The heart divides the soul from the Darkness.”

“But it does not win over it, you better than anyone else knows this,” Syd retorted.

All the scales shivered in rhythm. For Caer Maloth, this was not a scar but an open wound. Vimras, her companion, had submitted to the Dark Principle wielded by the necromancer Kaïan Draghost. The mage had trapped the soul of her loved one and stolen his body.

Syd distinctly saw a thin burst of steam seeping through the blocked eyelid of Caer Maloth. The eye was dead, but the tears could still flow and turn to steam upon touching the scaling scales.

“I have hurt you, I apologize,” Syd said.

“When the Cynwäll have learned to love, they will become invincible,” she answered in a distant voice.

“I will hold a council in the Map Room in the next few hours. Will you join us?”

“Has the son of Kyrô given up his desire to venture into Acheron?”

“For the moment. I made a mistake. There would be no use in going there.”

“Caer Maloth respects that decision. Whatever happens, let the son of Kyrô know that the dragons will be at his side. However, Caer Maloth will not attend this council, for she does not command this fortress and she prefer to keep away from the humans.”

“Yet your advice would be of value there.”

“Caer Maloth may advise only in this: a father needs his son.”

Syd kept silent, saluted, and left the tower. The meeting with Caer Maloth had left him with a bitter taste. He feared the beginning of a discussion, he feared he would have to understand and admit that, had he been in his father’s place, he would probably have done the same. His mind in a jumble, he joined the escort the dragon-knights had provided to accompany him to the Map Room. The time had come for Syd to lose himself into war.

CHAPTER IX

The elders had learned to live with the stench of death that has been hanging for so long over the mountains of the Behemoth. It pervaded the clothes, wasted the food, crept into the closed rooms, and even made its way as far as the Gate of the Righteous. By custom, every new recruit was allowed to wear a scarf over the mouth and nose. However, this stage usually ended very quickly with the recruit throwing away the rot-smelling fabric in disgust. Nobody could escape the miasmas of Acheron.

Since dawn, the smell had become unbearable. In the stables, the grooms were doing their best to calm down the mounts driven to panic by the strong whiffs of putrefaction that overpowered their own smells. All around the castle of the Lion, the veterans kept silent. Only they could put a face to the decaying stench, and there was an obvious fear in their eyes. This was a fear the young soldiers could not yet understand, a fear that gripped you forever once an old friend who had died by your side suddenly rose again and looked at you with gray eyes still smoldering with the last dying sparks of his consciousness. A ghoul's kriss could break upon the soul of a paladin, but necromancy was a weapon that struck to the heart. It withered hope and robbed the heroes of the meaning of their sacrifice. On the walls, it was not combat people feared, but a friendly face bent out of shape by a necromancer's power.

Pledges were being made before the upcoming battle. With moist eyes, the warriors were trying to convince themselves that when the time came, their brothers-in-arms could become the enemy, and that the future of Kaïber would be decided on their willingness to strike at that moment. Leaders were passing through the ranks to remind them that the body of a companion raised again by a necromancer was nothing more than a lump of dead flesh. "The soul is already gone," they repeated. "Gone far above the clouds. Strike then, fellows. Strike without fear! Arin will care for the soul of those who fall on that day. There is only one enemy: death! Whatever shapes it takes!"

On the orders of Kyllion the Younger, the first units of spearmen were forming the ranks. Too awkward to defend the rampart, those men would push back the enemy if he managed to breach the walls of the castle. In the faint daylight, they progressively drew golden lines bristling with spears and raised their shield as their brethren went past to climb on the battlements.

Under normal circumstances, only the paladins were allowed to protect the crenellations and the top of the towers. The jagged horizon of the cursed land had broken the most hardened characters. An unshakable faith was required to spend nights and days scrutinizing the burnt trees waving in the wind, to tolerate the silence broken by the wailing of the banshees who hovered in the darkness. Such a routine was beyond the fortitude of regular troops, and Kyllion had reluctantly entrusted that task to his best paladins.

For now, those paladins were standing by the stairs directing the flow of the guards and archers coming to take their positions. These men, coming from every corner of the kingdom, were the rank-and-file of the Alliance of Light. The proud woodcutters of Allmoon were undeniably the most numerous of all the factions. They all took great care of the short-trimmed beard that was their distinctive feature. They had left the forest to defend their land and honor their king. Kyllion respected those simple and brave men with who he often shared his meals.

Those soldiers would be the front line against the enemy. So far, the castle had never fallen, but rumor had it that this time the battle to come would be analogous to the one that had seen the building of the stronghold. In the chilly morning air, they all knew what was expected of them. They would have to fight, that was all. To pitch themselves in front of the valley of ashes and slay all those who would try to set foot on the battlements. Therefore, they sharpened again and again the tips of their weapons.

The strain was perceptible. It was not only the fate of Kaïber that would be decided on that day, but also the fate of the Alliance of Light and its eternal struggle against Darkness. At this very moment, the gods must be watching with interest those few thousand men defending a whole kingdom. Should the barrier break, a time of ashes would come for all of Alahan.

At noon, two thousand men were filling up the three sides of the castle that the enemy could attack. The rustling of the Lion banners and deep blowing of the horns had joined the clanking of the weapons. The musicians played to cover the ominous creaking sounds coming up from the valley. They were marching slowly with their swords by their sides, flourishing proudly their lion-mouthed instruments. The Barhan enjoyed this low, syncopated music. For them, it was the sound of the brave, the echo of heartwarming old victories

Kyllion had been keen to come to the barbican protecting the main gate of the Castle. Below his feet were silently roaring great stone lions carved into the rock: the Pride, a symbol of Alahan, its tenacity, and its faith. Fights worthy of the gods had been disputed between the huge jaws of the statues. The blood of brave men had tinged the stone with a rust color that reminded everyone of the sacrifices of yore. More than a symbol, the Pride was a centuries-old challenge to the dark legions that came to be crushed on the walls.

Clad in holy armor with emerald glints, the Lion commander watched his troops maneuvering. Beside him were his two closest and most faithful companions: Aldenyss the Quiet, a falconer of Alahan, and Drym, his bodyguard. The first was a sturdy man in his prime, hunched up in a huge and heavy black leather coat. The second was a tall and thin boy who had not yet reached twenty, with a pale and gaunt face, chosen among a prestigious unit of reapers. The pair made up the commander's shadow, eyes and armor.

On three occasions already, Drym had shot with a single bullet an assassin who had infiltrated his master's close circle. As for the Quiet, he spoke little but saw everything. He had built up an empathic link so strong with his falcon, Silentz, that the death of one of them would certainly seal the fate of the other.

Aldenyss was leaning on his master, his eyes closed. A few moments earlier, he had launched the bird of prey and let him glide over the valley with a heavy heart. Each time the falcon was snatched into the mist, he stopped breathing. He was over there with him, in the heart of Darkness, hanging by a frail line of thoughts and love. If destiny meant for an arrow to cross his companion's path, then he would be there to die with him.

He had found him on a winter evening, trapped by a wicked root in the cavity of a rock. The bird had broken his wings in his struggle to free himself. So, the Quiet had healed him. Slowly. Without imposing himself. Aldenyss was a good man, a simple hawker, going from town to town since he was too young to remember. His only skills in life were for walking and selling in the town squares the fruits of his gatherings. From then on, he was no longer alone. The tall basket heavy with dates and herbs he carried on his back had also become the sickbed where the wounded bird could rest all day. And in the evenings, when he settled to sleep by the fire, he would slip him against his chest to keep him from the cold. Their indestructible friendship was born of that long convalescences. They had been inseparable ever since. And even though the falcon sometimes gave in to natural urges and flew off for days on end to join his fellow birds, Aldenyss knew he would come back. The same way he knew that as time went by and he lived only for the bird, he had forgotten how to speak with men.

People never understood his silence and his vacant gaze. How could they, when they had never felt the caress of a cloud? Only one man had accepted him as he was, a lord who had exceptionally left his fortress to come to him. Kyllion the Younger had heard about him and was looking for the best falconer in the kingdom. He had come to the Quiet without lies or deceit and demanded a flawless loyalty. You have saved your bird. That is enough for me to know Darkness shall have no hold over you. They say you don't like men. So be it. If you come with me, I will keep them from you. Nowadays you have no right to keep your gift hidden; you must use it for our cause, for the Alliance of Light. Be true to life. It needs you in Kaïber.

Aldenyss remember he had simply nodded to show he agreed. It had now been a decade since he had taken that silent oath, and he had never regretted it.

A burst of terror yanked him from his memories. Silentz had just found the Darkness. A muffled groan escaped from the Quiet's lips.

"They are too many..." he uttered.

"Talk to me," Kyllion said. "You are here with us. Watch but do not be afraid, my friend."

The lord had suited his actions to his words. His hand was firmly gripping the falconer's shoulder.

"Azël protect us.... Zombies... Skeletons and puppets are coming together. Thousands of them. And there... That noise. The Crâne Warriors... The ashes are rising... Oh, master... and here... The scythes..." His body quivered, and his voice became barely audible. "Wolfen..."

He suddenly threw his head back to avoid an arrow aimed at his companion a few miles away Silentz was in danger. War drums were reporting his arrival. Necromancers were calling upon morbid angels to give chase to the intruder.

"Take heed," his master whispered.

His breathing turned into a panting as the bird went deeper and deeper into Acheron in the hope of reaching the enemy's rearguard.

"He flies. He flies even farther but there is no ending. No, lord, this army has no end..."

"Every army has an end," stated Kyllion. "Let him fly farther."

The Quiet was afraid that despite their friendship, there would come a day when he had to choose between Silentz and the promise he had made to the commander. The falcon was flaying away from the Light and ever deeper into the Tenth Barony. Through the shreds of mist, he could now discern the outline of a huge gray cloud heralded by the echo of a deep and rhythmical pounding that shook the earth. He felt the gaze of the necromancers on him and he had to be quick. A wing flag took him near the edge of the cloud made of ashes and dust.

He dove inside.

The Quiet shuddered and a whisper went past his white lips.

"Specters, ghouls... Scavengers also. They are everywhere."

"How many? How many are they altogether?" Kyllion asked. "Give me a number for that army."

"Tens of thousands. A sea of bones..."

"You must be wrong. All the Houses together would not be enough."

"Over there... its him, the Almighty Crâne."

At this exact moment, Kyllion the Younger acknowledges that the Tenth Barony was not coming to weaken them. It was coming to crush them.

Ortho, the imperial legate in command of the Akkylannian troops, was striding through the endless corridors of the Grey Barrier, the great wall that blocked the valley from the east to the west. Behind him came the Praetorian Guardsmen entrusted with his protection.

He knew every nook and cranny of the rampart that had a thickness of up to twenty yards in some places. The Grey Barrier was an embodiment of the boundary between Light and Darkness. Erected behind the Castle of the Lion like the shoulder of a taller brother.

With the same liveliness he gave to his father, Ortho was threading his way among the fusiliers and the artillerymen, giving out a few words of support here and there, as his big bony hands slid with delight along the barrels of the cannons. He knew a musical score similar to the wrath of Merin would soon be played out in this place, when the black muzzles would spit their cannonballs into enemy lines. The hail of stone and iron would mow down the ranks of the damned and that thought was like an elixir reviving the legate's worn out body.

He had recently begun to feel a deep weariness. He led a fight the emperor no longer deemed to be an absolute priority. Octave IX was looking toward a new horizon: the second crusade. The quest for the tomb of Arcavius had become an obsession. The founder of Akkylannie haunted the emperor's dreams. In these dreams, Kaïber was nothing but an old story. Ortho still saw the pale lips of the emperor as they articulated the decision: My dear, he had breathed with a look of resignation; your war has lasted far too long already. It is here, anchored to our flesh like a canker. It torments us, but we have learned to live with it. You offer me a wall and many long years of patience, when instead I need victories and conquest. I am the father of this empire and my people require that I open new roads...

The emperor was not a child of Kaïber like himself, an orphan of the sands set down by the Gate of Righteous a quarter of a century ago by an elderly inquisitor with a tanned face. The prelates of the stronghold had taken him under their responsibility, like so many newborns the second crusade had deprived of a father and mother. Like them he had grown in the light of the only god, he had learned humility within the walls of his monastic cell, he had studied the holy scriptures with old masters of theology, he had served as a simple artilleryman behind the cannons of the Barrier to put his faith to the test, he had trodden the paths of the valley of ashes to fight against the Darkness. The Inquisition had known to notice his predisposition for combat and to disregard his profound lack of interest for theoretical teachings. His devoutness expressed itself with blood. His sword for a credo, he strengthened his faith with each day spent in contact with Evil.

Some prelates tried unsuccessfully to stop his lightning rise within the Akkylannian hierarchy. At the age of thirty-seven, he became the youngest imperial legate in history and turned down the prestigious postings set aside for him in

Arcavia. He belonged body and soul to this stronghold. It seemed to him that they were intimately bound by a secret and tacit agreement. It had sheltered him and revealed the best in him. In return, he had vowed to devote his life to it. He had more than once mentioned this oath in the cathedral's confessional, this disturbing feeling of not knowing, sometimes, if his prayers were for Kaïber or for his god. The distinction was clear in his mind, but his dreams would show him a pale young woman in diaphanous white, coming through the Gate of the Righteous to fetch him. This recurring dream obsessed him, and he would wake up with a start, his body covered in sweat, his throat parched, and his hands shaking.

A loud thud brought him back from his thoughts. A cannonball had escaped from the hands of artilleryman and rolled his feet. Petrified with guilt, the man was kneeling down to apologize. Ortho pushed him away with an irritated gesture and, his features tense with the strain, he picked up the projectile himself and carried it to the cannon.

CHAPTER X

Kaiber lived through the Map Room. Some battles had been won here, in the huge reversed and truncated pyramid that had been completed a century ago.

Separated from the Grey Barrier by an abyss called the Fault, the building had been designed to allow the Alliance to command all the troops gathered inside the stronghold. Its three sides were filled by tiers of seats of elaborate metal spaced out every three hundred yards and culminating at almost three hundred feet. In the center was a wide cone of alabaster dominated by the commanders' table. A single artifact was set inside the cone, visible only to those seated around the table.

The Arkäll. Syd breathed out to control his emotion when his gaze fell on the granite sculpture set inside the alabaster.

It represented a young girl of six or seven years. Her long hair masked both sides of her face and fell to the ground. She was sitting, her legs stretched on one side, one hand supporting her, the other raised to her chest, the fingers apart and the palm turned heavenward. Her half-closed eyelids allowed a glimpse of two bright balls the color of dawn emitting an oblique light that fell on her knees. The Sphinx had dressed her with a simple shirt that went halfway down her thighs.

Syd had long dreamed of this face, its thin and slightly aquiline nose, its high cheekbones, and its pouting lips. The work was so perfect that Syd, like many other children in the stronghold, had been convinced this was a real petrified young girl who a kiss from their lips would release one day.

The Arkäll was devoted to war. Gems of Light glittered in her hair and beams flashed from her hand to sketch the volume of the stronghold and its surroundings. This faithful image of Kaiber glittered in the empty air and revolved slowly. As it received information from the constructs crisscrossing the walls, the child represented each fighter with a small spark that would wink out only upon his death.

Syd had learned to interpret Kaiber through the Arkäll. Melehän, more gifted than he was in that field, had often helped him distinguish the hues of a given spark. He also had to recognize from the glittering whether a warrior was wounded or agonizing. Most of all, he had to wrap himself in the reflection, to become imbued with it, to forget himself and become an integral part of Kaiber.

Syd remembered his father's hand on his shoulders as he led him among the tiers to get a better view of the artifact. This is a tool, my son, he had said. The tool does not make the craftsman, just as the sword does not make the Selsým. It is a precious and magical tool that helps us to react more quickly and to prevent Acheron from slipping in here. No matter where they come from, we will always

know exactly where they are. We are the Cynwäll; one of our duties is to offer the Alliance the means to take the best decisions. This does not preside over the fate of the warrior fighting on the battlements. Here, we have to think the war while others fight it. But those are both sides of the same coin. And you, my son, will have to be proficient with them both in order to succeed me one day.

Along with the equanimous masters, Syd had spent long hours in meditation before the Arkäll, struggling to free the realities of Kaïber from his mind to substitute them with the glowing three-dimensional image and read its most minute changes.

The exercise often drove him into a lethargic weariness, forcing him to rest several days between each attempt, while Melehän was satisfied with a few hours of rest. When one of them was not in the Map Room, the other would try to look for him among the thousands of sparks in the stronghold and get used to his specific glitter. Long before he had mastered the technique himself, his brother had been able to locate him easily despite his efforts to hide among the Alliance units.

Cynwäll elves, Lions of Alahan, and Griffins of Akkylannie went silent as his entrance was noticed. Soon the only sound left was the steady jingle of the constructs threading their way through the tiers.

Syd sat in the armchair reserved for the Cynwäll commander and looked upon the huge reflection of Kaïber. His heart was fiercely pounding in his chest. He turned to the two men sitting by his side.

Kyllion the Younger, commander of the Barhan detachment, and Ortho, imperial legate for the Akkylannian troops, both greeted him with a nod. For the occasion, the Lion wore simple leather armor and a large scarf of russet silk in a knot around his neck. Syd recognized the noble and focused face, the earnest look of the big hazel eyes set under the thick graying brows. The beard trimmed at right angles, the high brow and the determined chin made him a reassuring and inspiring figure for his troops. The man was equally proficient with leading a charge, setting up the defense of a wall of the Castle of the Lion, or anticipating the enemy's moves through the Arkäll. His many wounds had earned him the highest honors, among which he treasured only one: a fiery kiss from the Red Lioness the veterans still mentioned with a tear in their eyes. Kyllion the Younger had won as much respect from his men as he had from his allies, and he served Kaïber as he served his king.

Ortho, for his part, served only the god Merin through the stronghold. Tall and unhealthily thin, his face perched atop a long white and frail neck, he dreamed about applying the values of the Inquisition to the entire fortress. A formidable steward and an outstanding strategist, he spoke little and settled everything. His judgements. In his hands, the Inquisition had turned the Griffin quarters into a huge chapel vibrating to the choir of swords and prayers.

Set back deep in their sockets, the legate's blue eyes were watching the Cynwäll with a combination of curiosity and repulsion. His features hardened when his gaze fell on the shoulder bent out of shape by the Echyron. The artifact's presence bothered him. He put his hand on a bronze cross hanging from his neck and uttered a few unintelligible words.

"Lions and Griffins are honored to have you by their sides," Kyllion announced.

"Thank you."

"The Griffins however hope you will promptly put the rumors to rest," Ortho went on with a stern tone. "Your Guide has chosen you and we respect that decision. Nevertheless, this succession is in many ways disturbing."

"Explanations will be provided later on," Syd answered

"I am afraid this is not good enough. Trust is the cornerstone of the Alliance."

"Kyrô will explain himself in due time," Kyllion stepped in. "Syd, I have personally made your father welcome like a brother; he will stay with the Lions for as long as he pleases. I must also tell you how much he relies on your visit."

Syd gave a slight nod with his chin.

"I will make it a point of speaking clearly. I have been trained to command the Cynwäll in Kaïber. For almost twenty years, my father and his most faithful lieutenants have instructed me and taught me all they knew. I have battled inside Acheron, and for four years I have been fighting in a trihedron. I reckon all this legitimates my right to be here."

"You have my trust," Kyllion said spontaneously.

"Under the present circumstances, I feel sorry the Guide has not appointed a more mature commander," Ortho stated. "You are indeed theoretically the most qualified to replace your father, but you have already forsaken Kaïber once. It is enough for me to have serious misgivings about your commitment."

"You are confusing my father with this fortress," Syd retorted.

"To serve Kaïber is to be born and to die in it."

"I was born here. You will have to be satisfied with that for now."

Kyllion leaned to the side and put a hand on the arm of the imperial legate.

"Ortho, we don't have much time left."

The legate nodded. A smile cracked his bony features.

"One question only, then: Syd, have you taken the appropriate measures to pull your troops back together?"

"The Cynwäll are under my direct command. This is also true of the dragon-knights my father apparently tried to remove from the authority of the Alliance. I can assure you the dragons will intervene according to the decision we will make here together. I also discovered that our heliasts were no longer allowed to move around freely inside the Grey Barrier. I understand perfectly that you might deny

them access to your private quarters, Ortho, but until further notice that wall is a common sector. It belongs to the Alliance, not to the Griffins only.”

“Your heliasts are upsetting my troops,” the legate said. “My sharpshooters have long complained about the presence of your constructs. Your father had agreed with the principle of a limited access.”

“It was a mistake. The concept of common sector is clearly stated in the Code of the Behemoth. We Cynwäll have always seen this Code as the pillar on which Kaïber was erected. I can see no good reason to maintain this restriction as it is, and I ask for immediate cancellation.”

“I sustain the motion,” Kyllion the Younger said. “Two voices in favor and one voice against: Motion accepted.”

Ortho gave out a small sigh and motioned for Syd to go on.

“On the contrary, I found out that my father had lifted the supplying requirements.”

“That is correct,” Kyllion concurred.

“This is an obligation in principle,” said Syd. “You may take into account that my troops will take up these duties as they used to. Another point: the watches. Reports are mentioning a general slackening: soldiers asleep, and more importantly, three established cases of bribery to avoid guard duty.”

“The culprits have all been punished,” the imperial legate volunteered.

“Do we have an explanation?”

“Weariness. The enemy remains out of sight. Without an enemy, discipline slackens.”

“It is important that we make an example of this. The guilty parties will be integrated into reconnaissance units. Kyllion, I suggest concerted missions with your reapers. Is that feasible?”

“Of course.”

“Perfect. Now I come to the main point. My people are usually only used as reserve units. I insist we appoint our Helianthic units on the walls of the castle. And also the monks from several monasteries of which I will show you the list as soon as possible.”

Kyllion smiled, thinking back momentarily on the child of eight who was already wondering why the only Cynwäll in the front lines were constructs.

“I’ll talk about it with my men,” he said. “As for me, I can’t see any objection to it, if their deployment is properly coordinated.”

“I will see to it.”

In the tiers, Lions, Griffins and Cynwäll were carefully listening to the three commanders.

“There are other matters of lesser significance that I would like to clarify with your stewards and lieutenants,” Syd carried on. “Let’s set up a council later on. In a

room of the Exianth, for instance. Before then, can you give me a rough idea of the state of your troops?"

Ortho spoke first.

"The reinforcements the Emperor had promised will not come. The second crusade has become an absolute priority. I had the support of an old friend, cardinal Fero, but his mediation had no effect. The Commandery of the East drains away the strength of the empire, and the battles against the alchemical legions have become ever more costly."

"What about Innocent?" Syd asked. "May he not support you?"

"God has spoken to his Holiness. He has told him to put his servants in the service of the second crusade, whatever the costs. I must yield."

"How many men do you have?"

"A little over three thousand. Theoretically one thousand and two hundred fusiliers and four hundred artillery men for two hundred cannons."

