

## THE DARK LANDS

There is no question that 605 AR saw a drastic and alarming increase in Cryxian activity and sightings, which would prove to be only the start of far worse things to come. Among those who noted this escalation very early were the Morridaines of the Thornwood and the Umbreans of southeastern Khador and western Llael. In the remotest battlefields and in the wilder domains of Umbrean lords, Cryxians began to emerge and despoil the land. When confronted, they retreated into a maze of tunnels connecting to the great necrofactoriums built beneath the Thornwood. This network of tunnels, many of them first built by a cephalyx hive dwelling deep beneath the forest, allowed the Cryxians tremendous flexibility in traveling unseen throughout the region, scavenging corpses and other useful materials wherever the other nations engaged in battle.

Each battleground was, for Cryx, a fertile and precious resource. The war front along the northern edge of the ancient forest served as an effective distraction for Cryxian deprivations. Necrotech mining rigs were established wherever fighting had occurred and bodies lay either unclaimed or hastily buried beneath the mud and blood-churned soil. This efficiently mechanized harvest of death was new and unheard of, and it allowed the Cryxian iron lichs and lich lords to mass-produce fresh mechanithralls at a tremendous rate, creating entire armies seemingly from nowhere.

Alarming as this development was, the necromantic potential in the region went beyond simply an ample supply of fresh bodies. The most learned occultists understood that the region between Khador, Llael, and Cygnar had long been steeped in the energies of death. In truth, mechanithralls were the least significant of the fabricated war materials generated here. Across Umbrey and the Thornwood lay countless centuries of unending strife and bloodshed, dating back to the ancient Kingdom of Morrdh, pioneers in necromancy long before the Gift of Magic, as well as the carnage unleashed by the Khardic Empire in its attempts to subjugate the Black Ring of Umbrey. In this region lay buried numerous unholy relics and accursed barrows, the tainted graves of the restless dead whose spirits were bound to Caen, twisted by spite and unforgotten grudges.

From such burial sites, certain Cryxian masters had been able to plunder special weapons and assets, including old and powerful corpses capable of becoming formidable banes. Furthermore, Asphyxious and others of his ilk experimented with weaponizing the latent energies of death itself, finding ways to coax malevolence from the soil and transform it into poisonous mists or a corruption capable of tainting stored grain. The most notorious manifestation of these efforts in the autumn of 605 AR was the so-called Balebrand, a subtle taint that poisoned stores of food across the region. Many of those who unknowingly consumed this poison had their thoughts and dreams corrupted. Some committed terrible deeds, turning on friends or family, while suffering unpredictable periods of madness linked to the phases of the moons. This combination of disease and enchantment left many people shaken, their faith undermined when it seemed they could not trust their own minds.

## SILENCE OF DEATH

### Somewhere in the Thornwood Forest, Khadoven 22nd, 605 AR

With a crackle of flame and the hiss of rotten flesh on burning steel, the High Reclaimer broke another thrall in half. Ignoring the deep call of exhaustion spreading throughout his aching bones and muscles, he turned to face another pair of oncoming undead, deftly sidestepping as they swung their oversized mechanikal fists.

Timing their movements, he thrust the flaming end of Cremator at the eyes of one of the abominations, blinding it, as he dodged its haphazard swings. With surprising speed, the second mechanithrall landed a solid blow to the warcaster's sternum. Even with his power field deflecting some of the force, he knew he was injured; he felt the familiar pain of bruised ribs already accompanying each breath. He parried another blow from the mechanithrall, then put all his weight into an arcing swing to send the undead warrior toppling on its back. Before it could regain its feet, the warcaster threw the blinded one on top of its comrade with an almost casual shove. With the same ease he raised Cremator high and, using all his considerable strength, skewered both mechanithralls upon it. The undead writhed in a grotesque mimicry of pain as the righteous flames of Cremator consumed them.

Stepping back to allow the fire to do its work, the High Reclaimer took stock of his surroundings. The early afternoon sun gave this part of the central Thornwood a serene quality. Without the dozen or so charred bodies of the undead littering the clearing, he might even have called it beautiful. But Menoth taught the faithful to be wary of the allure of nature, as the blasphemous touch of the Wurm pervaded every part of the untamed wild.



