



CRYX

HOMECOMING

THE NORTHWESTERN OUTSKIRTS OF IOS

Goreshade galloped as swiftly as his undead steed would take him through the foothills along the southeastern edge of Rhul's mountainous border. He was followed by an escort of bane riders, and together they comprised a ghostly posse skirting the fringes of civilization and racing across the snowy landscape like shadows. Tremendous peaks soared up toward the night sky to his left, the great outer wall of that impregnable kingdom. He passed the Silvertip Peaks and saw farther to the northeast the greater mountains called the Skybridge.

To minimize the chance of detection he had initially traveled only at night, but for the last several days they had continued through night and day in order to exploit the endless stamina of their unliving mounts. The region he crossed was mostly ignored by Rhul and Ios alike, as there had never been conflicts along their shared border. The primary threats in this region were from the wilderness, in the form of winter trolls or argus dwelling in the nearest mountains. He became cautious again as they crossed the frozen Fleetsfill River and veered up into the mountains nearest the region overseen directly by the Gate of Storms, that Iosan fortress emplaced to watch against danger from the northwest.

In past centuries a trickle of trade had passed through that gate between Ios and Rhul, but it had been sealed for decades and the road left in ill repair. The gate had been closed at the outset of the War of the Houses, the Iosan civil war ignited by Goreshade when he was Narcissar Ghyrrshyld Vyre. Those events now felt as if they had happened to another entity entirely, someone whose memories he had inherited.

The battlements of the ancient Gate of Storms were no less impressive for never having been tested in war. The gate was controlled by one of the Five Great Military Houses, House Issyen, famed for their swift cavalry forces. They were among the most responsive and wary of Ios' border defenders, taking advantage of their mobility to intercept any intruder. There were good reasons why the human nations viewed the Iosan borders with superstition, as

mystical methods were in place to alert the scyirs of the military houses to any intrusion. Goreshade knew, however, that Ios' Homeguard Coalition relied too much on these methods. His plan hinged on that fact.

The stars and moons shone down brightly from the night sky as he approached the northwestern border of the nation of his birth. The cold of winter's first days meant nothing to his force, who followed silently. Banes were incapable of fear, but Goreshade sensed their eyes upon him—they were intelligent, and this was unknown territory to all of them, even the ancient malevolent spirit Suneater, who led them. No Cryxian had ever been in Ios, so far as Goreshade was aware. None of the banes knew the details of his plans. So long as they were given leave to slay the living, they were content. Indeed, it had taken some effort for Goreshade to convince them not to kill their six Iosan captives but instead bind them and throw them over the hindquarters of several of the dead steeds. Even now he could sense the banes' desire for murder, but he held them in check. He required those people alive for a vital ritual he would soon conduct.

His escort was quite limited, in part because his forces had been whittled down since his first attempt to interfere with the return of Nyssor. He had left behind most of his remaining minions except these bane riders so he could move with the speed, mobility, and secrecy he required. He had not brought any warjacks with him, although years ago he had arranged to secret a small arsenal in a forgotten cave amid the mountains north of the border, between Aeryth Dawnguard and the Gate of Storms. One of a number of Cryxian stockpiles scattered across western Immoren, this one was his alone, unknown to the lich lords. Before approaching the border directly he visited this sealed and hidden repository to check its inventory. He activated several Stalkers but left the other machines for later. He did not anticipate battle; if he was forced into a clash with the border defenders it would mean his plans had failed.

To the naked eye there was little to demark the dividing line between Ios and Rhul other than the trees beyond

a short plain after the Rhulic foothills. These were the Frostpines, an inconsequential woods much smaller and less formidable than the Mistbough in southern Ios. Spread along the borders stood towers and fortresses, and the regions between were patrolled regularly. The real secret to Ios' seemingly impregnable borders, though, was the work of the sibyls.