He raised his hand toward the reflection projected by the Arkäll and showed them the defense works built above ground level on the mountain flanks on either side of the castle. The one to the east was the Counterfort of the Levant, and to the west the Counterfort of the Ponent.

"We have finished the strengthening works. I will assign three quarters of my conscripts, about six hundred men, to the support of the counterforts. They will assist my fusiliers should the enemy engage them in hand-to-hand combat. If need be, I will hold several units of inquisitors in reserve."

"What if they are unable to hold?" Syd asked.

Ortho raised a wary eyebrow.

"The inquisitors have always held."

"Answer the question, legate."

"Should the enemy infiltrate the counterforts, then my artillerymen will seal them off with explosive charges," he assured as he indicated the network of tunnels going from the ends of the Barrier up to the first towers of the counterforts on either side. "Be assured that I will take no risk in that matter. The integrity of the Barrier is fundamental."

"You would sacrifice your conscripts and your fusiliers?"

"The children of Merin die with no fear of Judgment."

He ran a hand across his smooth skull and pointed at the whole of the Griffin buildings.

"I entrusted the Darkness hunters with the defense of our quarters. The best units will be positioned around the cathedral to hunt down any infiltrated opponents. If need be, the magistrates and thallions will help them make our quarters unreachable. In the same way, my templars will protect the Barrier. As for me, I will be at the Alliance's disposal with my Praetorian Guard strengthened by a few units of inquisitors."

“What if the Barrier fell?” Syd asked.

“The Grey Barrier has never fallen,” the imperial legate with a knowing smile.

“Yet Acheron has never mustered an army of this magnitude ever since the first battle. So, my question stands: what will you do if the enemy overruns the Barrier?”

“Then we would do what our ancestors advocated even while the stronghold was still being build,” Kyllion stepped in. “We would fall back behind the Fault and defend our quarters. They were built with that purpose in mind, were they not? And if that was still not enough, then we would fall farther back behind the walls of the Circle.”

The Circle, an enormous stone ring holding tall square towers at regular intervals, was the last bulwark of the Alliance. It was standing in the narrowest stretch of the pass. Designed and serviced by the heliasts, it stood on a colossal base of chalcedony and could, if a stretch of wall threatened to fall, swivel around to confront the assailants with a brand-new section of the same wall. Beyond the Circle, there were only the small forts around the Gate of Righteous, the slop down to the plain, and the vast territories of Alahan.

“The circle shall not turn,” Kyllion said in a deep voice. “The Lions will hold the castle and prevent Acheron from putting a single foot upon the Grey Barrier. This being said, my men are worried. Most of them know Kaïber well and they have all been in several battles already, but this one scares them. Ortho is right. When the enemy stays out of sight, it puts the troops on edge. My guards’ morale is faltering.”

“How many are they, nowadays?”

“A little over three thousand. And less than three hundred paladins to lead them into combat.”

“Your swordsmen?”

“About five hundred. Half that number serves in the castle, while the other half will protect our quarters and back up a potential sally of our knights. I should not speak of potentiality, actually. Rest assured that the Gates of the Bold and the Brave shall soon open up.”

Syd raised his eyes to the two huge gates that opened at the foot of the Barrier on either side of the castle. Beyond those gates were high vaulted ways blocked at regular intervals by heavy iron portcullis. These passageways still rang with the deep and rhythmical echo of the charging steeds of Alahan.

“They will be led by a man I trust implicitly,” Kyllion went on. “I am sure he will be able to break the encircling of the castle if the enemy withstands the fire from the counterforts.”

“A visitor of distinction,” the imperial legate whispered.

“Dragan d’Orianthe,” Kyllion said to Syd.

The name of the baron of Daneran was known even in Lanever. Dragan the Merciful ruled over the barony neighboring Acheron, and the wester border of his territory ran around the stairs leading to the Gate of the Righteous.

“His presence is not yet common knowledge with the troops. I will announce him at the opportune moment.”

“Do not delay too long,” Ortho advised with a knowing look.

“I also have at my disposal about two hundred reapers, scattered between our outposts and the Old Wall. Here and there,” he said showing the ruins that could be glimpsed ahead of the castle. “They will hassle the enemy vanguard for as long as possible before joining here, close by the swamp, to retreat in good order under the cover of the Counterfort of the Levant. As I have entrusted the command of our knights to Dragan d’Orianthe, I will lead the paladins to amaranth myself.”

“I long for a chance to convert them,” the imperial legate said ironically.

“Don’t count on it,” Kyllion answered with a burst of booming laughter. “These men will serve Arin until death.”

The face of the Lion abruptly clouded over when Syd suddenly raised his voice to get his attention.

“Kyllion, are you expecting reinforcements from your king?”

“None whatsoever. Gorgyn refuses to interfere. Our barons are bled dry and troops are in short supply on all borders. Witness the fact that my friend Dragan has come here only with his personal escort. Nothing has changed: Kaïber must hold alone against Darkness.”

CHAPTER XI

The three commanders had parted before the doors of the Exianth after the end of the council held with the main lieutenants and stewards of the Alliance. For close to three hours, Syd had tried to win acceptance for his personal approach to commandment, and particularly for the importance he attached to the Cynwäll commitment beside the Lions and Griffins. The obvious disinterest of Kyrô had allowed some elven leaders to revel in their elitist privileges while they neglected their role in the chain of command. Based on reports handed out by the First court and the advices of his allies, he had profoundly reshuffled the elven staff of officers. Though he had become aware that he was acting in great haste and could not in some cases judge for himself the truth of the matters, he had demoted some leaders and appointed in their stead those who, according to numerous testimonies, still believed in their struggle. A delegation of tribëns had left the Exianth on four occasions to notify those implied and put to immediate effect the orders signed by the commander himself.

Once the council adjourned, he had gone back to the Map Room while Kyllion and Ortho carried out a last tour of inspection on the ramparts.

His back wedged against some cushions, he was now looking fixedly at the twinkling replica of Kaïber. Fragments of his memory came to the surface progressively, feeding his focus and rousing old automatisms he had thought gone forever. In order to master the Arkäll, he had to force his mind to abstractions, to shut away the interferences from the Map Room, to exist through the replica and become its conscience.

Become Kaïber, master Thalsö used to say. Become its old stones, become its loopholes, its pits, its cracks. But become also its horizon, its anchoring in the ground of Alahan, its foundations, the top of its towers.

Syd felt the company of the Echyron by his side. The mental imprint of the artifact accompanied its master to spare him the worries of cramps, hunger, or weariness. However, it lacked the energy to prevent him from shuddering when the light waned on the outskirts of the replica. The influence of the Arkäll reached as far as the Old Wall, where Kyllion's reapers had taken position to test the mettle of the enemy vanguard. Scattered among the ruins, the small units were staying put despite the dark stain that was spreading over the jagged landscape of the vale.

The gleam of the Arkäll was fading with the progress of the enemy. The impious cancer was inexorably advancing and began to spread through the chinks of the Old Wall.

His throat tightened when the first spark went out at the enemy's touch. Despite all his experience, despite the lucidity he had set as a principle, he could not prevent his mind from projecting itself for a brief instant in the middle of the fight. His father had repeatedly warned him about the flimsy border between interpreting and imagining. If your imagination takes over, you shall fail, son. You must interpret the facts but you must never, do you hear me, never try to imagine what hides behind a dying spark or the waning light of a wall. You are Cynwäll, you have no right to feel doubt or fear.

Momentarily slowed by the skirmishes perceptible all along the Old Wall, the dark stain picked up again and started to flow between the Barhan units. The sparks surrounded by the enemy soon became small islands of flickering light in the Darkness, before they were suddenly snuffed out.

Others managed to fall back and fight ruthlessly to delay the enemy. The first messages from the front indicated a discipline unheard of in the enemy ranks. The dark legions did not break up but merely detached cohorts of scavengers to hunt down the small scouting groups who had revealed themselves.

As agreed with Kyllion, Syd immediately ordered the complete withdrawal of every reaper. In the following hour, the units were pulling back toward Kaïber and leaving the vale to the enemy.

The cancer was slowly gaining ground. A few minutes earlier, Syd had seen a single tear run down the cheek of the Arkäll. A young disciple had rushed to the sculpture's side to deferentially collect the precious drop of granite. The matter was now closed, but it had left a mark in the minds.

The animation set off in the tiers by the first moments of the battle has vanished. Everyone was looking at the main fringe of the dark stain that was advancing towards the ramparts.

A heavy silence fell over the Map Room.

Syd took advantage of the last moment of lull to turn back and give a smile to the young heliasts standing behind him. They would be his voice during the battle, taking care of transmitting the orders of their commander to the implied units. He looked around the whole of the building, to the serious and busy expressions of the archivists and officers crowding the tiers, to the unceasing comings and goings of the Cynwäll messengers and the winged constructs above their head, to the slower motions of the magistrates of the Griffin who watched over the proceedings to ensure that nothing would disrupt the work done in this place.

As custom dictated it, one of those magistrates had come forward on a rostrum and was counting down in a loud voice the number of yards remaining between the undead army and the first burst of Akkylannian fire.

In the heart of the Grey Barrier, the artillerymen were holding their breath. With a heavy rumble, two hundred cannons had come forward to point their black

muzzles out of the portholes, raising their steel shutters. Escorted by the Praetorian Guard, Ortho had insisted on overseeing the maneuver personally.

Under the mantle of mist, the enemy remained unseen but could be heard as far as the Gate of the Righteous. The ground shook and reverberated the rhythmical pounding of the thousands of damned marching against the stronghold.

“Three yards... two, one... within gun range!” the magistrate called out.

Syd gestured to the heliasts. Under the ground, buried constructs awakened, guided by the calls of the Cynwäll mages. From the tips of the counterforts to the top of the dragon-towers, Kaïber’s defenders cheered the beams of light that burst through the layer of mist and rose to the sky in shiny columns.

The roar of the powder echoed the light, and the whistling of the cannonballs in turn echoed the powder. The enemy staggered under the Griffin fire. In the Map Room, the stain stopped growing and even seemed to ebb for a brief moment. In the vale, the zombies and skeletons decimated by the first volley disappeared under the trampling of their damned brethren.

Meanwhile, on the walls of the castle, many falconers of Alahan were surrendering their faithful companions to the wind. In a flapping noise, the birds of prey pulled away from the ramparts to swoop down into the shrouds of mist to meet the enemy and particularly its leaders, for they had the decisive task of locating the necromancer to direct the artillerymen’s aim.

All of Kaïber was shaking to the roar of the cannons.

At the farthest ends of the counterforts, the Griffin fusiliers were beginning to shoulder their weapons.

Behind the castle’s crenellations, the paladins were pulling down the visors of their helmets.

In a banqueting hall, Ortho knelt down with his Praetorian Guard in a common prayer to commend the souls of Kaïber’s warriors to Merin, the fiery god.

Atop a high tower of the castle, Kyllion the Younger was getting ready to join the Map Room. His hand brushed the hilt of Araldine, his old and true sword.

“The hour of the brave has come... May Light help those who honor it.”

The army of Acheron was rushing out of the mist.

In putrid waves, their bodies bent by hatred and hunger, thousands of zombies were marching straight ahead. While the cannons roared above their heads, the archers of Alahan crowded on the battlements of the castle were bending their bows and slowly raising their aim heavenward.

Kyllion the Younger gave the order to release. The sky darkened as a swarm of wooden shafts flew through the air. The arrows dug deep furrows in the first lines, though they did not slow down the advance of the army. The enemy was maneuvering toward the ramparts with no concern for the havoc wrought by the joint firing of the Lions and Griffins.

From the counterforts, the fusiliers were cutting down whole ranks of morbid puppets clumsily trying to climb on the rocks. Bullets engraved with the symbols of Light whistled like shooting stars and crushed the skulls of opponents, while others sank into rotting flesh and dissolved it like acid.

The influence of Darkness was becoming so strong that the replica of the Arkäll had already flickered twice, like a candle in the wind.

Syd tried his best to decipher the enemy's intentions. Disregarding etiquette, he had removed his mask to push back the locks of hair stuck to his brow by the sweat. His eyes were blinking repeatedly, tired as they were by the glints of the replica. His gaze struggled to encompass everything to better understand the whole. He picked up the fluctuation of a given spark as well as the vast ebbs and flows of the opposing army.

The dark stain representing the dark legions in front of the replica had stopped on a single frontline that oscillated less than fifty yards before the castle, in front of the gigantic statues of the Pride.

Messengers were going to and fro among the tiers, bearing heartening reports. The firepower of the Alliance was crushing the front lines of the enemy and preventing them from reaching their ramparts. The smell however had gone far beyond what was bearable. Soldiers were vomiting in spasms, their intestines knotted by the overpowering stench of decay. Others were deathly pale and agitatedly lighting their pipes in an attempt to partially cover the stench of the damned with their own acrid smoke.

The birds sent above the battlefield were gradually coming back. Some had been wounded, others were gone, but the word was already out and relayed throughout the stronghold. Never in the memory of the falconers had Acheron deployed so many Crane warriors to relay the control of the necromancers and ensure a flawless discipline among the regular troops. The army stretched so far north that no falcon had been able to view all of it.

Kyllion had listened carefully. The beginning of the battle had reinforced his opinion that Kaïber could withstand the next assaults. He knew better than anybody that the worth of an army had never been in its numbers. The absence of the morbid angels from the sky worried him more than the legions of undead. As long as the battle remained entirely ground-based, Kaïber would never fall. With Drym by his side, he passed through the Grey Barrier hanging heavily with the smell of sulfur, on his way to the Map Room.

Syd silently greeted the commander. For a short while he had begun to perceive subtle changes in the battle array of the opposing army. It was sliding toward the left flank of the fortress and, he was sure of this, would soon engage the counterfort of the Ponent and the western wall of the castle. The replica clearly

showed how the troops in range of the counterfort of the Levant were slipping away to march to the southwest.

He gave Kyllion some time to reach the same conclusion.

"A move of some magnitude," Syd pointed out. "Maybe they intend to attack the Barrier directly."

Kyllion did not believe it. No commander would dare commit his troops into a defile limited by a counterfort crowded with fusiliers on one side, and by a castle wall brimming with archers of Alahan on the other.

"No, they won't risk it," the commander said. "Their whole army could be swallowed up before they set a single foot on our ramparts."

"It's still too soon to know, but we must warn Ortho. He must strengthen the Ponent without delay."

The move of the enemy was magnifying before their eyes.

"Baron d'Orianthe is ready with our knights," the commander stated.

"So are our dragons."

Both men stopped talking. The enemy kept coming despite the downpour of metal and wood, and contrary to all expectations, they were indeed entering the defile.

"I don't get it," Kyllion muttered. "I don't like it."

Syd was already talking to one of his messengers.

"Ortho must come here. At once. Send a construct."

Half an hour passed before the imperial legate appeared. Traces of powder were apparent on his hands. His usually white and sunken face seemed younger, sublimated by the slaughter of the damned. The half-smile upon his lips receded when his eyes fell on the replica of the stronghold.

"The order was justified," he breathed out through his thin lips. "You were right, Syd. I have given orders to reinforce the Counterfort of the Ponent. About five hundred fusiliers and the same number of conscripts will hold it until death."

The three commanders followed the slow and expensive enemy advance. Sometimes a messenger would slip behind them to whisper a precise report of the situation as it was perceived by the leaders of the units standing on the threatened ramparts. The dark stain trudged forward yard after yard, contemptuous of its losses, with a sickening resolve.

A heap of bodies was rising at the foot of the Grey Barrier, in front of the huge Gate of the Bold. Its panels of gold and iron, reinforced by Solaris magic, had vanished under the corpses. Bit by bit, their piling was developing into funereal mounds the enemy was scaling to reach the first level of loopholes, thirty feet from the ground.

Syd was satisfyingly following the deployment of the templar knights in the bowels of the Barrier, along with the artillerymen and fusiliers. In the maze of

corridors crossing the colossal wall, the air had become unbearably hot. The water thrown on the scalding barrels of the cannons turned into hot steam the loopholes could not drain out fast enough. Despite their skins bronzed by the heat and their tunics sticky with sweat, the griffins kept firing by the glow of the beams of light crossing the horizon. Some had been extinguished by the magic of Darkness, but the huge glowing portcullis was still sketched above the vale.

Syd understood the battle was only beginning when he saw a black shape emerging from the outskirts of the replica and swoop down upon the fortress. A swarm of morbid angels had risen from the back of the vale and came, hugging the western mountain at full speed, to attack the Counterfort of the Ponent.

A few instinctive volleys tried to slow the onslaught from the sky, but the creatures carried by both necromancy and the Primagic winds were already attacking the crenellation and the top of the towers.

Wearing simple leather armor and carrying only their rifles, the Griffins stationed on the rampart-walks were swept away before the conscripts had time to step in. In the castle the faces of the Lions froze at the sight of the broken bodies that came tumbling down the ramparts to crash on the rocks below.

Heroic struggles were joined inside the intricate fortifications where the conscripts and fusiliers had entrenched themselves to fight, shoulder to shoulder, behind improvised barricades. An order from Syd was given to the dragon-knights at the exact moment when five units of inquisitors were arriving as reinforcement to try and slow down the advance of the enemy. With the help of their squires, four dragon-knights hoisted themselves into the saddles sewn with silver threads of their mounts and raised their lances to indicate they were ready to go.

Stimulated by the prayers of the priests were singing in a clear voice, fusiliers and conscripts were holding fast while the inquisitors, with their crosses hanging on their belts and their suits of armor sealed by the bolts of Solaris, were beginning to retake the lost ground under the leadership of Eschelius the Ardent.

The old mercenary served his god better than the gold he had long believed to be the only cause worth following. Haunted by the ghosts of a wretched childhood spent in the gutters of Arcavia, the man had agreed to the worst in order to gratify his fantasies. Hunted down by persistent magistrates after the murder of a young monk, he had been arrested and judged by an inquisitorial court. Three years of torture had paved the way of his redemption.

His war helmet hid a face disfigured by the pliers and the brands of his own masters. Despite all that, the man was not prone to hide himself. A respected orator, an industrious reader of the holy scriptures, and a formidable warrior, he freely gave his friendship to all those he deemed worthy of Merin, the one god.

Right now, his most faithful companions were closely following him, their swords in hand. The steps of a stairway red with blood were creaking under his heavy

iron sabatons. In his mail-gloved hands he held a sword engraved with magical symbols.

The creature was waiting for him, sitting on the last step. Its strange stance prompted Eschelius to cautiousness, as did the black toga and the shadow of the hood. Darkness oozed through the fabric. The inquisitor motioned for his companions to stay behind. The gravedigger of Salaüel slowly raised his head. The priest had come through the sky, along with thirty others of the devout of Acheron, carried in the powerful arms of the Molochs, demons of the abyss hidden from the eyes of Kaïber by the host of morbid angels.

Evil permeated the long features of a face framed by long, gray, ropy hair. His long-fingered and gnarled hands were laid flat on his knees. Eschelius went up another step and caught sight of the priest's weapon leaning against a wall: a scythe of Salaüel, its shaft strewn with black roses.

"Death walks in great strides today," the gravedigger whispered. "Do you hear that clamor? Does it gladden you as much as it gladdens me?"

"I am glad mostly at the idea of killing you to give thanks to God."

"No."

"What a pity. I would have liked so much to hear his sobs when you are defeated."

Eschelius smiled under his war helmet when he saw the huge silhouette of a demon appearing behind the necromancer. Today he would give Merin a victory worthy of his rank.

CHAPTER XII

Cyraël the Pallid was gently stroking the hollow cheek of Sarkhom, her most faithful servant. The Wolfen leaning in her direction gave out a growl of pleasure. The Shriveled hand of his mother slipped on the raw sinews of his powerful jaw and awakened in him a matchless pleasure. He lived only for her and her dry fingers furrowed by Darkness. Only she could shut out the pain of the necrosis in his muscles, only she could convince him to stroll down the paths of the gardens of flesh. Under the dark cupolas of the Lazarian necropolis, she had made him walk at a leisurely pace, channel the rage swelling his putrefied chest, wait for her in silence and watch the growth of the fleshy roses she trimmed as she whispered rituals.

He went down on one knee and waited for the old woman to climb on the slope of his back with painful sighs. With measured gestures, she drew back the folds of skin and cauterized them with her index finger. The distended skin of his back was now a perfect shelter for the Pallid: warm, snug, and safe.

Her trusty Sirith, a root-shaped cane, tapped on the Wolfen's skull. The creature stood up and grabbed the two-handed scythe an armored zombie was holding out for him.

Thirty other Wolfen did likewise and formed a circle around Cyraël to await her orders. The necromancer, mistress of the flesh rituals of the House of Lazarian, raised her cane to give the signal of departure. The elite warriors set off and were swallowed into the depths of the army of Acheron.

Rocked by the long strides of her servant, Cyraël let her mind wander. She appreciated the way the order of the Ram did trust her. She particularly appreciated that Feyd Mantis, the archbishop of Salaüel, had personally chosen her to carry out this mission, even though she had not been too keen about the idea at first. Her life within the Lazarian necropolis was a work of art she fashioned meticulously for the glory of Darkness. She manipulated flesh in order to design the very best warriors of Acheron, she gave birth to them and regarded them all as her own children. Leaving the necropolis meant neglecting her art, interrupting or canceling her ongoing experiments. She had, however, accepted the archbishop's offer, as the challenge appealed to her. She had worked four years, with infinite patience, and was at last ready to give her masterpiece its finishing touch.

The roar of the cannons pulled her out of her torpor. With the passing of time, and despite the careful treatments she performed on her own body, her consciousness was becoming sluggish, numbed by magic and the exertions consented on the altar of Darkness. Around her, the ranks of the army were being

ploughed like water. The Wolfen were unceremoniously clearing a path, killing those who did not step aside quickly enough. The party approached the ramparts and bore right toward the Counterfort of the Ponent.

The climb took longer than she had anticipated. Anxious to minimize the risks -she was particularly concerned about an untimely attack by the dragons-, she had been adamant with the order of the Ram that they undertake this hazardous march along the mountain flank.

She lost Lakyniss, a dauntless Wolfen that a stray bullet swept into a deadly fall, but she managed to report as planned at the foot of a tall tower deserted by its defenders. Three devout waiting behind a handful of stunted bushes greeted her silently and showed her the access opened in the stone wall.

“Thank you, brothers,” she whispered.

She turned around and motioned for her warriors to pass through the gap.

“Silently, my children,” she repeated to each of them as they sneaked inside.

Ten minutes were enough for the whole of her party to infiltrate the counterfort. The inside of the ramparts resounded with the raging of the age-old battle between Darkness and Light. Inquisitors and demons were fighting everywhere, for the control of a guardroom or a simple dormitory. The Molochs were spreading in the cellars and caves to drive out the entrenched conscripts and guzzle down the blood from their slit throats.

The Pallid had inquired about the dangers that might cross her path. The devout had used all their might to push the enemy back beyond her objective and allow her access to the single well in the Counterfort of the Ponent, through which she had so often gone in her youth.