Reclaimer Mask

It was an altogether different evil that had sent the High Reclaimer on his current quest. Visions of the undead committing sacrilege in the Thornwood had roused him to action. At once, he took leave from his pilgrimage in southern Llael and walked the many difficult miles to this place. In the six days and nights since his arrival in the Thornwood Forest, he had been almost constantly tested by the elements, by the limitations of his flesh, and by the various creatures and denizens that called it home. As he looked back to the northeast, he could see in his mind's eye the many places where he had encountered those who attempted to impede his sacred mission. He thought on his battles against small Cygnaran scouting teams, Tharn hunting parties, even a pair of creatures known as cephalyx. But as he neared the center of the forest, the undead had begun to engage with him the most—a sign that he was on the right path.

It was the horrors of Cryx that he sought. With each step, he came closer to the unholy site where they congregated. Menoth had not seen fit to bestow upon his servant the details of the Nightmare Empire's plot, but he did provide the High Reclaimer with glimpses of what he was to do. A small unit of faithful Exemplar Knights had fallen in righteous battle against the undead, and the seniormost among them had witnessed something—something that should not be. The knight's words must reach the Harbinger. The High Reclaimer could not relay those words himself, his tongue being forever silenced by the oaths of his order, so the knights' souls must be shepherded to where the faithful rest in Urcaen. That way, the Harbinger could make contact and learn what she must.

In his heart, the High Reclaimer feared he was already too late. Still, he hoped that in guiding the knights on their way to Urcaen, they would in turn guide him through the darkness and danger to come.



"Your various enterprises have not gone unnoticed, Asphyxious," said the ethereal vision of Lich Lord Thalassina in Asphyxious' mind. Even from Skell, the Cryxian capital city many hundreds of miles away, her tone carried the sting of subtle threat. "You would do well to err on the side of caution."

The iron lich stood in the center of what his more sentient servants referred to as his private workshop. All around the periphery of the large circular room stood tables and bookshelves piled with ancient tomes, parchments, and strange mechanical objects. Specimen jars, blown glass vessels, and bubbling fluids cluttered a large space at the far wall directly behind him, home to his alchemical efforts. With only the dim glow of gas sconces at each cardinal direction, the living would have had trouble making

out anything written in the old books, but to the eyes of the undead the chamber was more than adequately illuminated.

A deep, dark fire lit the single eye socket of the iron lich—a physical effect of the powerful communication ritual, pioneered by Thalassina herself, which temporarily linked the two undead in a way that let them speak across great distances. This magic drew on principles similar to those that allowed a lich to commune with a skarlock, but it was a strain on both parties, and they did not use it frequently.

As usual, Asphyxious maintained the neutral, obliging tone he employed when speaking to a superior. "A most wise counsel, Lord Thalassina, and one I shall heed when I next create another outpost for our armies under the very noses of our enemies," he replied.

"Tread carefully, Asphyxious. Wit does not become you," the lich lord said.

"As you say. I meant only that risk is unavoidable when one is given such monumental tasks to complete alone."

As he spoke, the iron lich's clawed hands moved as if they had a mind of their own, gesturing commands to five subordinate skarlocks in the room. The undead attendants moved with speed and unerring precision, coming inches from colliding as they maneuvered throughout the chamber, as their master's will kept their courses true. The skarlock Aramax held up a map of the northern Wyrmswall Mountains with various locations circled, and Asphyxious pointed to the one farthest from both a symbol of the Convergence of Cyriss and some notes indicating a site of power for the Circle Orboros. Then, Caligari presented a large parchment covered in the latest schematics for a prototype helljack, which Asphyxious approved with a motion. Likewise, Lychus, Noxilena, and Morturion all offered their master various documents and plans for review and endorsement. Even as he conversed with the lich lord responsible for the Nightmare Empire's foreign affairs, Asphyxious continued to oversee his skarlocks, his movements not unlike that of a spider.

"We are all quite aware of your many successes on the mainland these past few centuries," Thalassina continued. "It is why you have been allowed such leeway to pursue your own . . . curiosities. Speaking of which, where is your eldritch? I have an errand I would like to entrust to him."