The sibyls of the great houses were powerful arcanists who specialized in divinatory techniques by which they safeguarded the insular nation. These included rites to view and listen to events from afar, but that skill was only supplemental to their first line of defense. They did not have the time or inclination to spend all their waking hours in meditative reflection, remotely peering along the borderlands. Those powers were only brought to bear once they had been alerted to an intrusion by the latent energies woven along Ios' borders like an invisible shroud of gossamer webs. As soon as any significant force broke through those intangible strands, the sibyls connected to them would know. Once alerted, they could use other means to pinpoint the threat and coordinate with Homeguard Coalition garrisons for immediate and overwhelming retaliation.

Houses Nyarr and Issyen had especially powerful sibyls, among the greatest of those practicing those arts. Were Goreshade and his bane riders to simply race into the forest ahead, the general alarm would be raised and the swiftest cavalry in Ios would converge on his position. Fortunately, he was well aware of these protective measures and had long ago considered means to circumvent them.

As Goreshade neared the trees he slowed his steed to a steady walk. Staring ahead and allowing the world to become unfocused, he entered a trancelike state. His surroundings took on a grayish tinge, the sky above deepening to a pitch-black field devoid of stars and moons. Ahead he could now perceive a complex pattern of energy, the different colored strands crisscrossing the air in front of him. The gossamer lines were difficult to perceive even in his altered state; in daylight he could not have seen them at all. After several minutes he was at last able to locate the nearest permanent anchor point. He marked this in his mind and came out of his trance. He then summoned his banes and withdrew to a nearby tree he had identified earlier, its naked branches stretching outward in the early winter air.

The banes assisted him in positioning their captives, climbing up the thick trunk and using the rope binding the prisoners' feet together to hang them head-down from high branches. The Iosans thrashed futilely against their bonds, their eyes wide in alarm, any cries muffled by cloth gags. During the last part of the ride they had been largely quiet,

whether out of exhaustion or resignation to their fate, but now they could not help but struggle for life.

Each had been either a mage hunter or a soldier who had volunteered to fight alongside the Retribution; Goreshade had taken them alive just before his last clash with Dawnlord Vyros. Each had served Ios and their cause well, but now in being of use to Goreshade they would contribute to the salvation of their race, which seemed fitting. It was unfortunate he could not expect them to understand that fact. His undead visage and the curse bestowed on him by Nyssor made it impossible for them to regard him with anything but horror and loathing. His was thankless work.

The midnight hour was at hand, and the three moons were in auspicious positions. He used Voass to inscribe a frozen line in the earth around the tree and then carved complex sigils into its trunk. Goreshade felt no malice toward his victims, and his ritual did not require them to suffer, so he conducted matters expeditiously. He gestured to the waiting banes, and they raised their weapons as one and cut the throats of the Iosans. The cuts were precisely as he had instructed—not too deep, so exsanguination would proceed slowly. Blood dripped down while the gagged captives thrashed instinctively, only hastening their deaths. Soon they fell unconscious.

Goreshade rode beneath them, through their limp, hanging arms, letting the warm and fresh Iosan blood drip down upon him and across the flanks of his steed. He gathered and manipulated the mystical energy flowing from the escaping life essence. The blood clung to him and his steed and spread as a thin film, still warm and vibrant.

One by one the banes followed suit, showering in the blood of those who had been Goreshade's countrymen. Several of the undead hissed in distaste and glared at their master accusingly, though they were too strongly dominated to speak an objection. It was not the blood they disliked, but the lingering aura of life now coating them, a force antithetical to their nature.

This grisly procession concluded, Goreshade used the peerless edge of Voass to cut through the nearest victim's wrist and took the severed hand. He directed one of the banes to stay behind to dispose of the corpses, and the rest returned with him to the border. This would be the test of the efficacy of his work.

He guided his horse toward a section of the mystical invisible weave where a second series of lines split off from the rest and dipped to converge behind the main lattice, bound to something in the soil. He felt nothing as he passed through, and his sensitive eyes did not witness any sudden flaring in the lines that would have suggested

they were signaling an alarm. He urged his followers to pass through as well and to go past him to the next wooded hill. They made it without incident, falsely identified as living Iosans.