Only a very few veterans would have been able to recognize the young Cyraël in the features of the Pallid. There was nothing left of the young sorceress who, thirty years before, had called on Kyllion the Elder with a shy smile. Water was a constant concern for the commanders. Bards took turns by night and day in the huge maze under the mountains to watch over the underground rivers and make sure the water arrived unspoiled to the warriors of Kaïber. Motivated and introverted, Cyraël had carried out her tasks with a matchless recklessness, delighted by the solitary journeys that took her ever deeper into the mountains. Too deep, Kyllion would have said, as he had long missed the young woman.

The truth of the matter had been found out about three months after she went missing. The bards who had been sent to look for her eventually found her trace in a cave where, as she was probably too parched and weak to perceive the danger, she had quenched her thirst with the thin dripped of darkened water. The impious spring had been destroyed and the cave sealed off forever, but Cyraël had survived to become one of Acheron's most powerful necromancers.

It had nevertheless taken about two years of research with the best archivists of the House of Tanith and several Dirz biopsists for her to uncover the appropriate

guiding principle of her magic. She had made rough sketches with zombies and step-by-step had found the best way to mold bodied in order to remove them from the sight of the Arkäll. Every Wolfen in her present retinue had required weeks of painstaking work. Bound by heavy chains and drugged to withstand the mutations of their bodies, her children had almost all live through the process and could now escape the keen vision of the Arkäll.

The hag snickered and untied the bun holding her long gray hair.

“Go forth, my child,” she whispered tenderly in the ear of Sarkhom. “I long to pass through the Gate of the Righteous again.”

The devout himself had raised the grate bordering the well to let the Pallid go down the first steps of a worm-eaten stairway.

Leaning on her cane, the hag remained motionless for a moment, paralyzed by the stakes. She embodied the hope, palpable at last, to see the fall of Kaïber. Failure would not be tolerated. If she didn't reach the Cynwäll quarters, she would never again see her children growing behind the black circles of the necropolis, she would no longer taste the hazy pleasure of seeing an icy skin warm up under the breath of Darkness, and she would nevermore sculpt the bulging muscles of the Wolfen, nor even the tracteries of her rosebushes of flesh. Only the presence of her most beautiful children gathered for the occasion could still give her the strength to carry on.

The galleries became ever narrower as they went down. Cyraël was stooped over her cane, worn out by the rhythm of the forced march, her bones painful with the moisture. Her offspring marched on in an orderly manner, but she could feel their edginess. They were tolerating increasingly badly the constant scraping along tunnels too narrow for them and the water filtered by Solaris magic that fell in drops from the ceiling or trickled down the sides of the galleries. She remained silent to keep them from worrying. She had already lost her way once and took longer and longer to find her way using her ancient memories.

The Lions had changed the layout of some of the tunnels, and time worked against her. If she persevered in trying to reach directly the Cynwäll quarters, she ran the risk of losing everything. She had to get to the ground level as soon as possible and hope that, wherever they might emerge, her children would clear a fast track toward her masterpiece.

A valuable opportunity presented itself only three hours later, in a circular cave she remembered sleeping in when coming back from a strenuous outing so long ago. Cyraël recognized the natural alcove where she had curled up to regain her strength. She had found the passage only after waking up, behind a rocky outcrop she had thought to be a dead end. Since then, the Griffins had blocked up the stairway, as they did with all the back ways their ancestors had used when they were building the fortress.

She kneeled in front of the wall and prudently studied its relief with the tip of her cane. She very soon found out the dormant symbols, magical glyphs engraved in the stone by the bards of Alahan, of the kind she could easily open and close in that ancient times when Solaris still inspired her.

To defeat the enchantment, she needed help. She strongly clenched her fingers between the snarls of Sirith. Beset with black gems, the cane had been crystallized root, snatched from a cemetery in a stone circle of Yllia. In the gardens of the necropolis, she had healed it to recover and taint the blurred essence of many valorous warriors. The imprint of those souls would give the Pallid a means to amplify Darkness and break the enchantment.

The ritual almost made her faint. She stumbled in the arms of Sarkhom who had come to hold her up, and watched from behind heavy lids as the corollas of Darkness broke away from Sirith and flowed into the cracks of the wall, like some kind of molten metal. As it came in touch with the Solaris, the spectral mist hardened and soon completely covered the symbols.

“Bring down that wall,” Cyraël directed in a weak voice.

Two Wolfen immediately began to loosen the stones one by one with their scythes, and they had soon cleared off a gap large enough for their companions to crawl through.

Held by Sarkhom, the Pallid straightened up to address the party.

“Children of the flesh, I have refined you, heightened you, and exalted you in order to come here. Behind that wall you will have to fight and die. Never linger. Surprise and speed will be our most precious assets. I want to feel you around me like an indomitable tempest. Kill, move forward, and protect me, until we reach the masterpiece.”

The children agreed with guttural chuckles and, under the sever gaze of their mother, they rushed toward the surface.

CHAPTER XIII

Syd kept his eyes on the shimmering replica of the Counterfort of the Ponent. A few minutes before, an alarming report had mentioned the devout of Salaüel being there. With the help of Kyllion, he had just managed to convince Ortho to remain at their side, despite the legate's insistence that he should go there and assist the inquisitors.

"The dragons are enough," Syd asserted. "The enemy is trying to scatter out attention. He is toying with us and spreading confusion. We need you here, Ortho."

He stopped for a moment to follow the flying ballet of the four dragons sent to the counterfort. The sparks danced above the towers and pushed back the morbid angels rising to confront them.

"Regular troops have entered the Grey Barrier," a messenger warned them.

"Isolated units," Ortho said soothingly. "It was to be expected. My conscripts will hunt them down. Darkness hunters are on their way to give them a hand."

Syd took in the whole of the battle with one look. The compact crowd of the regular troops thronging against the Barrier, the threat to the Counterfort of the Ponent... the enemy's strategy still eluded him. He turned to the two commanders.

"Kyllion, what do you think?"

"They are groping about as if they were looking for a fault, testing our resilience. We have reasons to worry if they are able to sustain that pressure for long. I have a hazy feeling that they're trying desperately to break in at this precise spot. But I have no idea why."

"Will the Barrier hold?" Syd asked as he turned to Ortho.

"I have no doubt about it."

"Be wary. The Ponent can no longer support the archers in the castle. The enemy is arraying itself right there, at our feet. I suggest we use the knights of the Lion without further delay. Let them out through the eastern gate and they may skirt around the castle to charge the enemy's right flank."

Kyllion pulled a face and thought for a moment, his arm crossed on his chest, before he began to speak.

"I share your worries, but it's too soon, much too soon to play such a critical card. You were saying it better than me, we have no idea about what we will find there."

"If there even is something to find..." Ortho grumbled. "I also stand against your proposal, Syd. Have you lost your self-control?"

Syd was no longer listening to him. His eyes were riveted on the Gate of the Bold. Distracted by the talking, he had not immediately noticed the darker ribbon appearing and widening amid the enemy troops. A few instants later a report arrive that substantiated his fear: elite units were gathering in front of the Barrier. In the tiers, the leaders were befuddled by the surge of contradictory messages and lost themselves in conjectures.

The glow of the replica flickered once, then a second time.

Kyllion the Younger had risen, his features hardened. The main door of the Map Room was suddenly opened wide. On the threshold was a single templar, his armor splattered with the black blood of the damned. There were deep claw marks across his shield. His helmet was cracked on the left temple and his sword was broken.

He staggered into the room and bumped against the magistrates of the Griffin who had put themselves in his path. Two of them were aiming their guns at him until the imperial legate told them to let him pass.

The templar went to the legate, went down on one knee, and removed his helmet. Under the blood, a real distress was apparent o his features.

"Imperial legate, I have failed," he confessed. "They have invaded the Grey Barrier. They may spread within our walls."

"You will have failed if you die now," Ortho said as he put a steady hand on the top of his head. "Now stand up and report."

A concentrated onslaught. Atop a hill of bones. Protected by a magic... unimaginable."

"Only Merin is unimaginable. Tell me what I must fight."

"Ghouls by the hundreds. Led by black paladins. Necromancers from the House of Hestia were assisting them, and they opened a breach with fire."

There was a moment of silence at his words.

"The breach is high on the wall," Syd said contrarily. "It would take their armies weeks to pass through. They are using elite units to try and wreak havoc, but they cannot take advantage of this to invade Kaïber massively."

"They are waging another kind of war," Kyllion said in a dreamy voice. "The bulk of their troops is only a colossal shield to protect their elite as far as the rampart, so they can infiltrate out lines of defense."

"A river. You must see them as a river. And scatter it. Set up a dam to stop the elite from coming under cover."

"I will not reconsider my position. A sally of our knights at this time would be premature."

"Then I will deploy my Echahïms."

Syd had long thought they should have less scruples about deploying these Helianthic units who were under the responsibility of the First court. With their arms and legs extended by combat constructs shaped like long stilts, these warriors

could move like spiders over the battlefield. The Guide had agreed to entrust the defenders of Kaïber with the famous units of Lens Mendkenn, who had become a living legend as a young woman under the scorching templar commandery of the East in accordance with the treaties linking the Griffins and the Cynwäll within the Alliance, she had been caught in an ambush and had been forced to cutoff her own legs trapped in the claws of a Dasyatis clone. Sent back to Laroq hovering between life and death, she had eventually been saved by heliasts and had overcome the ordeal to join the Echahïm elite. Six years later, on the evening of her thirty-second birthday, Lens Mendkenn had assumed the command of her own units. She was to lead those units to Kaïber the following year.

Quite a few years back, just as he had dreamed of the Arkäll as a child, Syd used to elbow his way among other teenage boys to get to the bridge of Issym and watch Lens Mendkenn on the training grounds. In those times, they were all fancying her long golden hair and her olive-green eyes watching the world compassionately.

The new teardrop sliding down the cheek of the Arkäll quieted his last scruples.

The enemy opened a breach in the castle in the first hours of daylight. New waves of zombies and skeletons came forth over the thousands of corpses crushed against the blackened stone of the western rampart, to spread into the sizable wards of the forward citadel.

Firmly holding their position and kept out of the battle so far, the spearmen of Alahan managed to hold the damned in check, by the sounds of the horns of Citharas. The bards were enchanting their companions fighting in the front line and countering the dissonant trills of the quaestors. The enemy was indiscriminately throwing itself on the spears. Zombies would grab the weapons sticking into their chests and hail themselves along the shafts with their bare hands to slash the faces of their executioners.

Between the lines of the units of spearmen came the paladins in armor of bronze. Their holy swords were relentlessly cutting down the distorted faces of the zombies and finishing off the morbid puppets crawling on the pavement sodden with blood. They inspired the regular troops with courage and willpower and led fierce counter-attacks to slow down the advance of the enemy.

Hooded figures escorted by specters were unleashing a continuous fire of slithering flames that coiled around the fighters, melting their armor and turning them into human torches. Skinny horned demons with long and misshapen arms were propelling themselves in grotesque bounds in the middle of the defenders to strew death. Alysiarchs with diaphanous skin, priests of madness, were sneaking around like stealthy shadows to sow discord and confusion by crushing the minds of the veterans in the insubstantial clutches of their nightmares. Agonizing guards were screaming for their friends to put them out of their misery before they felt

Darkness closing around their hearts. They, like so many others, had seen the staggering walk of their old companions the necromancers had risen from the dead to swell the ranks of their own units.

Beside the Lions, the war constructs were distinguishing themselves under the direction of the magicians in trance standing on top of the towers. They communicated their will through beams of light reinforced by Primagic in order to guide the giant and elaborate spheres speckled with amethyst-colored bolts, which levitated above the battlement and unfurled heavy flails of lead, as well as the mechanical insects that looked like giant dragonflies and could disrupt or cut through the invisible threads spun by the necromancers to control their minions.

Helianthic warriors were relaying the magicians' influence. Synchronimes clad in heavy armor of time, a clock made with gems of light stuck into their breastplate, were fighting with a perfect simultaneity. Equanimous monks joined them with a mad recklessness and stood still amidst the battle to listen to the earth and feel the ancient echo of the gods who had once trodden Aarklash. They worshipped none but heard them all, as they became able to perceive and use the resonance of the earth that kept a memory of the divine strides. Their wiry bodies would then be invested with an ancient might that turned their hands into deadly weapons, able to tear through steel and pluck out the hearts of their enemies from under their armor.

Both sides of the castle's western wall were the stages of such fierce and intense fighting that the sky, streaked by sporadic lightning, was visibly darkening. Farther away, behind the thick walls of the Grey Barrier, another battle was taking place, a battle far more worrying for the three commanders standing around the Arkäll.

Faithful servants of a dark Code that raised the essence of war into a cause, the black paladins were running head-on into the templars of the imperial legate. These perverted humans wore full armor of ash-colored plates, dipped into the murky waters of the Lazarian gardens and sealed forever on their bodies corroded by drugs and flesh rituals. Sleep and hunger no longer any hold over them. They were wavering on an insubstantial border between life and death, barely able to hold on to the consciousness that urged them to do their worst. Evil had bloomed like a jet-black flower on the compost of their perversions, a flower that had never stopped growing as it was fed with the pleadings of the victims and the repeated care of Feyd Mantis. The archbishop loved these elite troops and their devotion to a corrupt code of honor. Today they had been selected for the duty of confronting the templars inside the Grey Barrier.

Sheltered behind their long shields, they came forward through the alleyways, clearing a path for the ghouls and the necromancers. They advanced in closed ranks, surrounded by threads of hot steam, heralded by the whizzing of the bullets that clattered ineffectively on the thick metal plates. Despite the desperate attempts the veterans made to rally the distraught conscripts and fusiliers, the Griffins were

falling back. In the face of certain death, some artillerymen swiveled their cannons around to fire point-blank into the horde of ghouls rushing for their positions. Others flung themselves among the attackers in self-sacrifice, their chest girdled with packets of powder.

In the Map Room, faces turned ghastly pale at the clear sound of the explosions shaking the ancient wall. Syd distinctly saw the vivid sparks of the templars converging toward the enemy. Kyllion was right: Acheron used the bulk of its troops to withstand the terrible damage inflicted by the combined firing of the Lions and Griffins and protect the arrival of its elite units. Dwarf zombies were joining the black paladins, as well as demons summoned from wreathes of foul-smelling vapors. The fighting had turned into a muddled and desperate fray spreading from the alleyways into the maze of stairs. Ortho refused to wait any longer and obtained the clearance of the other commanders to join his men with his Praetorian Guard.

In the Counterfort of the Ponent, the enemy had fled the battlements beset by dragons but was slowly gaining the upper hand in the depths of the ramparts where he harassed the inquisitors. Wounded six times, Eschelius the Ardent was leading a heroic resistance to prevent the demons from crossing the limits of the counterfort. He had rallied the survivors from the defense of the Ponent and executed a handful of routed fusiliers as a warning to others. He had withdrawn his troops, thirty-three inquisitors, a hundred or so conscripts and twice that number of fusiliers, back into the red bastion, a reserve position halfway inside the mountain flank.

Eschelius had the wounded carried outside. Battered men and women were huddled along the rampart walk under an icy rain with the dragons flying in protective circles above their heads. Inside, the Ardent quickly organized small units led by his lieutenants and set up regular barricades behind the doors of the three main passages that went through the bastion and led directly into the caves linking the counterfort with the Barrier itself. Racks, chests of drawers, mattresses and whatever else the soldiers could find heaped up to barricade the corridors already permeated with the stink of blood and rot. His torch held high, Eschelius inspected the positions and sent back the men who couldn't meet his eyes. To stand against the heretic cohorts of Salaüel, he needed pure and hardened souls, soldiers ready to receive communion through death in the name of the only god.

Excited by their master's imprecations, the damned souls threw themselves against the barricade in a fit of murderous rage. Some were mowed down by bullets before they came close enough to engage hand-to-hand combat, but more were coming that could not be stopped by mere bullets, Molochs driven to madness by their wounds and drunk with the Darkness irrigating their withered brain. Behind their war shield, the conscripts fought to the last, seconded by the unceasing firing of their brethren the fusiliers and the hymns of the inquisitors.

Syd sat deeper in his chair and took the glass of water a disciple was holding out for him. The intensity of the fighting had put too much demand on his mind for too long. He closed his eyes to forget for a few seconds the ghostly gleam of the sparks and sipped the clear water of the mountains.

As the hours went by, he had noted the signs of a weird complicity with the Arkäll. It had softly asserted itself in the folds of his consciousness in such a way that neither of them had wanted to interrupt the process. This was no longer empathy, but a deep and spiritual link the like of which he had never felt before. The Echyron acted like a catalyst, building a bridge between both sides of a same world, between the Cynwäll and the Sphinx. The spirit in the granite gave him its trust and confided its doubts. It had perceived in Syd an ambiguous force, a strange and distant energy. The elf had felt the warning indistinctly, like a muffled vibration, and was unable to learn more.

He focused back on the replica of Kaïber. His understanding of the battlefield had grown more intuitive and less formal. His analysis of the situation was not confined to the realm of the intellect anymore. He could now perceive different futures behind each move of the enemy. The outer reaches of his consciousness were crowded with blurred images of a stronghold devastated by the flames, and much scarcer ones in which the defenders of Kaïber were celebrating their victory under a cleared sky.

In the Barrier, the advance of the black paladins had been checked. Waving his cross of Merin like a flag, Ortho had gone against them with his Praetorian Guard and the support of the templars. In the Griffin quarters, on the benches of the great cathedral where the wounded came to seek refuge, the name of the imperial legate was on all the lips, and his deeds were already becoming a legend.

Despite his intervention, the Lions quickly realized that the positions held by the cursed knights were a threat to the castle. Ghouls were coming through the junction between the Barrier and the castle's western wall to attack the defenders from behind.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, the Barhans could not fight effectively on both front at the same time. An unceasing flow of undead kept pouring out of the breach opened an hour earlier to harass the spearmen and paladins regrouped in the courtyards of the castle.

The fighters could no longer even see the pavement under the corpses of the enemy. As if they had been standing on quicksand, the Lions had to brace themselves on their spears or their swords not to sink into the putrefying heap. And they constantly had to cut off the gaunt arms of the damned that tried to grab their ankles to pull them down.

The arrival of the ghouls put an end to the hopes of the paladins of Alahan who had believed they could drive the enemy back behind the breach. Despite the sustained firing of the archers of Icquor, the ghouls spread into the back of the castle and broke the lines of defense at the exact moment when, in the east, the Gate of the Bold was sliding on its hinges before the Echahïms.

Standing on her stilts, Lens Mendkenn wore light bronze armor over a dark tunic. Her face was covered by a gleaming red ceramic mask, framed by her long blonde locks that reflected the dim light of the braziers.

She gave a final check to the bolts holding the constructs that linked her body to the long fighting sticks. The mechanisms affixed to the stumps of her thighs had been designed and made to measure by craftsmen and chronosiarch-masters, and they were functioning perfectly. They were covered by thin slate plates that could slide under each other to follow every move of her legs and ensure a perfect coordination of the whole apparatus.

Lens Mendkenn lived only through her stilts. They were an extension of her willpower and a reflection of the courage she applied to all matters of life. Through terrible personal strife she had managed to live down her handicap and leave a lasting mark on the elite corps of the Echahïms. Under the rule, the fighting techniques had been perfected and modernized, academies had been opened which attracted ever more of the young elves fascinated by her art, her looks, and her passionate lectures in the amphitheaters of the prestigious universities of Wyde.

The two huge doors of the gate opened in front of her. Her long golden eyelashes quivered as she breathed a whiff of foul air from outside. She unsheathed the twin blades of Tamdeelith and crossed them to give the starting signal to her column. The troop set off under the heartening gaze of the magicians, who were lowering their masks as a token of respect before they began to trace in the dim light the defensive glyphs that would seal the gate behind them.

The Cynwäll deployed in perfect order, rapidly assuming the shape of a triangle led, at the tip, by Lens Mendkenn and the High Guardians who made up her personal guard. None of the zombies, forgotten or cut off from their necromantic masters, who were wandering close to the eastern ramparts of Kaïber had a chance to escape from those majestic elves who advanced as fast as a galloping horse. Propelled by their stilts, they strode like giants on the path opened by the twin blades of their commander.

Their mission was to pounce on the right flank of the enemy, make a lightning breakthrough along the walls of the castle, and join the Barhans coming from inside the castle right where the enemy had opened a breach in the wall. Most of all, they had to sow confusion in the enemy's mind. Such had been the instructions transmitted by the equanimous disciple to whom Syd had dictated his message. Lens

had to force the enemy into defending himself in order to break the continuous flow of reinforcements coming through the breach and inside the castle.

The surprise was absolute. The Crane warriors and necromancers present were unable to prevent the Cynwäll from punching holes in the compact lines of zombies and skeletons. Lens Mendkenn went in great strides deep into the teeming flood without glancing back. Her companions had to follow or die. Most followed, plowing deep lines into the enemy ranks with an exceptional self-control. They had long been trained to fight and maneuver fearlessly on their battle stilts, so that they were now able to choose almost instantaneously the best trajectory possible to go yet a few yards farther while evading the vicious hands trying to grab them.

Behind the castle's crenellation, the archers of Alahan were incredulously following the ethereal and flowing motion of the Echahims. Tears came to their eyes each time one of them was suddenly trapped and toppled over under the weight of the zombies hanging on to a stilt.

When Lens Mendkenn arrived near the breach, almost thirty had fallen. The spear of a skeleton had wounded her on her left shoulder; another one had scraped along the bronze plates over her chest and grazed her right breast. The pain was nothing compared to what she had once endured and never forgotten in the jaws of a Dasyatis clone. She steadied her grip on the hilts of the Tamdeelith and launched herself through the breach.

The Echahims were too late.

She acknowledged this with a cold fury when she discovered the jumped melee taking place inside the castle. Her eyes narrowed, her breathing grew steadier. Then, with the six remaining High Guardians around her, she gave up waiting for orders that wouldn't come and threw herself desperately into the fray.

CHAPTER XIV

The seven Cynwäll wanted to escape notice and took old and dusty passageways forgotten by most warriors in Kaïber. They had followed a series of rickety stairs that went along the faults in the Barhan quarter and gone through concealed passages that allowed a discreet crossing of the border from the Lion sector into the Cynwäll sector.

A great cloak of dark blue on his shoulders, Kyrô strode ahead without glancing back at the six dragon-knights following him. Sashem, his old sapphire-gleaming sword, was bumping against his thigh. He had no time left to ponder the legitimacy of his action. He knew he was already lost in the eyes of his own people. Out of loyalty and respect for their former commander, his companions had long since accepted to break the basic rules underlying the Alliance and their oath to the Light.

The next door led them into a very small courtyard surrounded by four dragon-towers. The light of the blazing fires lit the sky with a reddish tint that was reflected on the wet pavement. Kyrô told his brothers in arms to hide in the corners and went alone to a tower that had been sealed eleven years ago after the death of its defender, the dragon Ferym Maloth.