"Unfortunately, I already sent him on an urgent assignment, some months ago, but be assured that upon his return, I shall endeavor to make him available anon," Asphyxious said, mentally cursing the eldritch's extended absence. "But thou didst

## F&F INTEL: RECLAIMING SOULS

The Reclaimant Order of the Protectorate of Menoth is among the most enigmatic of sacred traditions in the Iron Kingdoms. Considered an extension of the priesthood of the Temple of Menoth, reclaimers are little understood by outsiders, and their unflinching regard can make even devoted battle priests uncomfortable. Reclaimers embrace a lifestyle of extreme asceticism and self-deprivation, essentially surrendering everything that would define them as individuals. It is believed that no one chooses to become a reclaimer; rather, they must experience a calling, one that compels them to irrevocably commit their lives to this path. Their vow of silence is an extension of the belief that all of their actions and thoughts belong to Menoth, and each stands ready to carry out the Creator's will when divine instructions are received.

One of the reclaimers' most vital duties is to serve as psychopomps, escorts for the souls of the faithful who use their power to ensure those who perish do not linger on Caen but will pass to Urcaen, from there to travel to the City of Man to serve Menoth for eternity. This can involve tending to the souls of the fallen at a battlefield where a hero of the faith has perished. But reclaimers also occasionally feel compelled to seek out specific individuals among the living whom they deem—ostensibly because of their direct connection to Menoth—to be needed in Urcaen. What other faiths might call murder is for them a sacred responsibility.

not call this meeting merely to inquire after my underlings but rather regarding negotiations with the cephalyx hive. I am happy to relate that, owing to thy skillfully orchestrated initial contact with the creatures, I will soon reach an agreement that will ensure our interests for the foreseeable future."

Asphyxious hoped that deflecting the credit would be enough to conceal his growing desire to end the conversation quickly.

"I am pleased to hear you have made progress. The cephalyx will prove themselves to be capable allies." Thalassina paused, seemingly distracted by something in her vicinity—one of her own servants, no doubt. "I will leave you to your scheming. But remember, you are being watched."

Before anything further could be said, the lich lord broke contact.

Asphyxious had no time to ruminate on her words. A far more pressing danger loomed on the horizon. "How close is he? Hath he discovered the ruins?" Asphyxious asked his skarlocks, maintaining a detached tone in spite of the growing sense of dread in the corners of his mind.

"Last report had him engaging our sentries less than three miles east off dais number four," said Caligari. "We have not heard any more from them, so we assume they have been destroyed."

A reclaimer's presence in the Thornwood could be disastrous for Asphyxious' plans. He knew that dispatching the lone man, while a simple matter in itself, would have dangerous consequences. Reclaimers shared a connection with their god that was stronger and more direct than that enjoyed by ordinary priests of their faith, and the man's death would no doubt draw a substantial portion of the Protectorate military to the region. A few weeks from now, such an event would be welcomed, but the timing was critical. It was too early, not yet time for the harvest of souls. As members of the Reclaimant Order were versed in the properties of souls, there was the possibility one might be able to discern some of the functions of the Orgoth device Asphyxious and his forces sought to harness. This in turn could lead to determined interference at an inconvenient moment.

If only Goreshade had completed his mission already. The fact that Asphyxious had not heard anything from that accursed elf added much to the iron lich's displeasure. He took a moment to focus on the matter at hand, allowing all other distractions to recede from his mind, and soon had a flash of intuition.

"Have we encountered any other Protectorate forces of late?" Asphyxious asked the room. He could sense the eagerness of the five skarlocks to be the first to answer.

"As a matter of fact, Vociferon took it upon himself to dispatch a group of Protectorate knights less than a month ago," replied Morturion quickly. "I believe he led the squad of bane warriors personally, collecting their souls for you, my lord."

"My, my," said Noxilena with feigned disappointment. "As usual, Vociferon's enthusiasm has done more harm than good."

"What a fool," added Aramax.