This would suffice for their intrusion, but he needed a longer-lasting but easily overlooked breach. He leapt down from his undead steed at the spot where the ward lines converged. With his metal boot he scraped the grass and dirt away to reveal a thick bronze plate two feet wide by a foot across that was inscribed in mystical runes. It was bolted into a block of stone sunk into the earth. Similar rune-inscribed and mystically empowered plates located at intervals along the border served to maintain the alarms.

Once more he gathered necromantic energy, which he poured into the severed hand. This he placed palm-down at the center of the bronze plate. He dipped his finger in the blood oozing from the stump and swept a circle around it, then added several Cryxian sigils. Around him the glowing lines faded, still present but muted and less responsive. He sent his Stalkers through and watched, tense, but again he saw no evidence of an alarm. It helped that Stalkers were inherently stealthy machines. His efforts to weaken the wards would not guarantee that any reinforcements he summoned later would escape detection, but they should greatly improve the odds. He pushed the surrounding vegetation back over the metal plate to conceal the severed hand. His alterations should pass unnoticed; this system of wards had been set in place thousands of years ago, and decades could pass between inspections.

EVERSAEL

They rode as ghosts through the forest, passing through trees and underbrush with equal ease, their dead flesh ephemeral. They managed to avoid a border patrol entirely as they made their way into the interior. Goreshade led the banes with some haste, knowing they were much more likely to be spotted after daybreak. His Stalkers followed behind them. Their supply of necrotite should suffice for his immediate needs.

The group's course took them through the northernmost section of Ios, across the secure but sparsely settled lands north of Shyrr, the capital, but well south of Aeryth Dawnguard, the stronghold and headquarters of House Nyarr's Dawnguard. The region was lightly forested and included scattered farmlands and pastures alongside several small towns. Over the centuries Ios had gradually given up much of its settled lands and allowed them to revert to wilderness, with the population concentrated in its last great cities.

The Dawnguard controlled the most remote and secluded of Ios' major fortresses, erected to stand against any threats

that might have followed the elves on their crossing from eastern Immoren. While a number of lesser houses held lands in Nyrrothyl, Ios' northernmost *ithyl*, or province, House Nyarr governed the region and the Dawnguard kept up regular patrols.

Goreshade did not intend to confront the masters of that northern fortress; he and his escort steered clear of the Dawnguard's watchtowers and southern holdings. His goal was instead an abandoned and overgrown region in the far east of their territory. He raced toward that forbidden place, one whose very name had become taboo and associated with betrayal and blasphemy. This was Eversael, a ruin that had once been the thriving city of the god Nyrro, Arsyrr of Day. As they galloped across the night-shrouded landscape, Goreshade remembered the day a quarter of a century ago when he had first come here. Then he had been soaked in his own blood, suffering from a mortal wound dealt him by Dawnlord Vyros. He had sought refuge in Eversael since it held the only means he knew to evade death.

Of his memories from his living days, those last during his defeat in the War of the Houses were the most bitter. He had been so close to rousing Ios from fearful denial of their approaching doom. Under his leadership things would have been very different. He was convinced the other great houses had united against him less from horror of his deeds and more from a prideful unwillingness to accept a single master. Those nobles who led the myriad houses were too arrogant, too addicted to their own self-importance, a product of their debased and vainglorious culture.

They soon reached the outskirts of the ruin. Over the long centuries since it had been abandoned, it had become surrounded by dark and looming trees, its buildings crumbled and consumed by moss and vines. Goreshade's bonejacks went ahead of him, scuttling from shadow to shadow on sharp metal legs. The banes guided their steeds into the broken and obstructed streets of what had been one of the greatest cities of Ios thousands of years ago.

The streets were utterly silent. Nevertheless, Goreshade knew Eversael was inhabited by its own masters, who preferred to remain below the surface. Intruders would be dealt with, but those dwelling here did not like to stir themselves needlessly. Most often the dreadful reputation of the place and its palpable aura of malevolence was enough to frighten off the living.