He had never touched the glyphs affixed to the doors and windows, for fear of raising an alarm and being detected by the Arkäll. To get in, he kneeled down and put the flat of both hands on a worn stone. With his eyes closed, he focused his mind on the invisible marks of Ferym Maloth and his reflections scattered around his last resting place. Only a Cynwäll could uncover the minute remnants of mana from another time, the barely sketched traces that bore witness to the might of the deceased. Under his hands turned white by the exertion, gleaming threads of light slowly appeared and drew a web on the wall. The reflections – Kyrô perceived at least three of them – let themselves be used unresistingly. The three residual memories condensed into strands of bronze mist that gathered in the Cynwäll's palms. The former commander tensed his muscles and felt an icy chill run along his spine as the mist slipped into his fingers to establish contact.

The pain, always the same, overwhelmed him with an incredible violence. For a few seconds, his mind had to bend to the fragmented memories of the dragon. The recollections banged around in his head like wild beasts caught in a hunter's net. He fell down, shaking uncontrollably, his arms crossed over his chest.

His consciousness returned slowly. The mental exercises he had been taught by equanimous masters allowed him to act without causing panic in the memories of

Ferym Maloth. He had to keep them intact so that they would open the tower for him. The contact with the dragon's intimate thoughts made him feel dizzy and almost ecstatic.

He became Ferym Maloth. He saw through translucent pupils the sky of Kaïber veiled by the opalescent strands of Primagic. He felt in his bowels the sting of the fire that came up in azure flames to the back of his mouth like a scalding bile. He tasted with disgust the putrefied flesh of a zombie. He heard the snapping of a scavenger's bones within his jaws, but also the soothing voice of a dragon-lady who caressed his scaly flanks.

The steady arms of his friend Selhune brought him back to reality. The dragon-knight was holding him by the shoulders while glancing at the stone withdrawing into the wall. Inhabited by the soul of the dragon, it opened and revealed a passage large enough to sneak inside.

Kyrô declined the help of Selhune and stood up alone. As his legs were giving way, he supported himself on his sword to limp to the opening and stopped to listen carefully. The silence was complete. Before going in, he gave a silent prayer to the one who had let herself die against the remains of her companion. She had refused to live without Ferym Maloth and had passed away by his side, sealing the tower forever. She alone could have lifted the enchantments protecting the tomb. Kyrô had knowingly used the only key that could bypass them. He was the only Cynwäll in Kaïber tough enough to dominate the fossilized reflections of a dragon.

A rancid smell pervaded the sitting room they had just penetrated. They gathered around a trapdoor of dark wood and opened it under the composed gaze of Kyrô. The former commander then waved them aside after receiving from Selhune a thick woolen blanket and a pitcher of water. The dragon-knights stood aside to let him go down the stairs and closed the trapdoor behind him.

Holding a hooded lantern, Kyrô went down the steps carved in the rock, followed a long corridor, and stopped before a heavy oaken door reinforced by metal bars. He took out a key on a pendant that had been hidden under his tunic and carefully put it in the lock.

The door opened, throwing specks of golden dust into the air. A whiff of foul air assailed him and held him on the threshold for a moment. He could now hear the creature breathing, the ceaseless rattle that escaped from a decaying throat.

He went in, short of breath, and raised his lantern in order to light the four corners of the cell.

Melehän was lying near the door, hunched on the floor in a fetal position.

Despite the rituals of purification, Darkness had gained ground. The skin from his thin legs was falling in shreds. There were cracks inside his thighs and around his knees. His feet, swollen and infected by an advanced necrosis, looked like rotten fruits. The evil was spreading from his chest. Between his nipples, the wound opened by the sword of the Crâne warrior had never healed properly. It

stretched into a purulent furrow along his left flank that joined the gash made by a scythe of the damned on the entire length of his back. His arms were covered with injuries more shallow but just as malignant. His hands, though, had been spared. His thin and translucent fingers made a striking contrast with the rest of his body.

Leaning on his elbows, Melehän moaned and tried to raise his head that was bound to a chain fastened in the wall. Kyrô crouched down, took him in his hands and raised him carefully.

He looked so much like his mother. Under the ignominious mark of Darkness, he could still make out the finely chiseled features of his wife, and most of all the same autumn-colored eyes that gazed at him with a desperate intensity. In the other pupils dilated by suffering, he had seen love, hatred, and much too often a longing for a quick death.

Kyrô kissed the furrowed brow of his son and helped him to his bed. He pulled away the sheets and blankets soiled with excrement and vomit and put down the tormented body on the stay mattress. He used his key to unlock the collar around his neck, removed the chain, and started to wash his son's body with a damp cloth. The affectionate gestures awakened a dim light in the pain-veined eyes. Melehän's mouth opened and closed with a soft wet sound. Kyrô smiled and let a few beads of water go past that parched and purulent lips.

"Patience, my son."

The care he administered had a deep effect. The cloth he used, embroidered and enchanted by Helianthic weavers, granted purifying properties to the water. He saw his son's face relax. The clutched hands slowly lost some of their rigidity and opened wide. The stiff and spastic legs calmed down and bent like a sleeper's.

He was now breathing more regularly. His heart was weakly beating to the rhythm of the Light that would hold the Darkness at bay for a while.

"I love you, son," Kyrô whispered.

His voice broke. He could no longer stand to see what the Dark Principle was doing to this body, the way it had crushed it so utterly as to make a son beg for death at the hand of his father. Several times already, the sharp edge of Sashem had wavered over Melehän's frail neck. With a stroke he could have pulled his son from daily torture, out of the misery he had endured for almost two years.

But no one could make him kill his son a second time. Four years earlier, while Syd was leaving through the Gate of the Righteous with no intention of ever coming back, he had convinced his most faithful lieutenants to follow him in a series of expeditions beyond the walls. Almost every night, he had left Kaïber through a postern gate in the Counterfort of the Levant with Sashem strapped on his back to crisscross the cursed valley in the search for his son. Weeks, then months had passed without shaking the unwavering resolve in what he had determined to do the day after the tragedy. His quest had become an obsession, a thin thread keeping him alive and preventing him from yielding to despair. For almost two years he had gone

farther and farther away, taking insane risks and resorting to countless tricks to hide his repeated absences from his own people.

He had found his son two years later, in the ruins of the Old Wall, dressed in rags and tormented with madness. He had hidden there, in an abandoned crypt, protected from hunger and thirst by the Darkness consuming his soul. The poison, however, had not finished its work. Melehän had not fully become an undead. There was a part of his soul left in him, a sparkle of Light that convinced his father he was to undertake the impossible to try and save him.

Kyrô had persisted despite his lieutenants' warnings. Love and remorse made him deaf to their arguments. He was ready to believe that his son had been able to survive that way, without any help, evading for moths on end the patrols of scavengers and the prowling specters in the Old Wall.

From then on, he had devoted every second of his life to search, in the arcana of magic, for spells that would destroy this gangrene of Darkness. Consumed by this quest, he had neglected and eventually broken up the passionate relationship he had previously kept up with his lover. He had, however, done nothing to allay the rumors, the better to avert suspicion. The young Barhan serving-girl, for whom he had almost left Kaïber to start a new life far from the Alliance, far from the war and the death, was useful to his secret project. He lived at night, by the light of the candles, bent over the spell books his dragon-knights went to fetch for him in the maze of the stronghold's libraries. He had never given up, even though he bore the crushing weight of remorse, doubts, failures, and the evidence that proved no body could resist the cursed blades of the Crane warriors. He had worn himself away in work and magic, he had lied to his own people, and he had neglected the responsibilities that no longer inspired him. His life was hanging on the life of the creature that sometimes recognized him through his glazed eyes and whispered his name.

Feeling unwell with the stench that prevailed in the jail, he stood up to open the door a little and light the incense sticks he had taken care to bring. He was sorry he could not shelter his son in a place less severe than this squalid cell, but it was only here, right below the tower, that he could hope to rid him without fear of the eyes of the Map Room. The relics of Ferym Maloth and the glyphs of his lady had enough influence over the power of the Arkäll to hide the presence of Darkness.

Melehän's lids fluttered. His hand shook and was raised, trembling, toward his father's shoulder. Kyrô began to smile and pulled it back gently.

"Hold still, my son. You will have to be brave. We must go now."

For several weeks he had been expecting the attack from Acheron, hoping to take advantage of the confusion to get his son out of the stronghold without drawing attention. The future he could now contemplate in Kaïber left him no chances to carry on with his research. Deprived of his privileges as commander, confined into the Lion quarters, and convinced that he had reached the limit of the lore available

in Kaïber's libraries, he was resolved to abandon everything and flee with his son to the East, on the trails of the neuromancer caravan and its renegade alchemists. He hopes that gold would be able to buy what Light could not achieve.

CHAPTER XV

Syd had stood up, his face somber.

“Withdraw your troops,” he said. “Abandon the castle and save your men.”

A lump in his throat, Kyllion was slowly pacing around the commanders’ table. All his life he had been preparing for the time when he would have to make such a decision, to accept the unacceptable and admit that the castle, symbol of the Lions, could fall, compelling his troops to withdraw behind the Grey Barrier with the Griffins. Dusk was coming, along with the feeling he had not been worthy of his king. He had not seen the threat and had been unable to respond appropriately. He thought of his father, the indefatigable pilgrim who had traveled all over Aarklash to learn and tell the story of the world. What words he would have chosen to narrate the fall of the castle his own son had been entrusted with?

“Enough of your artifacts...” he said weakly.

“The castle will fall, whatever we do. But we can still take advantage of the confusion created by my Echahims and sound the retreat.”

“The musicians of Alahan will never sound a retreat away from the castle.”

“We may pay a high price for your stubbornness. Let’s do everything we can to open a way back for your troops. They are exhausted, Kyllion. They have been fighting for almost nine hours. Withdraw them into your quarters so that they might recover.”

Syd saw the bitterness in the commander’s eyes.

“Don’t tell me how to manage my men, Cynwäll. The castle has not yet fallen.”

“Are you blind?”

Syd pointed his fingers at the huge dark plague growing inside the walls.

“Look, commander. Look at the way it’s spreading. Mendkenn arrived too late. We must admit it.”

“They will hold,” Kyllion said. “With my help they will.”

“It’s a trap. They want to turn the castle into a hellhole and draw our troops there, to empty the rest of Kaïber of its defenders. You will lose everything in a castle that is already lost.”

He picked up a bundle of messages and waved them like they were a piece of evidence.

“Will you not read them? Almost a thousand and five hundred guards are dead, missing, or wounded. Your archers are out of arrows. Your swordsmen are down to a handful of bloodless units. A hundred paladins are reckoned lost...”

People in the tiers grew silent as the tension obviously escalated between the two commanders.

"Figures... Always numbers and reports," Kyllion said. "I should not be here. I should be over there with my men. Like you and your dragons."

"Your anger is misleading you. I have already made a big deviation from procedure by sending four dragon-knights to help the Counterfort of the Ponent. I also sent monks and heliasts to fight side by side with your troops. I do think the commitment of the Cynwäll is beyond reproach. We have played our part, even exceeded it."

"True," Kyllion admitted grudgingly. "But I won't wait any longer."

"That would not be a reasonable decision."

"I don't ask for your understanding. You are an elf."

"Listen to me," Syd said with a sigh. "We are fighting at odds of one against ten, your very falconers say so. The castle is a trap, an abyss that will swallow us all. There are too few of us to fight like this, without the Griffins' support. Those men over there are no longer fighting behind battlements. They are in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy."

Syd stopped himself as he saw in the tiers the gesture of a mage asking for permission to speak. He ignored the man and focused back on Kyllion.

"I have spent long hours in the Exianth. I have digested countless battle reports to assimilate the essence of war as the history of Kaïber teaches it. This war, our war, is a war of battlements. Our forefathers warned us about the stubbornness of the righteous, about the fondness every man here may feel for the stones erected by our ancestors. But they are stones, Kyllion, and only that. You are a Lion, a dauntless dreamer, setting great store by justice and honor. But honor no longer has its place. Not here, not in a castle you persist in defending for the wrong reasons."

"Maybe you put so much emphasis on analyzing the war that you no longer wage it, my friend. A Barhan does not see the Rag'narok as a gigantic chessboard, but as a single battlefield that sets our world ablaze from Shamir to Lythis, from the Zoukoï Mountains to Misty Harbor. Wisdom is a luxury, but justice is a duty. You seem to have forgotten the meaning of a word that gave Light its finest victories: Bravery."

Syd chewed his lips and looked around the room while pondering his answer. Dissension threatened to rule over the commanders' table. He breathed out to steady his heartbeat.

"It is good that sometimes heroes may be revealed without paying a price in blood," he answered calmly. "My father was right, unfortunately. The idea of justice can warp a Lion's judgment. You are about to sacrifice men in a fight of the enemy's choosing."

The mage who had asked to speak crossed the first tier of seats. The shadow of Drym, Kyllion's bodyguard, appeared behind him. The barrel of a pistol was

delicately applied to the back of the initiate's neck. On his commander's order, the reaper then moved away and let the mage go forward.

The young Sesar Thelune gave a salute. As the official representative of the Manus Hermeticum, the conservative faction of the Order of the Chimera, he wore a long red velvet toga belted at the waist by a black silk cord. He had delicate hands, clear features, blue eyes, and a long jade staff clasped in his right hand.

"Speak, Sesar. And be quick about it," Kyllion said coldly.

"The castle is a symbol," he answered obsequiously. "The mages have remained voluntarily unobtrusive since the beginning of the battle, but the course of events demand that we officially state the position of the Chimera."

"Get to the point," the commander grumbled.

"The Chimera, through our queen, reckons that everything – and I insist for those are her exact words – 'everything must be attempted to save the castle.' The mages intend to implement that and ask for your permission to go to the castle right now."

"To the front lines?"

"The queen suggests it."

Syd did not hear Kyllion answer. A small detail had suddenly brought his full attention to focus on the Arkäll. A detail that, though it was entirely preposterous, had turned his heart upside down.

He must have been mistaken, deceived by his weariness and the persistent gleam of the replica. The spark had appeared only for a few seconds before vanishing. He disregarded the puzzled look Kyllion was giving him and leaned forward to make sure he had really been the victim of hallucination.

The spark reappeared so suddenly that he gave a start and gripped the edge of the table. Through a childhood game, he had become familiar with every hue and hint of the small crotchet of light that was now burning as brightly as a star. He couldn't see anything else in the replica and looked around, searching among the tiers for a face that would convince him he was not dreaming, that the wounds of the past were not tampering with his perceptions.

No, the spark was proving beyond any doubts that Melehän was there, alive, inside the stronghold of Kaïber. He grabbed his scabbard, hanged it on his belt, and then he called a disciple.

"Inform the First court. I temporarily hand over my command to them."

"Commander?"

"Do as I say."

The messenger ran off. Kyllion had come closer.

"Syd, what is the matter?"

"I must leave for a while."

"What are you talking about?"

"Its my brother. He is here."

The face of the Lion clouded over.

"This is absurd. You are exhausted. You must rest," he said warily.

"I have seen him. Maybe it is only a reflection, an echo..."

"You cannot leave the commanders' table over a mere feeling. Stay, Syd. I need you here. The Lions are going to defend the castle. Whatever the cost."

Syd fastened the cloak he had just thrown over his shoulders.

"Ill be back. In the meanwhile, pray to your gods. Only they may now save your men."

CHAPTER XVI

The silence in the tomb of Ferym Maloth was broken by a scraping noise.

Sarkhom's muzzle contracted with the strain. The heavy stone slowly slid to the side and revealed a stairway that went down into darkness.

Cyraël made the wolfen step back with a click of her tongue before she came near the opening. She leaned on Sirith and gave a slight moan as she bent her legs and lowered her head to breathe the smell coming up from the depths of the dragon-tower.

Her masterpiece was there, very close.

The aroma exhilarated her, awakened in her a fierce desire to rush down the rough steps immediately in order to hug her offspring. She longed to look at him, to touch him, to follow with her fingertips the harmonious roughness of his tainted flesh. But the father was protecting the child. She could sense it under the powerful and fetid reek, the vibrant and musky scent of Light, the impudent exhalations of a Cynwäll on the lookout.

She required Sarkhom's help to draw herself up, then walked briskly back to the bodies of the six dragon-knights. Either of her Wolfen had fallen to grant her access to the tomb, but what really made her sorry was not being able to carry the bodies of the Cynwäll back to her necropolis. She had a keen memory of the chiseled curves of Melehän's body. Nothing could compare with the rapture provided by overtaking a body of Light, the intense pleasure felt at the exact moment when the innocence of a young Cynwäll gave submission to the Dark Principle.

She gave up the idea of unleashing her pack down the narrow stairway. She trusted her senses and felt confident the elf was alone with his son. She sent Sarkhom ahead of her on the steps and ordered the others to protect the tower against any intrusion attempt.

The passage was so narrow that the Wolfen's scythe was scraping along the wall. Cyraël remained a few steps behind, her cold eyes surveying everything. She was familiarizing herself with the location, trying to perceive the mineral resistance of the stone, the persistence of Light in the hollows of the rock. Melehän's pernicious influence had had the effect she hoped. Just as it had acted as a beacon to guide her to this place, the desecrated body of the Cynwäll had radiated like a dark star and over time allowed Darkness to gain a hold on the underground passage, thus making the necromantic task she was now contemplating possible. The ritual she had prepared for so many years needed a place tainted by Evil to be properly performed.

Suddenly she saw Sarkhom stop less than ten yards from massive door that was slowly opening. A figure appeared on the doorstep, outlined by the yellow glow of a torch. Cyraël also stopped and shuddered as she felt the exhalations coming through the opening. She detected minute traces of a flesh in her own image, and she immediately projected herself in the mind of the Wolfen.

The orders tore Sarkhom's consciousness. He was forbidden from killing that prey. He had to hold the Cynwäll at bay only. His lips curled up and revealed his black fangs sharpened for battle. Heavy drops of brown saliva dribbled between his jaws and splattered on the ground. Seized by the power of the injunction, he crouched and prepared to leap upon his prey.

Kyrô had given up trying to understand how these two creatures could be standing behind the door of the sanctuary he had taken such pains to hide from his own people. His mind refused to admit that a trap set years ago was now springing on him and on Kaïber. He firmly gripped Sashem and gave a flourish to feel its flexibility and to give the breeze it held time to awaken. The hot wind rose between the veins of metal forged in a dragon's fire and began to form small whirlwinds of sparkling dust spinning around the blade.

He parried the Wolfen's charge effortlessly. The scythe hissed as it dug into the vibrating aura of the sword. The scalding air absorbed the impact and gave him an opportunity to strike back. Sashem followed the weakened trajectory of the scythe and suddenly plunge toward the Wolfen's chest.

Sarkhom leaped back to dodge the blow and felt the steel point biting his right arm. He grunted and saw from the corner of his eye that the wound was sizzling with the scorching heat. He stepped back a few yards, followed by Kyrô whose eyes were riveted on the necromancer. He knew that she was the truly dangerous one, even more since her lips were muttering silently, a prelude to a spell that worried him much more than the Wolfen standing in front of him. If he could not rid himself of the zombie quickly enough, at least he intended to push him back far enough to disrupt the ritual she had begun.

Sashem's incandescence made a halo of blinding white light illuminating the corridor. Sarkhom was still stepping back, his lips foaming, his eyes screwed to withstand the glare of the sword, and frustrated that he could not give in to his consuming rage.

Cyraël had made contact. Her mind had slipped between the fighters to slide through the doorway and reach the Cynwäll prostrated in his cell. At first, she had brushed him lightly not to scare him. Fleeting caresses that appeased the instinctive barriers erected by Melehän's consciousness and allowed her to pass that threshold without inflicting any damage. Behind those barriers the young Cynwäll soul was intact, exactly the way she remembered it since the day she had released him in the ruins of the Old Wall.

His soul was like a slack black ocean, bordered and hidden by the seals of the Dark Principle, in order to let his father believe until the very end there was a chance of saving him.

She contemplated her work with an obscure fear. She had been given enough time, almost two years, to make it perfect. This inky black surface contained an evil so powerful that Feyd Mantis himself had had to intervene to help her set the seals. For an instant she harked back and saw him, her master, standing before the altar of the cathedral of Acheron, accompanied by the threnody of the quaestors and the devout thousands communicating with the same devotion. She remembered the face of Sorokin de Vanth under the giddy arches of the narthex, a face lined by simultaneous pain and joy as the archbishop's bony fingers slowly dug into his chest to reach his heart. She remembered also, later on, the same heart beating irregularly in the squeezed fist of Feyd Mantis as he stood above the pale face of the Cynwäll, so that the flow of blood could transmit the soul of the sacrificed necromancer. Finally, she remembered her long and painstaking work to conceal the enchantment and make sure that soul would remain hidden from Kyrô's eyes.

The searing pain shattered all those memories as the first seals broke, allowing the rebirth of Sorokin de Vanth.

The lich woke up with a shrill and dissonant scream.

His previous life, such as it had survived in his memory, began to ebb away.

Sorokin forgot he had been born in Doriman, the largest barony of Alahan, swept by the cold winds from the Ephren Sea. He forgot about discovering his own body and the ugliness that would earn him – much too soon – the vicious gibes of the other children. Nature had forsaken him, abandoned him before completion to leave only a caricature, a deformed being with repulsive features, provided with a clubfoot and a strawberry mark over half of his face. He hated himself in the eyes of his tormentors and, as he was unable to help his family in the fields, he spent most of his time in the attic dreaming up another life for himself. As a teenager, he had begun to slip out of the house, going to the nearby woods to set traps for the wild beasts. He did this for fun, but also to cover himself with their pelts and hide the face that made him feel such shame. His taste for the morbid had grown in the musty attic, in that secluded universe populated by the skeletons and hides he collected like talismans to ward off the outside world.

Nevertheless, the others were there, coming back like angry ghosts, despite the rabbits and shews he bled by the dozens to make them go away. Sturdy and mean adolescents would chase him for fun each time he ventured outside his sanctuary, drag him to the neighboring pond, and throw him into the cold water to “purify” him. Forgotten by his parents, neglected by his siblings, he had endured all the humiliations and had bided his time.

His time had come in the dust stirred up by the creaking wheels of a caravan of strange entertainers with seamed faces, wide and brightly patterned clothes, and hats with extensive brims. They had juggled and danced in the marketplace until the middle of the night, and when almost everyone had passed out from drinking or retired for the night, a woman came to him. She had tanned skin, chestnut curly hair, and a dark blue silk tunic that hugged her small breasts. She captivated him and told him she had noticed him, Sorokin, among all the other men. She caressed his deformities and made love to him in the sordid attic, by the light of an old lantern, under a flayed rabbit still hanging from a beam.

Much later he had learned that his body had received the gift of Darkness on that very night, that this woman was a seeker of tortured souls and gave them the means to achieve their fulfillment.

Over the days and months that followed, Sorokin had learned to open passages between this world and the worlds of Darkness that held out for him. He flung himself into them with a matchless pleasure, intoxicated by the new horizons revealed to him by the Dark Principle.