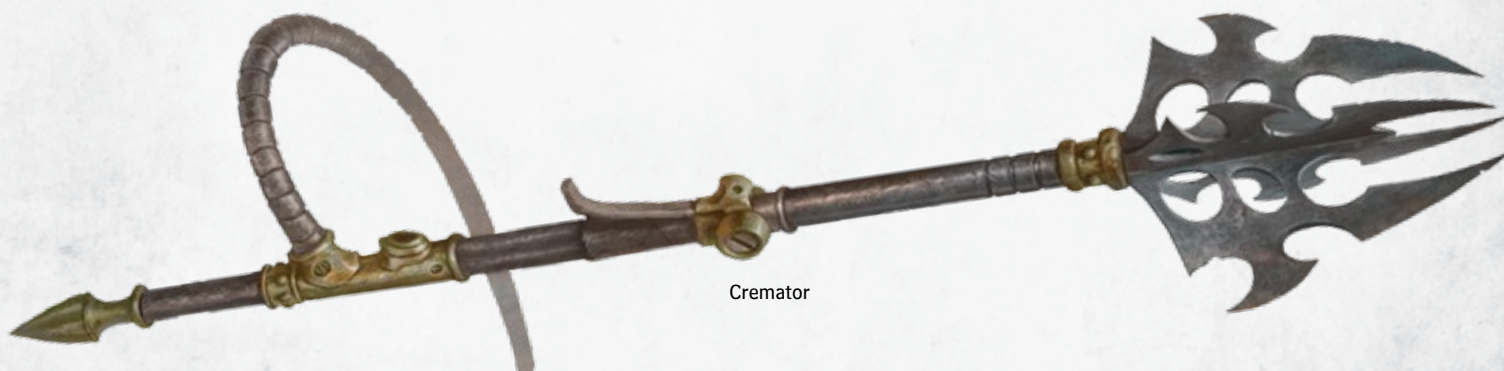
Asphyxious ignored their efforts to curry favor. Normally, he would applaud Vociferon's initiative, but now was not the time. He cursed himself for having sent his favored skarlock to parley with Master Necrotech Mortenebra on his behalf. "Who hast knowledge of where he stored the soul cages containing these knights?"

"I do, my lord!" replied Caligari, who immediately went to fetch them.

Within moments, Asphyxious had one of the soul cages in hand and was using his arcane sight to examine the energies contained within. The Menite souls were of remarkable quality. The purity of purpose marking each soul must make their captivity all the more agonizing. One in particular resonated with a certain power, its light vibrating in a way that suggested outside influences or certain special gifts, such as an awakening to magical power. If he had more time, he would have enjoyed studying that one closer. Vociferon had outdone himself.

Asphyxious was a connoisseur of special souls, having mastered the deeper magics that could be accomplished through them. To avoid the reclaimer's attention, however, he might be forced to relinquish them. The ancient lich had long ago learned the value of taking risks as well as surrendering assets when holding onto them might imperil greater works.

"Lychus, see that the corpses of the exemplars are brought to Perfido at the fourth dais. Noxilena, bring me a Stalker. I have a plan."



Cremator



Through their shared connection as master and servant, Perfido appeared in Asphyxious' mind, and the skarlock thrall listened to his instructions with feverish intensity.

Perfido held up the soul cage containing the knights in one hand while gesticulating wildly with the other as he spoke. "Of course, Lord Asphyxious, I will spread the souls inside this cage across this clearing and await the Menite intruder. Their energy will be as breadcrumbs to a mouse." Perfido punctuated his speech with a grating laugh.

"Hast thou delivered the corpses?" Asphyxious asked.

"Indeed, my lord. The bodies and their weapons. I will also have them spread across the clearing. I must say, these bodies are remarkably well preserved. They may as well be sleeping. Well, if you ignore all the bloody wounds—"

"Yes, yes, very good, Perfido. Remember the plan. Provide sufficient resistance so that the reclaimer gets what he needs and leaves. Do not allow him the luxury to inspect the site too closely, but leave him alive," Asphyxious said.

"As you wish, my lord," Perfido replied before Asphyxious ended their contact.

Asphyxious then connected his mind to the Stalker bonejack he had dispatched, which now sat hidden in the dense tree line at the periphery of Perfido's clearing. Through this link, he could see Perfido standing in the center of the fourth dais, its smooth, black stone surface covered in Orgoth iconography. Two other skarlocks and a score of bane warriors also stood in the clearing. On the ground, dozens of soldiers—Cygarnan and Khadoran both—lay dead, their souls floating serenely a few feet above. Perfido and his team had orchestrated the slaughter as a way to test the dais' response to soul energy. Asphyxious hoped that the inclusion of the dead exemplars in this scene did not appear too staged, lest it raise suspicion in the reclaimer's mind.