Only the looming Fane of Nyrro, which Goreshade rode directly toward, was important to its cursed inhabitants. It was the only great structure of ancient Eversael still entirely intact, its stones eerily free of vegetation and showing almost no wear or decay. Nyrro's divine sigil was prominently carved into the high, sloping walls that

flanked the great opening; below that shone an intricate and complex pattern of sacred runes created by a mosaic of polished glass shards. Flanking the great opening were titanic stones, each of a single piece, and broad steps ascended to it from the main avenue. Goreshade stepped from his steed and began the climb, followed by his banes.

Nearest him, the bane knight Suneater rasped, "This is holy ground?"

"Long ago, it was." Goreshade smiled. "A god lived below this building and from this high vantage addressed the people of the city. Now that god is dead, and all he sought to create and protect has crumbled to dust. It has been more than a thousand years since this place was holy."

As they ascended the steps, Goreshade reflected on the rest of the fane's history, which he had not bothered to relate to his bane knight. The dead god's priests had sought to retain their power and orchestrated a hoax, claiming that Nyrro had returned. Many pilgrims were lured here, and most were sacrificed in dark rites. *Knowledge always requires sacrifice*, the eldritch thought. So Nyrro's cult had learned. They had lost their god, but they found another power, another means to preserve themselves from death. Eventually the Dawnguard tried to purge this place by blade and fire, but they killed only pawns. The true masters of Eversael remained hidden. The Dawnguard had never returned, for they feared this place for its secrets, not least among them the evidence of their own ancestors' culpability in its desecration.

Dawn broke as they climbed the stairs, and it was under that light that the glory of the Fane of Nyrro was revealed. The building had been positioned perfectly to collect the sun's rays and send them forth from its polished stones and the glass inlaid into its runic patterns. The stone and glass gleamed like a mirrored lantern that once would have been a shining beacon to the inhabitants of the city. Now only the dead witnessed its splendor. After reaching the summit of the steps, they found another set of wide stairs leading to the vast underground complex beneath the surface fane. They descended into cold and darkness.

Flickering torches at the base of the staircase threw weak, mottled light on a closed pair of heavy doors laden with sacred runes. On either side of this doorway stood an armed and armored undead Iosan, pale and willowy. These were *sythyss*, lesser beings created by eldritch to protect them and serve their needs. Like skarlocks, they lacked imagination and the spark of will but were not mindless. As Goreshade and Suneater reached the bottom of the stairs these guardians stepped forward and drew slender, gleaming swords. Suneater hissed and raised his larger bane blade, but Goreshade held him in check.

The *sythyss* at the fore said, "Hold! Who dares enter the Fane of Nyrro?"

"It is Ghyrrshyld, formerly of House Vyre. Tell your master I have come."

The *sythyss* tilted his head slightly as if listening to a voice only he could hear. Then he said, "Begone, Ghyrrshyld. You are not welcome here."

The creature had barely finished speaking before Voass separated his head from his shoulders and the pale body toppled amid a clatter of armor. The severed neck oozed brackish ichor. Goreshade deflected the blade of the next creature even as Suneater hacked into its shoulder, the heavy blade slicing down into its chest with no difficulty despite the creature's steel spaulder and cuirass. The nearest banes moved up to engage and destroy the last two. Goreshade sensed a mystical seal laid upon the doors but shattered it with a crude burst of arcane power and threw them open. The group proceeded into a long, wide stone tunnel, its walls lined with tattered remnants of ancient tapestries.

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They heard the sound of clattering feet and hissing voices ahead. Goreshade paid this no mind as he advanced, Nyssor's sword naked in his hand. The hallway soon opened into a wide room with a vaulted ceiling—the great entry chamber where priests had once greeted important visitors to the fane. It had long ago been transformed into a gathering hall for the eldritch of Eversael.