He decided to leave the village on the eve of his sixteenth birthday. He slipped out of his attic, went through the common room where the six members of his family were sleeping, and killed them one by one to invoke a demon. The fiend went to hunt down his master's tormentors until daybreak and drowned them in the very pond where they had made him kneel and lap up the stagnant water.

Now, he could at last forget.

He could allow his memories to dilute into the consciousness of a lich and let the black rays of rebirth spread through his wounds.

Kyrô had broken from the fight to rush to his son. He stopped on the doorstep, frozen by the sight of the crucified body slowly rising above the ground. Beams of Darkness radiated from the black soul now awakened. Kyrô's legs wobbled as he staggered under the weight of his own guilt. Deceived by his remorse, blinded by his love for his son, he had brought, sheltered, and hidden Darkness in the heart of Kaïber.

Melehän no longer existed. His hands, long saved from the necrosis, shriveled up and aged at a stupendous rate. His fingers shortened, and his nails fell off. Everywhere, his skin withered with the evil heat. On his face, his eyes sunk far back in their sockets and clouded up with a cobalt tint. His chest caved in and revealed, in some places, black and crystallized bones.

The rebirth ended abruptly. The beams retracted, and the lich quietly stepped down to the ground. Kyrô clutched the hilt of Sashem with all his strength to be able to withstand the hypnotic glare of the creature.

His shrunken silhouette brought to mind a burnt tree. His arms stood out like an insect's, his spotted neck bent under the weight of a fleshless head that swung

slowly up and down. Battered and strewn with tufts of gray hair, his skull was glowing supernaturally.

A purple shroud had reappeared around his waist. Its cloth had originally been stolen from the remains of a stillborn babe, the first child of Agonn the Fiery. Sorokin had enjoyed the symbolism, particularly the fact that the mother had been delivered of a small being too frail to live. Darkness had snatched the cloth permeated with innocence and brought it to the demented weavers who, on their spinning wheels of onyx, had strengthened it with stringy hair plucked from the skulls of banshees.

Kyrô faltered as the piercing consciousness of the lich hit him head-on. The pain was so intense that he dropped his sword and seized his head with both hands. Sorokin de Vanth was gaining easy ground as he came over the ashes of a soul led astray. The old commander burst into sobs, overwhelmed by his emotions, unable to acknowledge the insidious poison transmitted by his own son. The pathetic being he had cared for with such self-denial had been only an illusion, a tool of domination revealed by the necromancer.

Kyrô collapses against the door, unable to resist the vise crushing his skull. A muffled sound passed through the shriveled lips of Sorokin, a breath that sealed for good his ascendancy over the mind of the Cynwäll.

With Sarkhom beside her, Cyraël came to kneel before the lich. She had fulfilled her task and was now submitting body and soul to her master. Sorokin extended his arm and, with a pointed finger, raised the necromancer's face.

"The dragons..." he rasped. "Bring me to the dragons."

CHAPTER XVII

Syd was running in short and controlled strides. He had a dark cloak thrown over his shoulder and he could hear, right behind, the soft sandals of Soïm and the heavy boots of Nelphaëll hitting the ground rhythmically.

His two companions had arrived in Kaïber during the night. Myldiën had discreetly pulled a few strings to divert a dragon-knight and his mount that were coming back from the East, from the Aegis Mountains, where the Cynwäll had personally delivered a gift from the Guide, rare parts forged by the chronosiarch, to the Senex, father of the dwarves. The equanimous monk and the heliast had made the trip in silence, settled on extra saddles. Upon their arrival, they had taken their quarters in a side room of the Workshop.

Only Nelphaëll knew the reason behind the privilege. They had not sent a dragon out of his way simply for them to reform the trihedron, but to make sure she would remain in Syd's wake. Before the constitution of the trihedron, Myldiën and several Helianthic Mothers from Laroq had asked her to keep a watch on the son of Kyrô. If the events were to show the artifact impaired the judgment of its master, she was to execute him. She had kept close to Syd for four years, and not once had she had to point her crossbow in his direction.

Myldiën caught up with Syd outside the Map Room, and while they walked, Syd explained to him in details what he had just seen. Myldiën did not comment and, as he knew the commander had just refused the escort from the tribëns, he suggested reforming the trihedron to move about the stronghold.

Syd agreed and felt relieved of a burden he had not known was there. Since they had parted on the Moaning Cliffs, on several occasions he had felt a deep loss, as if he had been cut off from a part of himself. On three occasions, as he was scrutinizing the replica from the Arkäll, he had spontaneously turned around to look for the soothing gaze of the equanimous monk and the fierce look of the heliast.

Their reunion had been disconcertingly simple and friendly. Syd gave them both a hug, a gesture of friendship that was not like him at all. The consideration moved Nelphaëll and awakened a cautious gleam in the dark eyes of the monk.

While Myldiën went back to the Map Room, he reconstituted trihedron had gone off into the maze of the dragon-towers. Syd felt confident, happy to be with those who had shared his exile from the stronghold. An exile... The word had spontaneously sprung up in his mind, a sign that he was subtly revising his outlook on the previous four years.

Armed Cynwäll were patrolling the paved streets winding among the towers. The soldiers swapped confused gossip with their partners and from one patrol to the next. Some talked about a mysterious enemy that had eluded the all-seeing Arkäll, some deeply infiltrated agent they held responsible for the death of several guards found earlier in a pool of blood, either disemboweled or with their throats cut. Others were talking more precisely about a large band of Wolfen led by a necromancer.

Syd led the trihedron to the place where he thought he had seen his brother's spark. It was a peaceful place, set apart from the bustle prevailing over the neighborhood. No patrol had ventured there, in the small remote courtyard where they were amazed to discover that Darkness had obviously desecrated the sepulcher of Ferym Maloth.

They immediately dashed through the opening and entered the ransacked sitting room where they found the dead bodies of the dragon-knights. Syd easily recognized them. All the masks, now broken away and strewn over the floor, had belonged to close friends of his father when he was a child.

The Echyron had not felt the threat within the tower pervaded by the emanations of Darkness. Four Wolfen zombies had already gathered outside, on each side of the opening. Three others, ambushed on the winding staircase leading to the upper floor, were now leaving their hiding place and coming down into the sitting room.

The pack revealed itself with an obvious pleasure. Two Wolfen appeared on both sides of a folding screen of clear wood splattered with blood, two more came out of the trapdoor in the floor, and a last one stepped from a corner behind a high cupboard.

The three elves found themselves back to back in the center of the room. Nelphaëll had shouldered her crossbow and was rapidly moving her aim between the possible targets in her line of sight. As for Soïm, he was moving in slow motion, his eyes half closed, to animate the tattoos covering his skin and reach mimetic harmony.

Syd felt the weight of his long sword in his left hand.

"The stairs," he whispered over his shoulder. "It's our only chance. Nelphaëll, cover us."

The heliast waited for Syd and Soïm to rush at the three Wolfen standing together at the foot of the stairs before she let her bolt fly. In the same second, she fell down on one knee to stabilize her aim, stopped her breathing, and shot to the first Wolfen who moved to cut the path of her companions.

The bolt found the zombie's throat. This close, the extreme violence of the impact lifted him off his feet and threw him back into the cupboard, which toppled over. Both Wolfen standing around the folding screen immediately charged her, their muzzles opened wide by their fierce war cries.

Syd had reached the first opponent, who tried to stop his momentum with a backstroke of his scythe. He jumped over the notched bade and landed less than a yard from his adversary. He used his sword as a decoy, compelling the zombie to dodge abruptly to his right side to avoid an apparently deadly blow. Driven by martial lore, the Echyron entered the putrefied flesh in the middle of his chest. Its blade-like outstretched hand wormed its way between two ribs and sunk deep inside the ribcage. The eyes of the Wolfen clouded over when the metallic fingers closed around his spine and snapped it like a twig with a sudden jerk. Ink-black blood gushed out of his open maw. He tried to use the last of his strength to raise his scythe, but Syd was already pulling his arm out of the opened ribcage. The zombie floundered and fell heavily at the commander's feet.

This had lasted only a few seconds. With a formidable agility, Soïm had dived between the scythes of the two other Wolfen and sprung up behind their back, forcing them to turn around. Meanwhile, Nelphaëll was reloading her weapon and running the few yards to Syd, with three zombies breathing down her neck.

The equanimous brother had succeeded in moving the fight away from the foot of the stairs, freeing the way for his companions. Syd caught Nelphaëll's arm and propelled her behind him. He glanced at Soïm to make sure was not having trouble with his opponents and turned to face the new assailants.

Within a heartbeat, he registered their movements and, using a chair to increase his impetus, he leaped as high as possible, his sword in both hands. A Scythe went up and drew a stinging furrow on his thigh. Another one whistled under him. Hindered by the proceedings and unable to strike properly, the third Wolfen used his weapon as a staff and gave him a strong blow to the shoulder with its shaft. The thump threw Syd off balance and his sword only nicked the arm of his opponent.

The dim light now outlined a new fray. Squatting on the first bend of the stairs, her hair disheveled around her mask, Nelphaëll was trying to secure a shot that would not risk wounding her companions. For his part, Soïm was growing more confident as his dodges increased the mimetic process. Reflections of the room seemed to animate on his torso and in the folds of his black skirt, as if the skin and leather mirrored the scenery. Both Wolfen were now striking the empty air, unable to anticipate the fluid movements of the equanimous brother.

Syd turned cautiously around, feeling a shooting pain in his shoulder, both hands clutching the hilt of his sword. Their charge being broken, the three creatures had spontaneously split to form a circle around him. They were swaying on their paws, shouting raucously, and carefully prodding the guard of the Cynwäll with the tips of their scythes.

Everyone stopped at the appearance of the necromancer, who laboriously came up from the stairs leading to the cellar. Cyraël was making slow progress, carefully putting all her weight on her cane. The last step made her dizzy and she had to grab the arm of a chair to catch her balance and her breath. She did not know how

long she could keep resisting the influence of the lich, who fed impulsively and wholeheartedly from every source of Darkness within its reach. Sorokin de Vanth was weaving his web with a hunger beyond measure, and almost beyond his own control.

He was famished.

The Wolfen came to a standstill when the emaciate silhouette of the lich came up into the sitting room. The shroud had grown some more, covering his head like a hood and hiding the lower part of his face, leaving only the eyes uncovered.

Despite the filter of his mask, Syd was unable to meet the gaze of those eyes. They were like pieces of black quartz, radiating a raw, even, cold, and opaque evil that surveyed the room before lingering on him interestedly. Dissolved within Darkness, the mid of Melehän had left only a few ashes, some of which were awakening a muddy echo in the folds of his soul. The lich bent his head mystified and annoyed by the sight of a face so strangely familiar.

Syd bit his lips until they bled to avoid screaming. Hit full front by the aura of Darkness, the Echyron had suddenly tensed and give rise to his fingertips to a wave of searing pain that went up his arm and exploded in his chest. His arm convulsed with the pain and he felt drops of icy sweat beading on his forehead. He took a step back and understood this spontaneous move to be nothing but the expression of fear, the emotion that went against every value his people, the feeling the elves had tamed through the exercised of their minds and the enchanted engravings on their masks.

Terror was stuck in his gray eyes like a spear, equivalent to the terror he had felt four years earlier when confronted with the Crâne warrior, Alderan. He took another step back and tried to resist it with all the force of his will.

He bumped against a chest of drawers and staggered through the room, his fists clenched, followed by the eager stares of the Wolfen who only waited for the order to finish him off.

His own brother, who he had recognized under the gaunt features of the lich, was using fear as a tool to control him, a bridge erected between their minds. The pain made his left leg give way under him. He started to collapse and kept his balance by putting a knee down, his arms folded under his stomach. He forced himself to breathe, closed his eyes, and thought he heard in a far corner of his head the echo of the voice of Master Thalsö guiding his disciple in the meanders of the stronghold.

“Hear the soul of Kaïber.”

He shut his eyes again. The whispers of the stone rose around him in mineral dust.

He perceived the clear pounding of a Helianthic blacksmith’s hammer vigorously striking the red-hot flat of a blade-to-be, the sigh of a chronosiarch over the subtle mechanism of a helmet of time, the shy breathing of a young equanimous

monk bending over to kiss the pale lips of a dying paladin of Alahan, the lonesome and heartrending cry of an Echahim thrown to the ground and chopped to pieces by ravenous zombies, the insults that an old Griffin fusilier impaled on the claws of a Moloch was shouting at his executioner, the muffled sob of a dragon who cried steamy tears over the souls who had died that night.

All those voices, all those noises that were part of the stronghold, mingled to become only one, like the sound of a horn rallying rooted troops. The fear flowed back, defeated, and Syd began to fight back the grip of the spectral hand on his skull.

A misshapen smile contorted the face of Sorokin de Vanth. The Cynwäll no longer tried to steal away; he was fighting back, shoving him away from his mind. The lich was disconcerted and chose to withdraw, conscious that he was losing sight of his objective and getting carried away with a meaningless confrontation. Time was of the essence. With a whisper that reached the minds of the Wolfen, he gave the order for the immediate execution of the Cynwäll and followed the necromancer out with a dawdling walk.

The zombies shuddered when he had gone through the opening. Soim had used the time to get close to the commander, and he rushed to grab him by the shoulders and drag him toward the stairs. As for Nelphaëll, she had also been paralyzed with fright by the presence of the lich and was now struggling to recover her wits. The crossbow fluttered in her frail fingers before it steadied to target the first Wolfen who moved to block the path of her companions. The creature wavered and glanced at her brethren. Even though it could not feel fear, it had no intention to commit suicide by running toward the heliast's bolt.

Syd was panting, his breath short and his ear ringing. He had been able to hold the lich at bay, but the intrusion in his mind had left its mark. Dizzy with weariness, all his muscles sore, he abandoned himself to the strong arms of his equanimous companion.

He was aware of being hoisted up the stairs, and through his falling eyelids he saw Nelphaëll climbing backward while holding her aim on their opponents until the trihedron had passed out of sight on the spiral staircase.

"Is he wounded?" she asked softly once they had reached the upper floor.

He felt the monk's fingers examining his body.

"On the thigh. Nothing serious."

Syd pushed the monk away and concentrated on the Echyron that was coming back to life. The elixir of the Sphinx flowed in his veins, an amber-colored fluid that was mingling with his blood to appease the stiffness in his muscles and remove the prints left by the lich in his mind.

They had found shelter in a large bedroom that took up the entire floor. All the personal effects of the dragon-lady had been left as they were. The passing of time had sprinkled a thin layer of dust over the furniture. Behind the rancid smell of the decaying fabrics, they could still distinguish traces of an enduring but distant

perfume, a fragrance of hyacinth the lady had worn when she went to sleep beside her old friend.

Syd declined the monk's help, stood up by himself, and took a few tentative steps to make sure his legs would hold him. Stationed on the landing, Nelphaëll had kept her crossbow pointed down the stairs.

"They are coming up," she suddenly told them nervously.

"Then we go up," Syd ordered.

The heliast raised a puzzled eyebrow.

"We can defend ourselves here easily."

"We're not staying. There is a catwalk on top of the tower. It must have been sealed off, but we should be able to get to a neighboring tower."

"What do you want to do?"

"Find the lich."

"Your brother..."

"Melehän is dead," he interrupted. "The lich has incarnated in his body. He has killed him... And now he's mine."

Nelphaëll saw that, under his mask, the commander's eye were ablaze with a ferocious gleam.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Counterfort of the Ponent was burning. Heavy wreaths of smoke belched forth from the loopholes and whirled above the battleground, tinged with red by the flames that licked the ramparts. Eschelius the Ardent, Griffin inquisitor, had gathered the survivors in a cave where the three great passageways from the counterfort to the Grey Barrier converged. By the light of the Solaris glyphs that glimmered on the great double door, the survivors looked like ghosts. Pain and weariness had left their marks on their face. Conscripts were holding up their wounded brethren; exhausted fusiliers were comforting themselves by bandaging their hands burnt by the powder discharged; inquisitors were kneeling by the dying men and women to hear their last confessions.

They were less than two hundred, and they inspired Eschelius with a profound respect. They had honored the Griffins, the Alliance, and above all, Merin. The company had done its duty to slow down the damned host of the devout of Salaüel. Many demons had fallen in front of the barricades and before the resolve of their defenders. True pillars of the faith, the inquisitors had stood like standards in the smoked-out corridors. Eschelius had seen them push back the black hordes without fear of being surrounded or of yielding under their numbers. He was thoroughly convinced that Merin had consecrated his servants, and even though he had no inkling about what the fate of Kaïber would be, he knew the Counterfort of the Ponent would become a holy place where the children of those fallen on this day of grace would come to pray in memory of their forebears.

He took off his helmet. His face mutilated by the torturers of the Inquisition reminded everyone of the meaning of their fight. He went through the first ranks to draw level with the last inquisitors who had gathered at the entrance of the middle passage. The sixteen warrior-mages, with their red robes hanging in tatters over their armor, kneeled down before their leader to receive his blessing.

Afterward, the Ardent bade them up to embrace them one last time and addressed his troops.

“On this day, I have seen what few men have seen before me. I have seen true Griffins; I have seen brave men. And my heart bleeds at the idea that I might lose you. I have been granted the pride and great honor to fight by your side. Here, in front of me, I see only righteous men, and the righteous shall receive the grace of Merin. That door that separates us from our brethren must never open. By the combined might of powder and Theurgic magic, we will block this cave and seal the passages we have so valiantly defended. I have delegated this sacrifice as a duty. But

before they set loose the anger of Merin upon this place, you, soldiers, will come with me.

We will try to make a breakthrough. You may be no more than a couple of hundred, but you are those Merin does not want to sacrifice. Few will get away from the counterfort, but even if there was only one left alive to tell of your fight this day, this breakthrough would be worth it. I will lead you one last time into combat. We will pass through the counterfort like a gust of wind. Those who survive and reach the outside are to scatter and do everything in their power to survive. I want to dedicate this breakthrough to your unborn children, may there be many growing out of the devotion of their parent's companions. In the name of Merin and for the Alliance!"

Loud cheers marked the end of his speech. The men straightened up somehow and formed a long column aligned with the central passage. The inquisitors spontaneously lined up on both sides of the low vault at the entrance of the passage with their torches held high, forming a guard of honor to salute the slow march of the conscripts and fusiliers, who were already singing in chorus the hymn Eschelius the Ardent had struck up in a clear voice.

Behind the Gate of the Bold was a large hallway paved in white marble and barred at regular intervals by heavy iron portcullises. Elaborate pillars supported the vault and held torchbearers fastened by lead rings. A murmur was rising in the passageway pervaded by the smell of dung and sweat. The advance guard of the war-horses of Alahan was fidgeting. Leaning over the neck of their mounts, the knights were heartening them while they waited for the orders of Dragan the Merciful.

His lance lowered, Baron d'Orianthe was watching the bards assembled in front of him. There were twenty of them, and they were squatting before the locks of the doors to lift the hermetic enchantments.

Dragan's puckered face bore an inscrutable expression. His standard-bearer and friend Daryon was feeling increasingly worried. He who usually relied on the lively gleam in his master's eyes to ride fearlessly by his side, could now only see doubt in the two midnight-blue pools overcast by bushy eyebrows. Could it be that the Merciful did not believe in this charge commission by Commander Kyllion?

The baron had refrained from voicing his scruples in the name of a cause he regarded as being above every other. Nothing had more value in his eyes than his oath to Light. Contrarily to most other barons, he put the authority of the Alliance above the authority of his king. For a long time now, the Rag'narok had transcended the border to involve the Alliance beyond the quarrels and plots hatched in Kallienne, the capital barony of the kingdom.

He had answered the call of Kyllion the Younger without the faintest hesitation, waiting only for the dawn to ride away from his castle with his personal guard, and taking with him the memory of a wild night in the arms of his wife,

Scylene d'Orianthe. He pressed his lips against the medallion set in the hollow of his pavise. He drew strength from the profile of his spouse, and he hoped that if death were to find him on this day, he would be able to give a last kiss to the piece of jewelry and passed away in her company.

Right now, his duty was to lead the heralds of justice to victory. The bards were finishing their rituals. In the veins of the wood, the knots of Light were coming unraveled. The Gate of the Bold opened wide.

Beyond the Gate there was a miry tide, animated by slow swirls smelling of decay. For a brief moment, the din of the battle made the horses uneasy and fretful, but a familiar sound was already rising among the ranks of Alahan. A musician had stood in his saddle to blow his horn and lead the sounding of the charge.

The column set off. Almost immediately, the horses' hooves began to slip on the tangle of corpses disgorged by the opening of the Gate, which prevented the knights from giving their charge the power and momentum necessary to drive deeply into the enemy lines. The large number of zombies and skeletons crowding against the Grey Barrier were nonetheless driven away in a few seconds. The tide of the undead ebbed at first, and then parted from the path of the knights. Caparisoned and led by the most illustrious riders of Alahan, the horses galloped straight forward in the wake of Baron d'Orianthe and his standard-bearer.

The column of steel and gold pierced the lines of the army of the damned like a searing blade. Some undead were literally lifted off the ground by the strength of the impact, others were caught and crushed by the gallop of the warhorses. The lances wreaked such havoc that an enthusiastic outcry sprang up from the battlements of the Barrier so loudly that it reverberated as far as the Gate of the Righteous.

Dragan had inflected the charge to the right in order to pass along the western wall of the castle. Just as Lens Mendkenn had gone to assist the besieged Lions, the baron tried in his turn to save the forward positions.

Separated from the bulk of their army, the damned fighting inside the walls gave ground but held out. Coming from the bridgehead secured by the black paladins inside the Barrier, the ghouls had entered the back of the castle in such numbers that the pincer movement started an hour earlier had taken a tragic turn.

The Echahim's intervention had only delayed the inescapable. Caught in dreadful hand-to-hand fights, the Lions were struggling in every corner of the castle and were no longer in a position that would even allow them to pull back in an orderly manner. Crâne warriors had come through the breach in the wall to close the ranks. Above the castle, where thousands of men and creatures were fighting, a siphon had opened in the sky. The fury of the battle had stirred up the wrath of the Primagic forces that rumbled and whirled by the glow of the lightning bolts.

Dragan d'Orianthe immediately saw that the castle was lost. He made up his mind despite the orders he had received from the Map Room and decided to take

advantage of the split opened in the enemy army by the sortie of his knights by turning it into a path of retreat to reach the Gate of the Bold. At the sound of the horns, knights and warhorses braced themselves where they stood to put up a living wall between the castle and the army of Acheron, while the Merciful, accompanied by his standard-bearer, jumped on his horse through the breach to rally the survivors.

The guards, the archers, and even the paladins were moved by the sight of the baron crisscrossing the inner courtyards to give the order to retreat. On two occasions, witnesses saw him breaking enemy lines with his faithful Daryon, allowing surrounded archers to reach the breach and the passage held open by the knights.

This would remain forever in the minds of the people. All along the rampart, from the breach in the castle to the Gate of the Bold, the knights of the Lion made an impregnable cordon and held out against the pressure from the bulk of the army of Acheron. More than once, they almost gave way but retreating paladins came in to fill the gaps. The knights, who had swapped their lances for long swords, held fast for forty minutes and allowed hundreds of soldiers to survive the agony of the castle.

Meanwhile, the four dragons dispatched to the Counterfort of the Ponent by their commander were completing the evacuations of the wounded. Syd had sent them hoping they would help the Akkylannian struggle to hold the counterfort, but the enemy had pushed the Griffins deep inside the fortifications and evaded the fight by leaving the battlements to the Cynwäll.

Crammed on the rampart walk, the wounded Griffins had needed the help of the dragon-knights to get away. Those who could still stand had improvised, jury-rigging gondolas from empty powder barrels and thus allowing the dragons to bring most of them back to their quarters.

A huge explosion put an end to the hopes of those who thought the Counterfort of the Ponent was indestructible. The sacrifice of the inquisitors threw up geysers of dust, rocks and flames that tore up the mountain flank. Towers quivered and toppled over, falling on the troops massed below. Entire sections of the rampart fissured and, in some places, slowly slid down into the pass, taking with them the wounded they had not had enough time to evacuate.

The Counterfort of the Ponent as it had been, designed by the architects of the Alliance to resist Darkness, was no more. The dragons turned away and, following an order from Myldiën the Sensible, went toward the castle to help the knights of Alahan.

Kyllion the Younger had led the paladins of amaranth in battle from the Grey Barrier. He had decided to attack after Dragan d'Orianthe, to let the enemy believe that the Alliance had put the fort's salvation in the sole hands of the baron.

The diversion did not have the effect he anticipated. In the general confusion, the reports received in the Map Room had underestimated the enemy presence. Despite repeated efforts, Ortho, his Praetorian Guard, and several units of templar knights had been unable to push back the black paladins beyond the strategic position that connected the Barrier to the castle.

Kyllion knew the amaranth could make a difference in the outcome of the battle. He had with him the unblazoned, those deprived of their pavises by the justice of his country. In a kingdom where people appreciated the worth of a family by the coat of arms on their emblazoned shield, losing that right was a disgrace close to death. To appeal to the mercy of the king, these men and women could enlist and become paladins of amaranth, warriors whose duty it was to die in battle in order to redeem the honor of their families. Their ardor and their sense of sacrifice turned them into an elite corps experienced in desperate fights.

Despised by most of the Lions who regretted that the king had acknowledged them as paladins, they lived apart from the other units in humble housings where the commander often came to dine with some veterans of the barony of Allmoon. Unlike most, Kyllion the Younger respected the unblazoned, and at this moment, he appreciated the fact that he had their leader by his side.

A subject of the barony of Icquor, Talsegur was a tall and well-built man. In compliance with the code of amaranth, he had given up his pavise but had kept the armor of his family. Reforged several times, the old metal plates protecting his body bore witness to the reversal of his fortune. Disinherited by his family, he lived only on the pay awarded to the warriors of Kaïber. A man of his word, he hid nothing of the circumstances that had brought him through the Gate of the Righteous. Both in love with the same woman, he and his brother had resigned themselves to fight a fratricidal duel to decide which of them would be entitled to marry her. Talsegur had accepted the proposition of his brother, who was a trade and a poor swordsman, and had swapped his sword for a pistol. The self-control of the paladin had nevertheless triumphed over the feverishness of the merchant terrified by the stakes. Talsegur had struck down his brother with a bullet in the forehead, and on the same day had surrendered himself to the bailiffs who came to arrest him for murder. Egeus the Forester, baron of Icquor, had applied the law and forfeited his rights. Talsegur buried his brother, handed over his pavise, bid his farewells to his family and to the woman he loved, and went to Kaïber to become an unblazoned.

He had a bandolier across his chest and he now wore a carefully trimmed long square beard that was the earmark of the amaranth. His long sword still strapped on his back, he had drawn two heavy pistols and had taken a place between the Quiet and Drym, the shadows of the commander.

Under his heavy black leather cloak, the falconer had donned a light leather armor. Silentz was perched on his right shoulder. As for Drym, he kept his unsheathed weapon along his thigh, and his inquisitive eyes were ferreting around.

Thirty paladins of the amaranth were following the three men who walked behind the commander. The company had gone through several Griffin blockages before it came to a postern gate leading inside the castle.

The unblazoned threw themselves into the attack with no second thoughts. They sought honor in death and did not hamper themselves with the proprieties stipulated in the rules of the paladins. Armed with flails, axes or swords, but also with rifles and pistols, they plunged headlong into the fray with the boldness of those who do not try to avoid death.

The appearance of the commander in his holy armor gave new hopes to the harassed troops in the courtyards and the battlements of the forward fort. The name of Kyllion the Younger blossomed on every mouth and the bards who moved around on the rampart-walks took it up.

The fort basked in the glow of the mana. Atop a tower, a mage clad in the rags of the celestial robe was blazing in the middle of a pillar of energy that went up toward the angry sky, surrounded by the wounded who had come to him to bask in the healing power of hermetic magic before they went back to fight again. Bright beams were bursting from the heights to inspire the swordsmen and paladins. Adepts were sinking inside the confused melee of blood and iron to draw their glyphs of radiance on the shoulder of the righteous, or to brand with the seal of infamy the Alysarchs who tried to slop into the lines and reach the leaders. From the palm of the magicians' hands, gems of Light sent forth haloes that blessed the archers and guided their arrows. For others, brought to bay in the basements of the castle, the gems would sharpen the edges of their blades and allow them to fight side by side with the warriors.

The magic kept up by the Order of the Chimera was blazing throughout the castle.

Galvanized by the commander, the Lions thought they could regain the upper hand. Slowed down by the arrival of Talsegur and his companions of the amaranth, the ghouls could not support the regular troops isolated from the bulk of the army by Dragan d'Orianthe and his knights.

However, despite the Light splattered all over the battlefield, the Lions were only humans. They had fought for several long hours, they had achieved small victories and met with just as many setbacks, they had seen veterans rising from the dead to join the enemy, they had heard the haunting rattles of the wounded agonizing, they had broken their swords and picked up those of their fallen friends, they had forgotten the atrocious stench rising from the ground... but they could no longer suppress the complaints of their own exhausted bodies.

Kyllion realized this when a younger soldier collapsed in front of him for no apparent reason. The boy was barely twenty. Defeated by exhaustion, he had dropped against a wall to wait for death. He had fought valiantly since the middle of

the night and now could no longer feel anything. He did not hear the din of the battle or even the voice of his commander who had bent over him to urge him on.

Kyllion stood back with the bewildered impression that he had not paid enough attention to the advice of Syd the Cynwäll, that he had succumbed to pride and sacrificed his troops to save a few stones underserving of so much Barhan blood. He looked around the main courtyard and saw what he had refused to acknowledge thus far: his troops were worn out. They were long past the time when these units should have withdrawn behind the front line, to rest and, for the duration of a meal at least, to forget the walking dead.

When it became lean that Dragan had taken upon himself to lead the retreat before he could do it himself, Kyllion did everything he could to help him and engaged the paladins of amaranth to assist in the withdrawal of his troops. With a lump in his throat, he followed the slow procession of the weary warriors and mages who crawled through the blackened stones before disappearing into the breach.

The last in line, he followed his warriors out of the castle.

CHAPTER XIX

Besieged by the Wolfen and entrenched atop the tower of the late Ferym Maloth, Syd had been keen to pay his respects to the sacred pearly remains of the dragon and his mistress. The posture of their skeletons revealed the infinite tenderness linking these two exceptional beings. The dragon-lady had lain down between the outstretched coils of the creature, like a child in a mother's arms.

Syd raised his hand and lightly touched the thin web of Solaris protecting the precious relics. The echo of the battle came to him, muffled by the translucent dome of the tower. He looked for a brief moment at the unleashed sky before he lowered his gaze on Kaïber.

The castle had fallen and fighting now took place on the flanks of the huge rampart manned by the Griffins. He perceived the fragmented cohorts of the wounded and survivors of Alahan gathered behind the Grey Barrier, along the Fault. In the West, above the remains of the Counterfort of the Ponent, the mountain was exuding thick columns of black smoke. The enemy army still stretched as far as the northern horizon, despite the heavy losses inflicted by the Alliance. The Castle itself had become a colossal sepulcher swarming with the hordes of Darkness. He averted his eyes from the exhibition of humiliated bodies and asked the equanimous monk to join him.

Soïm was still wavering on the penultimate step of the stairs, intimidated by the relics.

"Come on," Syd ordered. "Your propriety is pointless in such circumstances."

The face of the monk froze. He felt a deep respect for the dragons. The teachings of Cynwäll spirituality viewed them as brethren, but Soïm had never been able to admit that a mere elf could compare with such creatures. The awareness of a dragon's death terrified him and reflected his own fears. His masters had taught him to regard the mind as being far beyond the limits inherent to the body, to use the precepts of Noësis in order to conceptualize the multiplicity of the roads to immortality. The equanimous brother dreaded the void, death and its stillness.

Syd distinctly felt the shiver of the Echyron and thought for an instant that the dome's magic had disturbed the artifact. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Soïm step back with a worried look.

He turned around slowly. Incomprehensible tremors animated the dragon's skeleton. In the line of the spine, the coils began vibrating together. The light of the

dome started to falter. The glyph, supposedly unbreakable, was giving way under the pressure from the Dark Principle.

A thick and gray mist was crawling in through the crenellation. The equanimous monk spontaneously assumed a combat stance, his legs slightly apart and his hands unfolded at chest height. Syd detected a hint of willpower in the curls that slid over the stones and slowly came to cover the skeleton of Ferym Maloth. An acrid smell was in the air around them, reminding him of the stench of burnt flesh that sometimes pervaded the charred remains of an isolated farmhouse.

He motioned for the equanimous monk to step back and came closer as he drew his blade. He had no idea about how to impede the ritual that was obviously happening, so at first he just prodded the mist with the tip of his sword. The blade met no resistance as it passed through. The thick strands followed the shapes and curves of the skeleton and coiled around the bones and the spine like gleaming tentacles. When Syd saw the haze reach the skull and enter the empty sockets, he used the Echyron to sound out the consciousness crouched inside. The artifact recoiled against his will, before his fingers had even made contact with the smoke. He felt a biting and evil cold, as if he had stretched a naked hand over a blazing inferno of black flames.

A slowly thickening fog was flowing over the paving stones of the Cynwäll quarter, and it was an embodiment of the dark counterpart of the sacred flames of the peak dragons.

His gaze went to the neighboring towers. Everywhere the same fog was invading the alleys and climbing the walls to desecrate the graves. The thick and greedy vapors broke the seals placed by the dragon-knights and caused the collapse of the domes of light.

Syd gave out a fierce shout of bitterness and anger. This evil was humiliating a collective memory; Darkness destroyed the burial places to lead astray the illustrious skeletons that every elf, from Kaiber to Laroq, honored through his daily meditation.

Acheron was awakening the dead dragons.

Meanwhile, the lich lay prostrate in the ruins of the Alderion. The globe had given way under the power of the ritual. The glass walls had exploded. Half-melted shards were jutting out from clumps of metal rods bent by the impact. The rain was now pattering deafeningly on the naked floorboards.

The wind was now blowing twice as hard. Clinging to the spur of a girder, Cyraël was squinting to try to make out Sorokin through the raging elements and the silhouettes of her offspring.

Kneeling on the soaked wood, the Wolfen were holding each other's shoulders and made a compact circle around the lich. The flesh pruned so meticulously by the necromancer was visibly dissolving to feed the increased appetite of the creature.

The plates of armor now hung loosely over their fleshless limbs, and their muzzles once streamlined by the rawest instinct were now drooping toward their chests.

Sorokin de Vanth no longer belong to the world of Aarklash. His mind branded by the dark iron had just opened a portal to Erebus, the central place of the Abyss. Under the shreds of skin still stuck to his ribcage, the glowing marks made by the nails of Feyd Mantis were notched of Darkness that had allowed him to open the portal and join the immense city of Pandemonium.

His consciousness had gone to the fountainhead, in the bowels of Kaïan Draghost. In the shadow of the throne of arcana towering over the city, the gaping jaws of the dragon of Darkness released the flames of a rebirth devoted to the Dark Principle. The lich was slowly transforming into a receptacle consumed by the abyssal fire. His mouth had expanded disproportionately and was relaying and spewing out the seed of his master that spread over the dragon-towers. An inexhaustible flood was scrambling up to the sepulchers to sweep out the glyphs of Light and corrupt the sacred relics.

Despite the risk to herself, Cyraël left her shelter to walk toward Sarkhom. The Wolfen had fallen on his knees at the entrance of the Alderion. The rain was trickling down his muzzle, raised toward the dark canopy of the clouds. The face of Kyrô was resting on his naked thighs.

The Cynwäll was lying on the ground and breathing weakly, his eyes closed. He had been the key, the one who had given the noxious breath of Kaïan Draghost the power to open the elven protections barring the entrances to the dragon-towers.

Stooped over her cane, Cyraël struggled against the gusts of wind step after step, and finally collapsed next to her most faithful servant. Sarkhom had barely enough strength left to lift his arm, cradle the Pallid, and hold her against his withered heart. The necromancer snuggled against him and buried her fingers in the dripping hair of his chest. She raised her head and met his glassy stare. The spark that usually flickered in his eyes had gone.

“I am here, my child,” she said to him. “Do not die, not now.”

Two hundred yards away, the remains of Ferym Maloth were coming alive on the top of his tower. Darkness had replaced the subtle articulations of the spine, straightening up the skeleton and animating the seventeen rings that made up the central bone structure of the dragon. Syd stepped back, his legs bent, without losing sight of the streamlined tailbone. Tensed like a scorpion’s sting, it had raked the stone and left a furrow half an inch deep. The huge skull was swaying under the downpour, more than thirty feet off the ground. An olive-colored gleam sparkled in its empty sockets. A dim gleam, still weak, that looked like a will-o’-the-wisp.

The Dark Principle still had trouble controlling the whole of the skeleton. Stirred by a self-preservation instinct, the reflections of Light inside the bones

struggled not to be assimilated. A ring dislocated from the spine and came crashing down at the Cynwäll's feet.

The dragon shook himself to get rid of those rags of brightness that aroused a fierce burning feeling on his bones. His muzzle opened on a silent scream, a supernatural resonance that crystallized the Light into golden particles. Once expelled from the tainted skeleton, they scattered in the wind like stardust, and their exile sealed the complete submission of Ferym Maloth to the Dark Principle.

Syd raised his arm. Until the very last moment, he had hoped that the holy nature of the relics would be a protection strong enough to prevent the lich from actually taking control of the dragon.

The next move of the tail proved him wrong. The dragon suddenly propelled it in his direction and it cleft the air between them with an extraordinary speed. Taken aback, Syd threw himself flat on the ground at the last moment and he felt the wind of the blow ruffling his hair. He rolled to the side and heaved himself up against a crenel, his sword still in his hand.

The commander's dodge had freed the equanimous brother from his torpor. With a studied slowness, he started taking side steps along the summit of the tower, his eyes raised toward the dragon's head.

The creature was standing upright, gazing at his two opponents, and swaying to the rhythm of the gusts of wind sweeping through his rings. The pointed tip of his tail had settled at the level of their chest and was swiveling to alternately face the monk and the commander.

The tail bent. Soïm waited for the last second before bending one knee and arching his back. The bone spur whistled in front of him and plunged into the stone. Splinters of bone went flying and lacerated his legs. He shut out the pain and, before the dragon could pull back his tail, he hit what he perceived to be the weakest articulation. Palm against palm, his joined hands struck with the might of a war hammer and elicited a creaking roar from the creature.

The spur slipped away into the air too fast for the monk to strike a second time. Usually, such an attack could bend the metal plates of a suit of armor, but nothing could compare with the compact Darkness that underlay the moving bones. The pain became too intense. Soïm could not even feel the blood flowing down over his ankles, and he gave up sustaining the mimicry enchantment that was active on his skin. He stumbled back and caught himself on a crenel to recover his breath and relax his muscles contracted by the impact.

Syd had used the brief respite offered by his companion to slip below the dragon and to contemplate the fight to come: to evaluate the strength of his opponent, detect his weaknesses, and devise an appropriate riposte. The spur wavered above his head for a brief moment like the pendulum of a clock, and then the dragon and the commander became locked in a fierce duel.

Syd had cut himself off completely from the outside world his mind focused only on the fluid movements of the spur that made shrill screeching noises when it scraped along the stone. He was anticipating the blows as best he could and tried every time to evade them only at the last instant in order to have a better chance to lend an effective counterattack. He quickly saw that there was no way his blade would ever wound his opponent. Twice already, it had bounced back against the bumps of the tail without leaving even the slightest scratch.

He dropped his sword and used his left arm to balance the limber movements of the Echyrion. The dragon misunderstood the gesture of his adversary. Even though he could feel the magic in the Cynwäll's arm, he had no idea how it could be a danger beyond appearances. His experience was limited to what the Dark Principle had taught him in the last few minutes. He had neither the reflexes nor the memory of the late Ferym Maloth. His worldview was in its infancy and heavily slanted by the influence of Darkness.

His attacks grew less accurate and more daring.

The swiftness of the Echyrion came as much from the magic of the Sphinx as from the Cynwäll's own reflexes. Syd arranged for the spur to lose itself in the folds of his cloak, tearing it apart. A spike of bone bit his shoulder, another rasped against the sculpted dragon that protected it, but he had gained a precious second, a very short second in which to close his hand on the dragon's tail. The metal fingers snapped shut like a wolf trap and made the dragon of Darkness shudder.

Syd had a fleeting thought for his master at arms and his teachings about the primary art, lessons he had quite often laughed at afterward with his brother. Rule over chaos; let it pervade your willpower to make you inscrutable. This sentence guided his trajectory when the dragon abruptly withdrew his tail and gave him the impetus he needed to leap into his face. The trajectory was right, but the momentum was too short. For a blink, he thought he could heave himself up onto the skull. Then the dragon's claw scraped along the jaw and could not find a hold.

Then there was the fall, unforgiving and unexpected.

He saw himself falling. He even felt as if he had parted from his body to watch it fall. He met the desperate gaze of Soïm as he passed very close to the crowning of the tower without managing to catch it. He felt his leg catch on the ridge of a window and the spurt of vermillion blood as it tore. As a last reflect, he tried to angle his shoulders in the hope of breaking his fall with the Echyrion.

The pain, excruciating, went through his body like a ground swell as he hit the pavement.

A red curtain fell over his ash-gray eyes.

He was dead.

CHAPTER XX

The skeleton dragons, twenty-one in all, had been born inside the heart of Kaïber. In answer, Caer Maloth had majestically risen in the sky. Her tawny scales glowed red with the light of the torch and fires that sputtered on the battlements and towers. She wheeled around and gave out a roar that drowned the din of the battle. It was a scream of rage and a shout of alarm that called the peak dragons from their sanctuaries to fight the evil rising from their tower.

On the ground, the defenders were dumbfounded. Such an event jostled all the certainties established throughout the centuries by the followers of Light. Some warriors broke from the fighting, their eyes riveted on the threatening figures gliding above the citadel. If Darkness could seize the souls of the dragons, what hope did they have left? Fear came back to twist their bowels. Some renounced their oath to the Alliance and fled without a word toward the Gate of the Righteous.

The desecration that felt like a punch in the belly of the humans was a knife in the hearts of the Cynwäll. Dragon-squires turned white and withdrew into themselves, their shoulders heaving with sobs. Despite the obvious display in the sky, no one was yet able to admit that the Dark Principle could thus desecrate and subjugate the relics of the peak dragons.

In the Lion quarters, the wounded flocking from the castle by the hundreds somehow had to get back on their feet to obey the booming voices of the paladins, who reformed the ranks to pick out those they deemed fit enough to fight again.

Inside the Grey Barrier, the news spread like wildfire. Buried in the bowels of the Barrier and with their backs turned to their quarters, many Griffins refused to believe what they could not see for themselves. For them, the truth was in front of them and not behind their backs. The incarnation of the truth was in the hordes of the damned surging through the castle, in the thousands of skeletons and zombies and ghouls that came rushing at them from the positions held by the black paladins and tried to spread throughout the Barrier, and in the ominous black tide that never dried up and pushed on all sides to sweep away the Akkylannian resistance.

The cannons no longer roared. The battle had deserted the valley and now bordered the quarters of the Alliance, along the Fault that the enemy had never yet crossed.

The artisans and the children had locked themselves up inside their houses, leaving a clear field to the Darkness hunters and the magistrates, helped by the thallions, who patrolled in small units throughout the alleys and steep stairs, their

torches held high, to hunt down the infiltrated ghouls and demons. In their wakes they left the creaking shop signs laden with the bodies of the damned they had captured and hanged. The Alliance wanted, at any cost, to hold in check the panic that crept through the closed shutters and the locked doors.

From one end Kaïber to the other, doubt gripped the hearts of the defenders.

All that was left of the Wolfen zombies surrounding Sorokin de Vanth were grotesque mummies frozen in death. The lich had fed from the Darkness in their flesh to the last drop. He lied curled up and motionless on the floor of the Alderion, his legs brought up against his chest, and his arms in a circle around his knees. Like a child. The shroud, drenched by the rain, stuck to his skin and underlined the emaciated angles of his body.

He had manifested the wind from the Abyss. He had felt the hot and exhilarating breath of Kaïan Draghost passing through his throat. Thanks to Kyrô, whose willpower he had slowly subdued under the guise of his son Melehän, he had imbued the noxious mist with the ability to sweet away the seals of Solaris to reach the souls of the dead dragons and make them rise again. He was now in command of an army: the twenty-one skeleton dragons flew through the storm with rippling motions and faced the peak dragons led by their elder, Caer Maloth.

This impending confrontation drove the winds to an unprecedented speed. Sharp and icy gusts rose from the ravines of the Behemoth and the warriors had to hold on not to be lifted into the air or hurled down from the towers. The clouds burst, releasing a flood of turbulent water that drowned Kaïber under a roaring deluge and, despite the precautions taken by the Alliance, soon threatened the basements. In the Workshop, the chronosiarchs and their disciples were already wading through an inch of water and were bustling about every corner of the huge building trying to shelter the precious Helianthic apparatus.

The chaotic eddies of Primagic incarnated in ever more numerous bolts of lightning that crashed down on the fortress and killed attackers and defenders indiscriminately.

The Pallid struggled to push back the inert arm that covered her shoulder. Sarkhom was dead. She could not stand the idea of staying there, a prisoner of the corpse she had loved like a son. She had thought she could give up and let herself die here with him, but the Dark Principle would have none of that. She had felt for the Wolfen emotions that were forbidden, emotions that went against her tainted nature.

She sacrificed several souls locked up in the nodosities of Sirith, her cane, to receive the energy she needed to pull away from her offspring and walk to the lich. She made slow progress, laboring over every step and using her stick as an anchor. A

gust of wind almost carried her away, but she trudged on, her lips taught with the effort, her eyes blinded by the downpour whipping her face.