A large raised dais occupied the center of the far wall, situated between archways leading to other corridors extending deeper into the fane. A row of tables stretched out to either side. Countless sconces burned brightly, their light reflecting off a dizzying array of golden decorations around the chamber. Both on the dais and behind the tables eldritch awaited, their rotted faces a contrast to their elegant robes and gleaming armor. Many of them wore the ancient sigils of houses long forgotten, but the more familiar symbol of House Nyarr was emblazoned on several. Atop the throne on the dais was an eldritch in the golden vestments reserved to the auricants of Nyrro, the highest priests who in ancient days had attended to the god's needs.

Standing with weapons drawn were two rows of battle-ready sythyss wielding glaives, who had apparently rushed forward to intercept any intruders after hearing the commotion outside the outer fane doors. An eldritch in thick fluted steel armor and wielding a long, ornamented spear stood at their center, leading the room's guardians. Goreshade recognized him as Lothvyn, once an exiled noble of House Silowuyr. His gleaming eyes stared balefully at the warcaster and took in the banes arrayed to either side of him and the Stalkers not far behind.

Goreshade said, "Auricant Tyrios, is this how you greet me on my return?" He spoke loudly enough for his voice to ring out across the chamber as he addressed the eldritch in priest robes on the dais. "Am I not welcome at your table?"

**"I CAN DESTROY HIM IN AN
INSTANT IF YOU DO NOT CAST
DOWN YOUR BLADES."**

The former priest stood from his throne, his eyes blazing. His body was surrounded by an aura of black and purple energies. He said, "You enter my hall uninvited, armed, and with machines of war, and you expect a welcome? To be treated as a guest?" His resonant voice carried an accent suggestive of antiquity.

Confronting them aggressively had been a risk, but it had been a calculated one. The eldritch in this room were not all equivalent in power; several were truly formidable. The auricant was a repository of occult knowledge and a dangerous necromancer over a thousand years old. It had been Tyrios who preserved Goreshade's soul from passing to the Veld a quarter of a century ago. Though he owed the priest a debt, he knew these eldritch to be paralyzed and as reluctant to act as the Fane of Scyrah. The oldest, like Tyrios, no longer marked the passing years as they brooded here in their forgotten hall. They were resigned to waiting out the extinction of their race.

"I am not here as a guest," Goreshade said, "but to demand your fealty and obedience. Your time of hiding from the world is ended."

"Insolent cur!" This from Lothvyn, who stood closest. "I will teach you respect!" He lunged forward to jab his spear at Goreshade's heart, executing the move flawlessly and with unnatural speed and strength. Goreshade's power field surged with a crackle of energy to slow the strike, and the weapon's point was deflected off his breastplate rather than punching through. Lothvyn was a formidable combatant, but he was no warcaster.

The sythyss surged forward to fight alongside their master and were met by Goreshade's banes, and the hall rang with the chaotic clash of steel. Several of the eldritch stood from their tables and runes surrounded them as they invoked various protective rites. The others simply watched, their dead eyes glowing with interest at the spectacle. Goreshade recognized among them several that had sworn promises to him which he intended to see kept. His Stalkers rushed swiftly through the fray toward the dais, nimbly evading strikes directed at them.

The warcaster knocked Lothvyn's spear aside and, his adversary overextended, cut into the exposed area below his armpit. Lothvyn was too heavily armored for the blade to penetrate far, but the strike sufficed for the sword of winter to bite. The former noble's gleaming armor was rimed in frost and ice, freezing him in place.

"Hold!" Goreshade shouted to the sythyss as he placed the edge of his sword against the frozen eldritch's throat. "I can destroy him in an instant if you do not cast down your blades."

Three of Goreshade's banes had fallen to the initial rush of the sythyss, but twice as many of the sythyss had been cut down. The others backed away and dropped their weapons with a clatter on seeing their master at Goreshade's mercy. Most of the eldritch stood unmoving, watching to see what would transpire next, but one of the younger ones hissed in anger. He pointed a clawed finger at Goreshade and with a burst of spell runes sent an orb of greenish fire racing toward him.