She stopped above the lich and had to shout to make herself heard. Sorokin de Vanth uttered a low moan and raised a pale hand in her direction. His necrotic fingers were trembling when they closed around the crone's wrist. Cyraël shuddered and offered herself unconditionally. The lich thoroughly enjoyed that proffered consciousness and did not even consider sparing her. His thirst for Darkness was so strong that he did not even recognize the one who had awakened him. He drank to quench his quartered soul, and to keep the dragons under the absolute control of his willpower.

He did what the council of the Ram expected of him and split his offspring into two groups. Ten dragons immediately carried the fight to Caer Maloth and her congeners, so that the eleven others were free to attack the Alliance troops on the ground. The stakes were obvious: they had to catch the defenders in a pincer and prevent the bulk of them from taking their defensive positions on the bridges along the Fault. Feyd Mantis himself had insisted on the danger of being bogged down before entering the heart of the citadel. We can tear down any wall, but we cannot fill up a chasm. Once we get to the bridges, they shall have the advantage. We must spread into their quarters. This is the key point that will decide the outcome of the battle. If we manage to cross the Fault, victory will be ours.

Long silhouettes of alabaster immediately swooped down beside the Grey Barrier and rushed into the alleys of the Barhan and Akkylannian quarters. The units hastily reorganized by the paladins were swept away. The skeleton dragons followed exactly the twists and turns of the winding street, flying at full speed and scraping the flanks of the houses and towers. Cracks appeared on the facades, stone blocks came loose and crashed on the ground. The defenders who tried to intervene were mowed down or torn to shreds.

Soon, a film of blood was covering the pointed skulls of the skeleton dragons.

The slaughter had just started when, in the sky of Kaïber, Caer Maloth led the dragons into battle against their brethren who had come back from the dead. For a few seconds before plunging to meet the enemy, she thought of Vimras, her beloved. For many years, melancholy had become her only solace, her sanctuary, and her burden. Despite the regular visits from her son Netzach, he dwelled in her mind and addressed her in her dreams. She slumbered to forget the warm and musky smell of his scales, the velvetiness of his voice that whispered in her ears the story of men. She could no longer stand to see the blaze of his eyes, the pupils dilated by lust. Consumed with nostalgia, she refused to acknowledge that future in which he ceased to exist and lived only in the past.

The dragons of Darkness and the dragons of Light collided with a deafening and godlike clash. To the warriors of the Alliance, their fight appeared as a set of

fleeting frescoes, motionless instants captured by the haphazard glare of the lightning bolts over the Behemoth Mountains. Bodies tangled together, scales fell to pieces under the pressure of evil teeth, spines were seized and broken by bitter jaws, sword wielded by the dragon-knights turned aside bony spurs... The border between Light and Darkness soon disappeared entirely. The flying dragons made a moving but compact mass that was lit from inside by the fire spewed out.

A skeleton-dragon suddenly fell from this magma and crashed down on an Akkylannian temple. Adsylôm Maloth was the next. Mortally wounded, he had lost his ride and was unable to slow down his descent. Strapped to his saddle, the dragon-knight had passed away with his sword still clutched in his hand and could not prevent his companion from drifting down over the Grey Barrier and crashing down a few dozen yards farther among a large ground of scavengers.

Kyllion the Younger was soberly watching the Cynwäll who covered the statue of the Arkäll with thin silk clothes. For the first time ever, the young Sphinx would have to leave the casing the Cynwäll had built for her.

The cruel words, the cold and painful words still range in his head: I beseech you; we must abandon the Map Room. He owed those words to a heliast who had uttered them with an obvious lump in his throat. He had answered with a silent nod. A few minutes ago, he had given the necessary orders to allow the staff officers to withdraw with an escort behind the walls of the Circle.

The fate of Kaïber had shifted. He had known this the moment Ortho came into the pyramid to notify them personally that the Grey Barrier would hold for only one more hour, after which he would give the order for the retreat of his surviving units.

Was it dementia or bitterness blazing in the eyes of the imperial legate? His old friend nervously clutched the cross on his chest and spoke in whispers with the survivors of the Praetorian Guard. Kyllion knew the man regarded the battle as a crushing defeat. A moment ago, he had seen him dismiss his guards in order to kneel down, alone, in the shadow of a terrace, and pray. The apparent distress on his face had deeply moved him, as had the sight of the silent tiers.

He felt a swishing sound behind his back and turned to see Silentz setting down on his master falconer's shoulder and folding his wings. The Quiet displayed a gloomy expression.

"Commander, our living quarters and those of our allied are plunged into chaos."

Kyllion nodded.

"Has he seen Dragan?" he asked. "And Talsegur? He is supposed to be over there right now."

"Baron d'Orianthe seems to have gathered his knights in the Akkylannian cathedral."

“Inside?”

“Yes commander. Lens Mendkenn and a handful of Echahims joined him there.”

“No explanation?”

“None.”

“What about Talsegur?”

“Silentz doesn’t know where he is. Nor any other paladin of the amaranth. They are inside the Grey Barrier. Either dead or about to die.”

“And the Barrier itself?”

“The defense is crumbling faster and faster. All along the wall, retreating units are trying to rally on the Fault.”

Both men lowered their heads instinctively. A muffled impact had shaken the walls. Strands of dust fell from the ceiling, making the heliasts look very worried as they finished packing and protecting the Arkäll to take it into the Circle.

“The Cynwäll quarters seem to be the only places still free from the enemy’s presence.”

“The enemy will target them as soon as he has gained control of this pyramid,” Kyllion muttered. “Don’t you have even a single piece of good news you could give me?”

“Just one. You were right. This army does have an end. Silentz flew toward Acheron. The enemy’s rearguard has finally come into view.”

Kyllion nodded with a slight move of his chin. He was longing to be on the walls of the Circle and finally be able to put back together a command worthy of the name. Everything was now in abeyance here. The foretold collapse of the Grey Barrier had shown the limitations of the Arkäll and pointed at the discrepancies in the strategy of the Alliance. They had neglected the Code of the Behemoth for far too long, and they had forgotten that Darkness could someday overrun the Castle and the Grey Barrier. A short and bitter laugh remained muffled in his beard. He could not even remember when he had last consulted the code in the reading rooms of the Exianth. For an instant, he saw a picture of himself leaving through the Gate of the Righteous and turning his back on the oily black smoke devouring Kaiber.

He went to a small fountain set in a wall and splashed cold water over his face. He had to react without being distracted by the slaughter that might be happening in his own quarters, and accept to leave, at least partly, the fate of the citadel in the hands of the dragon-knights.

A rustle of crackled leather pulled him from his thoughts. Drym had slid over to him.

“Commander, we must leave.”

“I have to speak with Ortho first.”

“Commander, they are coming.”

“How much time?”

“If we delay any longer, I cannot guarantee your safety. People are fighting on the bridges of the Elder.”

The bridges were the rare passages linking the Grey Barrier with the first streets of the Alliance’s quarters. The bridges of the Elder were the two standing over the middle of the Fault and leading directly in the direction of the Map Room. They had received that name in memory of his father.

“Never mind. Make sure the Arkäll leaves at once.”

Kyllion stepped through the ranks of Praetorian Guardsmen, grabbed Ortho by the shoulder, and took him aside.

“The final decision is yours, my friend. These are your troops. I will second your opinion.”

The imperial legate crossed his arm and lowered his face.

“If we hold the bridges, those skeleton-dragons may decimate us. They seem anxious to make us give up the Fault and force us back into our quarters.”

“We have known that for a long time. If we use the bridges as bottlenecks, they won’t be able to pass.”

“The dragons, Kyllion... They are only waiting for this. Barricades on the bridges would be easy prey to them. This would expose our troops. It could lead to a slaughter. Having said that, I can do it. My conscripts and my fusiliers in the Counterfort of the Levant could establish a strong defense over the three eastern bridges. For the others, I can only conjecture. God only knows how many will escape from the Grey Barrier. I see only one problem. From now on, our fate is in the hands of the Cynwäll.”

“Let’s risk it then. I trust them.”

“Even though their commander is missing?”

“The peak dragons will soon come to help us out.”

“They are the only ones who can ensure the bridges will not become the tombs of all my troops, do you realize that?”

“And they are the only ones able to defeat the dragons of Darkness anyway,” Kyllion sent back.

Ortho nodded and raised his eyes toward the cracks in the vaulted ceiling.

“How could this happen, my friend?” he asked.

“We have to win this battle if we want to find out.”

CHAPTER XXI

He remembered he had been happy that evening. He had thought about it and even written it down, as if he was afraid to forget it, at the bottom of the vellum on which he was carefully composing an essay for Master Thalsö. Perched over two big velvet cushions in order to sit high enough in his father's armchair, he was working on his desk and glanced regularly with his child's eyes at his parents settled in front of the fireplace.

She, his mother, was reading to his father short poems Syd did not fully understand, but which seemed to charm him. Kyrô listened and smiled. Sometimes he would brush back an unruly lock of hair that fell in front of his wife's face. She kissed him. Farther away, close to a tall looking glass, Melehän was slipping on old garments, trying to look like a magician, and gesticulating in front of the mirror with his brows wrinkled to try to look suitably dignified.

Syd had liked that precious moment, out of time. He had almost liked it too much, actually. He had been suddenly afraid that the dreaded horizon blocking the North might one day rise like an angry sea and drown his family.

He was unable to open his eyes and gave out a groan. For a moment, the pain had focused in his chest and in his thigh before it suddenly ebbed back. He touched his body and felt nothing. Not even the blood he had seen flowing liberally along his leg. His eyelids fluttered. He was sitting in the very same armchair he had been thinking about a while earlier. Embers were glowing in the fireplace. His parents and his brother were not there, and the silence was oppressive.

A silhouette stood out in the shadow and moved closer by the glow of the embers. It was a stooped old man with a crackled skin and a thick gray beard covering his chin and his cheeks. He wore a gray cape with a hood drawn back behind his neck. A symbol unknown to Syd was painted over his skull and gave off a blue glimmer.

"My name is Lô. May I sit?"

A bewildered Syd showed him a chair. His voice was clear, surprisingly so for his old age. An even and steady voice.

The so-called Lô settled down in the chair and leaned forward to take the vellum that lay on the other side of the desk, in front of Syd.

"I am happy," he quoted with a smile. "These are your words, are they not?"

"Am I dead?"

"You have never been this much alive."

"Who are you?"

"A messenger."

"Who from?"

"From those whose attention you have attracted."

"No more mysteries, old man. If I am alive, I must fight."

Syd tried to stand up, but he was unable to move his legs.

"Time here does not behave as it does outside."

"Where are we? Answer me!"

"Inside yourself, Syd."

"You are a dream..."

"Maybe I am."

"Who sent you?"

"The gods."

"The Cynwäll worship none of them."

"This does not prevent the gods from taking an interest in them."

"We are free people, we belong to no god."

"Life is a freedom, Syd. Yours, as well as all the others that flicker on the surface of Aarklash. But you do not decide everything."

"What do you want?"

"To help you. To clear with you a path leading to Kaïber."

"Everything is already clear to me."

"Of course not. There is a mystery in you..."

"The Echyrion?"

"It has always been about it, hasn't it? About the prohibition your mother broke to save you, about the foundations of the Cynwäll people. A new way has been revealed in you and through you, an alternative fraught with dangers and uncertainties. Esneh, your Guide, has chosen you to open a perilous path. To demonstrate by your acts that the secrets precious kept in the monasteries of Lanever must be shared to testify to the utter commitment of the Cynwäll in the Rag'narok."

"Why does he need me?"

"To instigate this new age in the history of your people. Nothing is written yet. It will become a possibility if you succeed in saving Kaïber. The gods may modify the destiny of nations only in minute proportions. Today, I have come to you to give the Alliance a chance to reverse the course of History."

"What does the History say?"

"The Chroniclers have foretold the fall of Kaïber, but they think a measure of doubt remains. You, Syd. Your incarnation must come to pass. As we speak, you are lying in a pool of your blood beside the tower where you challenged the skeleton-dragon. Soïm cried above your dead body. Nelphaëll lives. She is wounded and coming up the stairs to join you. Now come."

Syd stood up, went around the desk, and stopped before the old man.

“Who are those gods watching over the Cynwäll?”

“Only the Noesians have a right to know. Take my hand. Incarnate.”

Dizziness.

He is floating under the arch of the huge cyclopean crypt held up by imposing twisted columns. He had no consciousness of his own body. He is only here, in this room that belongs to the past, as a raw mind enlightened by the knowledge of the gods. Distraught at first, he realizes he is free to move at will and heads for a glow that lights the depth of the crypt.

He perceived the nature of the ground, an ocher soil bearing furrows that all converge toward the same point. He sees the glow. It comes from thousands of candles held up by slaves chained to the columns. In the middle of this multitude, there is a more restricted gathering undulating in rhythm.

Serpents.

Standing on their tails, their humanlike arms folded behind their back, they surround an altar of black marble on which one of them is writhing about. The Ophidian holding their attention is wrapped up in soiled white sheets. He whistles, screams and struggles against horrifying torments.

Syd slips among the scaly silhouettes clad in sapphire armor. He hears the hypnotic vibration of their bifid tongues and the grinding of their crawling.

The Ophidian is dying from the effect of an unchecked mutation. Syd sees the scales rising under the pressure from strange yellowish excrescences, the partly severed tongue hanging on one side, the teeth growing bigger and longer, and bent out of shape as they strain against one another. He is now in the paroxysm of pain. A brownish pus oozes where the scales yield and fall in the folds of the sheets.

The disease is doing its work. It chose its victim randomly, slipped inside him without warning. It broke out in less than six hours and fed from the Darkness irrigating his body in order to transform him and seize his shoulder.

The serpent has fought to the very end to delay the metamorphosis and resist the onslaught of the Light. He feels like he is rising toward the sun, like he is consumed from inside by the rays of Lahn. He has tried to poison himself with his own venom, but the elixir of Brightness has stopped him and saved him, an Ophidian, from a sudden death.

Syd is now right above the altar and he understands as the molt happens before his eyes.

The reptile becomes a dragon.

Later. He discovers he has not moved, he is still floating above the altar. However, months, or maybe even years, have passed.

Ruins are all that is left of the crypt. Whole sections of the ceiling have crashed down; broken columns lay on the floor. Terrible battles have happened in

this place. He knows. He sees the hundreds of skeletons scattered among the remains, the brown spots spattering the stones, the strange weapons broken or stuck into the ground.

Suddenly he hears footsteps, light and nimble. In the dim light he distinguishes a small band advancing through the ruins. He goes to them and feels drawn by their leader opening the way: a woman, a Sphinx whose face he cannot see, for she hides it under a mask of bark. In the hollow of her cheek there is a trace of the dried furrow left by a tear of sap.

With the help of her companions, she is searching through the debris abandoned by the warriors. Her thoughts reach him in warm and scatter whiffs. He senses her compassion, her eagerness, her hopes, and her bitterness also. She is searching for Light and life; she is looking for the window holes leading from the feet of the columns down to the basement.

Through her, Syd understands that the crypt is a Lazarium, that the columns plunge deep into the ground, and that their underground hollows hold isolation cells. She comes to save those forgotten by the war. She comes for the deformed and diseased Ophidians, the incomplete and misshapen dragons she hopes to drag out of their prison to treat, and maybe even to save, so that Light may complete its work.

She sneaks through two sections of stone and leans toward a narrow opening. She has felt a presence, a shallow breathing. Her eyes pierce the shadows and finally make out a creature that does not move but still breathes. Hunger and pain have plunged it into a deep lethargy, on the edge of death.

The Sphinxes pull out the window frame and slip inside the cell. Syd wants to follow them, but once again the light explodes, and everything disappears in a glaring white radiance.

His eyelids open on a dark and smoky worship. Weird bronze apparatuses are humming in the dim light and refracting the glow of a lantern hanging from the ceiling. A woman, the same one he saw in the ruins of the crypt, is caressing the flank of a monstrous creature laid out on an oval metal table, a hideously deformed serpent that has never completed the metamorphosis. Syd also recognizes him. He has seen, on the altar, the pains an ophidian body could endure when confronted with the radiance of Light.

The deformities have gone so far that Light is no longer able to intervene and restart the mutation process. The Sphinx, however, does not give up. Her slender and gentle fingers are probing between the swellings of the skull, trying to reach the gleaming surface of the brain and establish contact.

The catalepsy has raised a heavy and tormenting mist around the serpent's soul, but there is still that diffused glimmer, like a lantern lost in the fog, the indelible mark of Light that guides and reassures her.

She saves the Ophidian. She saves his soul quartered between Light and Darkness, in the colors of twilight, and tears it away from the ravaged body.

The Serpent is decaying on the steel table while the Sphinx, taking ceaseless precautions, collects his essence and solidifies it.

The Utopia of the Sphinx does not tolerate any eradication of the Principle of Light, no matter its source. She knows the artifact will be unstable, and that there is a risk, however slight, of the restoration of the Patriarch.

With the help of her disciples, she gathers all the essence in a magical receptacle and begins to transfer on large pages of parchment the first sketches of the future vessel. It will take the shape of a fighting arm, much like the long piece of steel and ebony armor covering the most elite warriors from hand to shoulder. A piece of armor that already bears a name: Echyron.

As the thin lips of the Sphinx utter the name of the artifact, the workshop abruptly vanishes. Afraid to be dazzled again, Syd closes his eyes. However, there is only night now, a warm and infinitely soft opaqueness that carries an absolute feeling of protection.

The Incarnation is taking place.

The spiritual unity of the Cynwäll splits up into shards of Light, dissociated from the broken body lying at the foot of a dragon-tower. He is a baby... then and adolescent. He grows back to being a child... he is an adult. The phenomenon is beyond his grasp. Diving hands are molding his soul, his emotions, and his memories like clay. It slowly takes the shape of a sculpture standing out of the void.

The sculpture of his essence, of his body finally incarnated.

He does not feel suffering, even though small bits of the clay scatter away, sowing fragments of himself across Aarklash and the Elemental Realms, where they become Elixirs. He catches glimpses of places, objects and beings that are as many points of impact. A fragment embeds itself in the wooden leg of a ship captain, an influent member of the Cadwallon guild of Helmsmen. Another spreads through the strands of a huge cobweb woven between high branches of an Akkyshan city. The fouled-up nozzles of an old hydraulic armor swallow up the next one. There are others, too fast to follow, evading his attention, and disappearing on the elemental frontier. He clearly sees the last one, however, when the divine hands seem to loosen their pressure on his soul. It is the minutest of fragments, a tear beading in the corner of a Serpent's eye.

The Incarnation is complete. He knows he has been deprived of a part of himself, and that another has been revealed. He knows he may at last forget his regrets and his hatred, that the Echyron is not only an artifact of the Sphinx but also a prison holding the soul of an Ophidian. He knows that the gods who looked into his future have actually used him to trigger the awakening of his people, and to compel them to leave the field of the mind for the fields of earth, for blood and ashes. Eventually, he feels free. Free to forget the death of Melehän, the betrayal of

a father, and the downfall of a mother. Free to live and come to terms with the ambiguity between Light and Darkness the dragon's claw has bestowed upon him. Free to start his life over. The stronghold of the Alliance had been his womb.

From now on, his name will be Syd de Kaïber.

CHAPTER XXII

Kyrô regained consciousness under the rain, inside the ruins of the Alderion. He retained only a confused memory of the last hours. The will of the lich had brought him here, and he was perfectly aware that he had been used as a key. He staggered under the weight of his guilt. He had hidden the evil inside the fortress, he had let it grow and corrupt the tomb of a peak dragon, he had been subdued and made to lift the Cynwäll seals... His failing had opened the doors of the kingdom of Alahan for the tenth barony.

He snatched a few raindrops from his lips to appease the dryness that burned his throat, and slowly rolled on his side. The ascendancy of the lich had stiffened his mind as well as his limbs, but he could no longer feel the presence inside his body.

He watched in disgust the Wolfen kneeling beside him. His head had rested on the putrefied thigh of the lifeless zombie. He did nothing to suppress his retching and spat out the rising bile to ease his contorted stomach. He heard the bent bars of the Alderion's frame vibrating with the gusts of wind and felt a biting cold piercing his drenched tunic. Shivering, he drew himself up on his knees and gazed at the lich.

He was lying in a circle of Wolfen corpses, his arms thrown around the neck of the necromancer. In his chest hollowed by necrosis, he could see his heart, a withered organ embedded in a stringy matrix woven by Darkness. A bolt of lightning made his purplish eyes veined with black glimmer under the shadow of his shawl.

Why had he deserted his mind? Maybe the answer to that question found an echo in the sky. A distant clamor was covering the din of the storm with fierce and guttural roars. Kyrô clenched his fists. Caer Maloth was probably up there...

He tried unsuccessfully to stand up. His legs gave way under him, too weak to carry him. He started crawling, his face bent with the exertion, toward the two embracing creatures. He moved forward by one yard, then two, before he put his cheek down on the floor, unable to any farther. The lich had emptied him of his essence.

The Alliance was actively preparing the defense over the nine bridges of Kaïber controlling the access to the quarters. Akkylannian veterans had left the Counterfort of the Levant to make a bold and quick breakthrough across the enemy army that was spreading everywhere inside the Gray Barrier, and to join forces with all the units which, on the imperial legate's order, were leaving their positions to fall back and entrench themselves on the bridges of the East.

Across the entire length of the Fault, inside the buildings standing on the border of the chasm, fusiliers were spreading on every floor and settling themselves by the windows. They tore up the horn panels with the butts of their rifles, opened the skylights and propped their weapons in the openings to keep the bridges in their line of sight. Sporadic volleys covered the retreat of the last conscripts coming out of the Barrier.

Behind the overturned chariots, the bundles and the barrels piling up into improvised barricades, the regular troops spontaneously started singing hymns to the glory of Merin and soon received the accompaniment of the unrelenting rhythm of the war drums. Equipped with censer-shaped maces, the musicians went along the embankments, leaving a wake of musky steam. The voices that broke with fear or pain did not matter, and neither did the moaning of the winds or the rumble of the storm. The only important thing was the intensity of that exalted clamor that revived the courage of the weakest.

The elves had joined the Griffins to defend the twin bridges of the Elder. The equanimous masters had blown the dust accumulated over their old bronze keys, locked the doors of their empty monasteries, and led their disciples into battle. They came to the front-line walking in silent columns and scattered among the soldiers of the first ranks. Their ascetic faces reflected an unsettling serenity, almost surreal among the fervor and the confusion of the Akkylannian ranks.

In the Workshop, Hornell directed the indefatigable ballet of the Helianthic artisans. With their feet wading in the rising water, they worked relentlessly on the wrecks brought back from the battlefield. Disciples risked life and limb to diagnose, in the middle of the fighting, the damage taken by the constructs, and assess in a blink whether or not they could be brought back to the read to be saved. The forges were blazing at full power to remodel the carapaces lacerated or battered by the enemy. Chronosiarchs rummaged through the precious innards to operate on the buckled mechanisms and restart the mineral hearts with the light of Solaris.

A sudden burst of rage and pride had seized the motley ranks of the Alliance.

For the first time, Ortho and Kyllion were praying side by side in the basement of an old house. A torch stuck in the ground between two moldy stones shed a dim light on this rare and privileged moment. They were both aware that the dragons of Darkness and Light were struggling over Kaïber's fate. If the peak dragons carried it off, then the Alliance would have a chance to hold the Fault.

If it went the other way round, they would have to abandon the Fault and withdraw into the Circle, the last rampart of the whole stronghold.

The peak dragons had achieved a first victory over the ten skeleton dragons sent against them by Sorokin de Vanth. Experience and wisdom had prevailed over the instinctive and clumsy attacks of the newborns of Darkness.

One of them had however managed to escape toward the north, following an order from the lich. During his lifetime, Salmein Maloth had demonstrated an awesome shrewdness on the battlefield, always anticipating the moves of Evil and lavishing precious advice on the Cynwäll. A few years before he died, his ripe old age had earned him the tribute of the Guide and an invitation to Laroq, where everyone expected him to live out his last days peacefully. He had refused and had quietly passed away in Kaïber on a cold winter dawn with snow for a shroud.

During the ritual, Sorokin de Vanth had met with considerable trouble as he insufflated Darkness into the old bones of the dragon. The skeleton had only set off after several unsuccessful attempts, but he had eventually tuned out to be the most amendable and the mightiest of them all. Evil had taken delight in those vertebrae eroded by the passing of time. Twice during the battle, Salmein Maloth had snatched a dragon-knight right out of his saddle, taken him into his mouth, and crushed him between his jaws. Nevertheless, when he heard the call of the lich inside his skull, he repressed his instincts and broke off the fighting to flee toward the tenth barony. A peak dragon tried to intervene and set off in pursuit. Barely twenty yards apart, both creatures went into a wild chase throughout the Alliance quarters. Salmein Maloth followed erratic trajectories. He would suddenly rise above a rooftop before diving back into the darkness of an alley, slide under an arcade and graze along the buildings, raising clouds of dust. He blew out torches with the wind of his passage, he collapsed foot bridges, and he tore to shreds the defenders in his path. In a flash of lucidity, he spotted a building that was flimsier than every other in a narrow street and deliberately rushed into its front. The shock made him dizzy. He felt the fiery breath of the peak dragon behind him and broke away with a powerful twist of his body. The house came crashing down right behind him, trapping his pursuer. The heavy stones of Kaïber rolled over the scaly flanks of the dragon, bringing him brutally down and holding him to the ground. Infuriated flames roared inside his muzzle, but Salmein Maloth was already far away, on his way toward the north where the willpower of the patriarchs gradually took over and replaced the waning influence of the lich.

A sigh of relief died on the cracked lips of Sorokin de Vanth. He gazed down over the citadel. He knew the turning point of the battle had happened already, that by relinquishing Salmein Maloth, he had left himself no choice but to call back the eleven dragons of Darkness who had been wreaking havoc on the Barhan alleys. They answered immediately to their master's summon and rose through the air to gather around the Alderion. Their skeletons, turned crimson with the slaughter, stabilized around the ruins without being upset in the least by the arrows and bullets that whistled past them.

Syd laboriously stood up and discovered that his wounds had disappeared. He was alive and incarnate. By the will of a god.

He was in the exact place where he had come crashing down, a deserted alley running along the northern side of the dragon-tower. He raised his eyes and watched for a brief moment the titanic battle fought in the sky by the dragons. He was fully aware of the role he had to play and started walking toward a belvedere where he used to debate with his masters when he was young. The place had been a haven for lovers and it commanded a breathtaking view of the South, most of all when a ray of Lahn would strive to pierce the curtain of clouds and reveal the emerald valley of the barony of Algerande.

Syd filled his lungs and shouted a cry he had been holding back for years. A cry his father had taught him, a cry every dragon-squire had to learn if he hoped one day to become a knight, a cry no one but a Cynwäll elf was able to utter. Amplified and honed by the Echyron to cover the echo of the battle, the call reached the ears of Caer Maloth. A few seconds later, her gleaming body parted from the melee and dived to the ground to land beside the belvedere.

Syd climbed in the saddle and gripped the read leather halter. The dragon and her rider immediately soared back up toward the clouds gathering the other peak dragons in their wake. Four of them were orphans. Only two dragon-knights and Myldiën the Sensible were still saddled and ready to fight by the side of their commander.

Syd knew that another pitched battle would crush the last hope of the Alliance. He had to strike down the root of evil, attempt the impossible, clear a path to the lich, and bring into play the ambiguous legacy of the Echyron: Typhonism. The black magic, the hermetic magic corrupted by necromancy was now as much alive inside him as Light. The old man sent by the gods had made him discover the fragmented consciousness of the Ophidian. Syd knew almost nothing about this Serpent, not even his name. Fossilized inside the artifact, he provided an unsettling line between the Principles of Light and Darkness; he gave his master an opportunity to use the magic of his enemies.

"I expect a sacrifice from your brethren," Syd said as he leaned toward the ear of Caer Maloth.

"The dragons shall obey your commands, son of Kyrô."

"Let them do everything they can to ensure that you and I get close enough to the lich."

A steamy sigh passed through the dragon's nostrils.

"Caer Maloth is grieved. Many dragons will no longer dream tomorrow."

"They are eleven, we are seven. Moreover, the first fight has weakened your brethren. We have no chance to win a second confrontation. I must reach the lich."

"Syd has changed. The gods have marked him and revealed the shadow of his blood. Caer Maloth has doubts."

"Launch an attack on the Alderion," Syd said in a hollow voice. "Do it now."

The scales of Caer Maloth quivered, while down below the doors of the Grey Barrier opened like the floodgates of a gigantic dam, unleashing the flow of the demonic hordes.

The Quiet was sitting on one end of a bench beside a haggard-looking young conscript. The young man had a leg cut off at the knee and he was watching the falconer with a fated smile while he strongly gripped the tourniquet that delayed his agony. Aldenyss took the boy's hand in his own and closed his eyes to see through the piercing gaze of Silentz.

He stopped breathing. The bird of prey had glided over a gust of wind to climb higher and survey the advance of the army of Acheron on the nine bridges of Kaïber.

For starters, the fusiliers had opened a brisk fire. In the East, the bullets had been like a steel slap in the face, mowing down the front ranks. With holes punched in their faces and skulls, the zombies and skeletons collapsed or topped over the parapets. The Akkylannian volleys slowed down the putrid waves spewed out by the Grey Barrier, but they could not stop them from reaching the barricades. For every morbid puppet torn apart by lead and steel, ten or twenty more kept coming, pushed by the control of the necromancers toward the huddled ranks of the defenders.

Over the bridges of the Elder and under the bemused gaze of the conscripts, fifteen wizened elders, followed by their equanimous disciples, had stepped over the barricade to advance against the enemy. The picture engraved itself in the memory of the Quiet. On one side were the venerable elves in their dark and flowing robes, sages who had transformed their bodies into deadly weapons and who came together in a silent and martial ballet under the rain. On the other side was the seething, hateful, and amalgamated swarm of degenerate creatures that trod heavily.

The Cynwäll let the horde engulf them to strike it from the inside. The monks became elusive shadows, tougher than steel, suppler than silk. Wherever they passed, bones would snap like twigs, limbs would wrench, and necks would break.

Silentz had moved away and was now flying over the bridges of the West. The conscripts were struggling in an indescribable melee and being pushed back yard after yard by the battering assaults led by the Crâne warriors. The souls of the righteous died by the dozens on the edges of their cursed blades. The two-handed swords shattered shields and armor, crushed gorgets and decapitated regulars. The Alliance's lines of defense were breaking before the champions of Darkness. Their horns of blackness were flickering with a wan glow, like evil beacons calling upon the zombies and skeletons to advance and rush into the breaches opened by their lords. Some conscripts would rather fling themselves into the Fault than face the surmounting terror; others would collapse in the pools of blood, curl up, and wait to die.

Overwhelmed by the army of Acheron, the three bridges of the West gave way simultaneously.

Silentz began a sharp turn, puzzled by a rumbling sound coming from the farther south, inside the Griffin quarters. The huge bronze doors of the Akkylannian cathedral had opened before Dragan d'Orianthe and either knights of the Lion. The baron had anticipated the fall of the Grey Barrier, and more importantly the arrival of the dragons of Darkness. At the very moment when he had seen the first one spreading his wings above a tower, he had commandeered the cathedral, with the agreement of the magistrates, and used it as a shelter for the horses and riders. This imposing and holy building had, in his eyes, a major strategic asset. Beyond the parvis, there was a gently sloping street usually taken by the religious processions of his Akkylannian allies.

The warhorses trotted out of the cathedral and gathered speed over the two hundred yards separating them from the first barricades erected on the bridges of the West. Riding behind the Merciful and the standard of the barony of Algerande, the knights of Kaïber charged the enemy. Nothing that day could have stopped that galloping column of Light that bore through the ranks of the enemy. Nothing could have slowed down the ponderous gallop of the warhorses of Alahan weighted down by their caparisons of gold and steel. Nothing could have prevented them from leaping over the barricades and clearing a path to the foot of the Grey Barrier before they turned around to face the remains of the crushed horde.

Out of the three bridges of the West, only one had been saved by Baron d'Orianthe, but the heralds of justice had shown the way. The next bridge was already echoing with a fierce clattering of the war stilts. The ethereal and majestic figures of the Echahïms were coming to assist the Lions and Griffins driven back into the houses bordering the Fault. The conscripts were fighting with an energy derived from desperation. In the winding stairs, the fusiliers were rushing at their assailants to impale them with their barrels. Zombies were screaming over the sound of the bullets fired at their putrefied chests.

Standing in the front line, Kyllion and Ortho both saw Caer Maloth, ridden by the Cynwäll commander, plunging toward the Alderion.

The peak dragons had chosen a reckless and possibly suicidal course to swoop down upon their dark brethren. Their elder had demanded this sacrifice so that her protégé might reach the lich. They had all unwaveringly agreed. To die for Kaïber was a natural and honorable act.

Clinging to his saddled, Syd kept his eyes riveted on the smashed globe. The rain pattered on his mask and the wind whistled past his ears. Caer Maloth was constantly making sudden twists and dodges in order to draw closer to the Alderion without having to engage combat. Syd could feel the influence of Darkness growing

with every passing second. Evil emanations pervaded the air; fleshless jaws and spurs brushed past them without ever touching them or slowing them down.

Through the curtain of rain, he finally recognized the hunched figure that had formerly been his brother.

At the cost of a perilous maneuver, Caer Maloth managed to land briefly on the floor the Alderion. Syd jumped from his saddle, rolled to break his fall, and stood back on his feet in the same movement. He assessed the situation with a quick glance.

The lich was in front of him, less than six yards away, with the necromancers by his side. With a pounding heart, he saw, slightly to the right, his father crawling toward them, his face drawn with pain.

The Ophidian venom released in his veins by the incarnation allowed him to see Darkness as it truly was. He could now distinctly see the broken lines radiating from the creature's chest, scattering through the sky toward the tainted dragons and whipping their spines. This was a savage link, a nefarious chain holding their souls captive.

He drew his sword and approached cautiously. The exhausted necromancer opened one eye and shook her head as if she refused to believe he really was there. In her arms, the lich was panting, his lips colored by a black and viscous fluid that trickled down his chin.

Cyraël raised her staff and pointed it at the elf. A doleful sound came out of the vibrating root, a noise that sounded like a deformed prayer from the children of Yllia. Evil have filtered the echo of the packs that long ago had come to worship within the stone circle and reproduced it as a creaking murmur.

A ghost materialized under the downpour; a huge and spectral wolfen, a grave guardian armed with a scythe and a scimitar, his face hidden beneath a ram mask. The creature had appeared from nowhere and seemed to exist transparently in a diaphanous body that looked like a glass sculpture.

The necromancer was giving the lich a reprieve to extract some dragons of Darkness from the fights in progress around the Alderion. She had felt the resolve of the Cynwäll and danger he represented for Sorokin de Vanth.

The elf and the Wolfen met silently. Syd moved lithely, taking smooth side steps that raised small sprays of water, and tried to find an opening in his opponent's defensive guard. The wraith took no chances and merely parried his blows and move to keep him away from his mistress. Every minute that passed played against Syd. The peak dragons had already paid a heavy tribute. Two of them, mortally wounded and too weak to keep fighting, had sacrificed themselves by dropping like stones on the bridges of the East.

Kyrô became petrified when he saw his son suddenly drop his sword, close his eyes and assume a combat stand similar to that of an equanimous monk on the lookout.

Syd had sense that the artifact alone would decide the fate of Kaïber, and he unreservedly turned over the use of his body to the instant of the lore of the Sphinx that permeated the Echyron.

Distraught by the behavior of the Cynwäll, Cyraël ordered the ghost to be wary and to act cautiously. His scimitar pointed at the elf's chest, the Wolfen began to turn slowly around him.

Syd was submitting himself to a terrible mental torture, with the certainty that he would turn it to his advantage. His blood was rebelling against this aberrant surrender, this voluntary submission to the Dark Principle. His heart started to beat faster and faster. He was alone. Alone with his past, his doubts and his emotions. He was Syd de Kaïber, son of Kyrô and Alahën, brother of Melehän, crucible of the mixed influences of the Utopia of the Sphinx and the Ophidian Alliance.

His thoughts focused on the tenebrous tendrils linking the lich to the dragons of Darkness. The discipline of the mind received from his masters became the forge of his soul, to force the Light back and make room for the magic of Typhonism.

He was barely aware of the impulse of the Sphinx that moved his body and gave the artifact an opportunity to block the first attack of the Wolfen wraith. Nonetheless, through his closed lids, he distinctly perceived a dragon's claw identical to his own, like an intangible and perverted reflection of the Echyron.

He was wavering on the border of Evil and he could see that beyond this icy hand, there was a corrupt Cynwäll whose ash-gray pupils dilated to become gems of Darkness. A mirror of the Abyss, Typhonism was showing him the darkened future, his own future.

This fleeting vision vanished when he flung the reflection of the Echyron toward the lich. Just as Evil had disguised itself under the aspect of Melehän to infiltrate the fortress, the artifact had donned a mask of Darkness to bypass the barrier erected by the lich.

At the sight of his son, Kyrô had regained an unsuspected amount of strength. A few moments earlier, he had barely been able to crawl slowly, one elbow at a time. Now, despite a painful feeling of dizziness, he could stand on his legs. He leaned down to pick up a shard of glass and stopped behind the necromancer. Cyraël shuddered and, without even looking back, she grabbed the wrists of Sorokin, hoping to give him the last fragments of her energy. Hunched in her arms, the lich did not react, his gaze remaining dull and remote.

A smile blossomed on Syd's face when a grinding noise rose from between his fingers. The first umbilical cord had snapped easily. A whiff of abyssal rage came to him through the cut tendril, but he had mainly perceived the distant sigh of relief from a peak dragon returned to his grave.

The dragon of Darkness froze up inside the storm. One by one, the huge skeletons animated by the Dark Principle went back to being the relics of ancient

creatures devoted to Light, and they fell to pieces through the air. A mother-of-pearly rain fell over the Cynwäll quarter in a haze of holy dust that thousands of soldiers along the Fault cheered with shouts of victory.

At the exact moment when his father was raising his arm to decapitate Cyraël, the evil reflection of the Echyryion tried to push its advantage and reach the heart of Sorokin de Vanth. It came straight up against the ethereal foundations of a Dark Portal, a black sphere gathered around his heart that started to swell rapidly. After a few seconds, it had expanded around the whole chest of the lich. Streams of mana rumbled on the sphere and scattered around droplets of onyx that burrowed into stone like an acid.

Syd and his father had stepped back to a safe distance, and they were watching the establishment of the Portal, unable to do anything about it. The energy deployed by the Abyss radiated like a black sun at the top of the Alderion. Syd heard the wailing and throaty murmur filtered by the mana from the dead world. The outer side of the sphere expanded again and swallowed the gaunt body of Cyraël. Despite several attempts, Syd was unable to draw the reflection of the Echyryion near the limit of the Portal. Nothing, except the lich and the necromancer, could resist this primeval energy fed from the sacrifices of disciples who died by the hundreds in the Abyss. A silent and smiling crowd was pouring out on both sides of the throne of the arcana and, under the cold eye of Kaïan Draghost, they all flung themselves from the height to come crashing down on the colossal stone esplanade where the Portal had appeared.

Like his father, Syd covered his eyes to avoid being blinded when the lightning struck the sphere. The Portal had acted like a magnet on the Primagic storm, and it had drawn to itself six bolts of lightning that consumed the streams of mana and made the sphere disappear suddenly, leaving only the echo of the infuriated shout from the throat of the dragon of Darkness.

EPILOGUE

An acrid smoke floated over Kaïber.

The fortress had held. The enemy had been stopped on the bridges above the Fault. The Acheronian elites had sacrificed their last troops to cover a hurried retreat and flee northward, leaving behind them corpses by the tens of thousands. From the moment the skeleton-dragons had disintegrated in the sky, the necromancers and the Crâne warriors had known the battle was lost. The conspiracy orchestrated by Feyd Mantis and Kaïan Draghost had failed.

The defenders counted their dead and tended to their wounds. In the courtyards of the castle, the Lions were erecting massive funeral pyres to burn the bodies of the enemies, while the inquisitors and the Akkylannian prelates were blessing the corridors of the Grey Barrier to erase the blemishes. The stench was unbearable, the carnage almost abstract. Everywhere, men and women worked with scarves over their faces to remove the corpses of their companions and carry them to huge funeral convoy that was being set up at the border of the barony of Algerande.

The survivors pointed out in every place the traces of the harsh struggles, the sacrifices, and the acts of bravery. Here and there, they acknowledged the silent and gloomy testimonies of the anonymous heroes who had given their lives to stop once more the demonic legions at the doors of the kingdom of Alahan.

In the Lion quarters, the wounded came to grieve before the statues of Elan, the goddess of fertility. Their vibrant homage received an echo with the chimes of the Akkylannian bells calling the faithful to prayer. Fusiliers and conscripts had spontaneously assembled under the arches of the cathedral, over the straw and dung left by their Barhan allies. Nobody could forget that the knights of Alahan had found a haven here, sheltered from the skeleton dragons, and that they had left this place in the last hours of the battle to lead a charge that would pass into legend. Lamé and pale, bandaged and drunk with exhaustion, the wounded had come to worship without thinking of the future, simply happy to be here, alive, and to make out in the crowd the face of an old companion. During the mass, Eschelius the Ardent made sure that his troops, who were barely a score to have survived, would seat in the front now and join their voices to his in singing the praise of the righteous fallen in the Counterfort of the Ponent.

The sky had appeased. A light drizzle had followed the flooding downpour, like a warm and welcome balm. The Primagic forces unleashed by the echo of the fights had withdrawn and given way to lazy and mundane gray clouds.

A small group was standing at the foot of the Gate of the Righteous, along with a father and his son, who Kaïber had separated for a while before reuniting them.

Kyrô hugged Syd against his heart, without hiding his emotion. His face raw, Ortho was standing in the background and watching carefully the funeral convoy led by the Merciful, which was disappearing to the south, behind the wooded hills of Algerande. Beside him, his arms crossed on his chest, Kyllion the Younger was speaking in a low voice with Drym, his bodyguard. The reaper listened attentively to the last instructions from his commander, who was very much in demand to supervise the works of reconstruction. Despite the urgency demanded by the situation, the Lion had insisted to be here for Syd's departure.

Rumor had already seized upon the young commander.

Syd did not know it would grow to become a legend in the days to come, that disciples in the amphitheaters of the universities in Wyde would stand to ovation the tale of the battle and the part he had played to save Kaïber. Neither did he know that the Guide would take a quill, in the cold hours of dawn, to write down a new page in the teachings of Arakis. In it, he would tell how he had hoped this victory would not be the victory of Kaïber but the victory of an elf named Syd, so that he would become an example and ensure the tribëns and heliasts agreed to open the temples of Lanever and unreservedly share the secrets of the Sphinx with the Lions and Griffins.

From the stronghold, Syd was determined to keep only the name. He had come to obey an order from the Guide, and, contrary to all expectations, he had found here the answers to the questions that haunted him. He had, however, no intention to stay and submit himself to demanding life of a commander. His life, his true life, the one that eventually resembled him the most, could not blossom within the walls of Kaïber. He had been the commander of only one battle. The next ones he would fight in the shadows, on a more intimate scale, with Soïm and Nelphaëll.

His freedom had a price. He left his father to the judgment of the tribëns and he did not know yet if the First court would agree to give him back his command. He left behind him Hornëll and the spicy smells of the Workshop, and above all a dragon. A short while ago, Caer Maloth had flown to Laroq to meet the Guide and mention the comprised future of the dragons in Kaïber. Only four of them had survived. Decimated and deprived of the experience of their elders as they were, she would soon have to seek out and train young dragons to watch over the Behemoth Mountains.

His father stood aside to let Ortho and Kyllion approach. The imperial legate reluctantly agreed to shake the proffered hand of the Echyrion. Despite the common battles and the oaths of the Alliance, there was still a wide gap between the

Akkylannian and the Cynwäll. Then Kyllion came forward and unaffectedly embraced him to thank him and wish him a pleasant journey.

The reconstituted trihedron left the fortress in the wake of the funeral convoy and disappeared into the night.

Syd de Kaïber was born.

THE END

BIOGRAPHY

Mathieu Gaborit, alias William Hawk, was born in 1972. After his impressive debut as the author of a role-playing game (*Écryme*, the basis for the novel *Bohème*), he has continued to write and published his first trilogy: *Les Chroniques des Crépusculaire*, also meeting great success. He is now a dedicated author of fantasy novels in French. His First Literary success allowed Mathieu Gaborit to write other works and propose other worlds, but also to play. He has participated in the creation of many role playing games, as well as the development of video games.

CHAPTER I

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"Kaïber.

At night, the stronghold looked like a constellation. Torches and braziers twinkled like so many stars and sketched a dotted outline of its cyclopean layout. Out on the first line, there was the castle of the Lion, a fort built in the middle of the pass and backed on to the great wall called the Grey Barrier. This wall blocked the pass from one side to the other, and counterforts built high along the cliff faces extended it on both sides, surrounding the castle from the heights.

His hair flying in the wind and his body chilled by the biting cold, Syd could hear the distant murmur coming up from the pass, the monotonous and muffled noise every warrior learned to live with. The hammering in Kaïber's smithies was like the heartbeat of the stronghold, and it never stopped.

The dragon began his descent and glided toward the Gate of the Righteous."

Mathieu Gaborit, a.k.a. William Hawk, was born in 1972. He is the author of many fantasy best-sellers and role playing games; he is also involved with the creation of universes for the video game industry.



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