Once again the warcaster's power field absorbed the energies, leaving him unscathed. With a snarl Goreshade opened his left hand toward their progenitor, and green runes appeared to circle his wrist. He instantly gathered and redirected the arcane energies just hurled at him and used them to fuel his counterattack. A bolt of pure darkness sped from his palm into the twisted face of the attacking eldritch, who hissed again as his face melted and the bones of his skull collapsed inward. The entity toppled onto a table, destroyed. The others stared at the husk of his body mutely, as if unsure how to react.

With his left hand Goreshade yanked the spear out of Lothvyn's grasp and tossed it down behind him. He kicked the former noble to send him tumbling to the marbled floor even as the ice and frost along his armor began to weaken and break. Two Stalkers had leapt onto the dais and stood poised with long metal legs raised within inches of Auricant Tyrios. A third crouched before the throne, ready to spring upon him. The ancient eldritch stood as though also frozen, his face a rictus of rage.

In truth, Goreshade was uncertain if even three Stalkers would suffice to destroy the auricant, but the threat posed by their proximity was enough to prevent Tyrios from acting. It was as Goreshade had predicted. The ancient eldritch did not react well to surprises; he had moved too quickly for them to gather their torpid wits. Had all of the arcanists here focused their power to obliterate him, he would not have endured.

"I am not here to destroy you, but I will do so if I must!" He raised Voass before them. "Do you recognize this blade? Surely before so many sages of our people, its nature should be obvious. I hold Voass, Summerbane, the weapon of the Scyr of Winter, forged by the Grand Crafter in the Veld!" The normally impassive eldritch shuffled and murmured in shock.

Goreshade continued, "How can this be? As you rot here doing nothing, you are ignorant of a fact known to every Iosan celebrating in the streets of Shyrr, Iryss, and Lynshynal: the Winter Father has been found and restored to Ios! I have faced him, taken his weapon as my own."

He had their full attention.

He walked to the center of the room, and the sythyss backed away. Lothvyn had regained his feet and glared at Goreshade, but he also stepped back, weaponless and cowed. The warcaster's voice rang out as he addressed them.

"When I left here, I promised I would return only once I had a solution to the deepest woes plaguing our ailing race. At that time many of you vowed to assist me in restoring the balance that was shattered along with the Bridge of Worlds. Perhaps you thought I would fail or discover the task to be impossible. I know that deep down you hoped I would find a way as much as you feared it.

"All of you share a single quality: you fear death, with good reason. The Veld is a wasteland, the gates of Lyoss shattered, the palace of the gods plundered, and the souls of the dead set upon by horrors from the hellish wilds of Urcaen. Those who die are hunted and subjected to endless torment. This is the only afterlife afforded us. So we have gone down dark paths to forbidden knowledge in order to cheat death. Hiding here, though, you have squandered the years stolen from mortality. It is time to rectify that. We know better than the living that solutions can be found in atrocity and that sacrifices are necessary to bring about true change.

"The solution is in our grasp. It requires the slaughter of the gods lingering among us. They cling tenaciously to their corporeal forms on Caen and would drag all of Ios down with them. Their bodies must be rent and destroyed, their ineffable essence released and allowed to depart this

realm. Only then will the balance be restored. Nyssor and Scyrah are the last, and both are positioned where we can reach them.

"Together we can march into the Fane of Lacyr in Shyrr and give these last two of our gods a merciful end. Delivering them from their suffering will be the salvation of our people. Bow to me now, vow to obey me, and we who have been accursed and shunned will put an end to this."

Around the room one by one the eldritch knelt, although in the eyes of several he saw lingering fires of prideful defiance. He did not require their enthusiasm, only their obedience. After the others had bowed only the auricant remained. Goreshade turned to the fallen priest and beckoned to him.

"Your assistance is vital, Auricant Tyrios. Only you know the secrets of the inner fanes. I will need your counsel in the days ahead."

The Stalkers lowered their scything limbs. Moving in a stilted fashion as though it pained him, Tyrios stepped down from the dais and knelt before Goreshade, who strode past him to ascend the throne of Eversael.