For nearly an hour Asphyxious waited, watching patiently through the Stalker's eyes as Perfido and the other skarlocks collected souls. Then, as Perfido mindlessly reached out behind him to draw in another soul, a grave marker in the shape of a Menofix speared the grass just between the soul and the skarlock. After a moment of confusion, Perfido noticed the soul he had summoned would move no closer; instead, it was drawn to the marker.

A large, hooded figure carrying a flaming mace walked across the clearing to stand next to the grave marker, a growing number of souls drifting toward him. Though he remained silent, his bearing said all that was needed: *No more.*

## F&F INTEL: BACK FROM THE DEAD

While rarely performed and even more rarely successful, both the Church of Morrow and the Temple of Menoth have sacred rituals to attempt to restore the dead to life. In both faiths, these rites involve a petition for miraculous intervention. In most cases the dead stay dead. Such unlikely miracles are more likely to succeed with the recently fallen, before the soul passes to Urcaen. Members of the Reclaimant Order have had the greatest success in restoring such individuals, an extension of their power over souls.

The historical annals, however, record several instances of successful resurrection of those who were not recently fallen, some of whom remembered what they saw on the other side. It is from these that the only firsthand accounts of Urcaen have been documented. Such resurrections are exceedingly rare, and almost all have been performed by the most holy and revered leaders of the clergy, such as exarchs or primarchs of Morrow or hierarchs of Menoth. And some members of these faiths believe that to even attempt such a miracle is morally wrong—an act of hubris that invites the wrath of the divine.



Perfido gathered what arcane power he had while motioning to his banes to attack the reclaimer.

With a sinking feeling of recognition, the iron lich watched from afar as the silent man marshalled the soul energy within himself into a torrent of raw power.

In an instant, the entire clearing was awash with flames.

Asphyxious recoiled from the searing light. He could almost feel the heat of the fire through the connection to his warjack.

*I see, he thought, It is this one. Not just any reclaimer, but the High Reclamer.* Perfido had never stood a chance.

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Though ash and smoke darkened the world around him, the souls of the faithful illuminated the High Reclamer's path. He walked to the nearest knight, unburnt by the righteous fires of Menoth, and placed his palm upon the dead man's brow. Silently, he began the holy rites of reclamation, attempting to usher the exemplar's soul to Urcaen. He made his way around the clearing, praying over each of the fallen knights. The usual sense of calm that accompanied the ritual never came to him, only a growing sense that he had failed in his sacred mission.

Just as despair threatened to overtake him, he saw one of the exemplar souls still lingering nearby, bright and gleaming. He followed its light to its former vessel, a young woman. Her armor designating her as the unit's ranking warder. With a deep breath, the High Reclamer bent and focused on her. As he prayed, he was shocked to sense the miracle of resurrection unfolding before him. He had never before been allowed to bring back someone this long dead. And yet the young woman's body and soul united as easily as lighting a candle. Her wounds knit before his eyes, and her soul's light spread upon her skin like the glow of a new day's dawn.

As the young woman gasped the first breath of her new life, all the pain and suffering the High Reclamer had endured these many weeks vanished from his memory, replaced only with gratitude toward the Creator. He felt honored to have served as the conduit for such a miracle.

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For Cyrenia Ibn Sohar, resurrection proved to be equal parts excruciating and soothing. The desire to cry out was overwhelming, yet instinct and discipline forced her to focus on her breath. Eyes darting, she could see nothing but a haze of smoke and a dark figure leaning over her. It took her a moment to recognize him as one of the Reclaimant Order, here to guide her soul to Urcaen, no doubt. She had truly died. Though she could not remember how, she hoped it was a death worthy of an exemplar.

Cyrenia tried to speak, but her head throbbed with pain. Could the dead get headaches? She felt strangely aware of her body, which she thought she would have left behind. She tried to stand, but her movements were sluggish and awkward, as if her limbs

had fallen asleep. There was no doubt she was still corporeal. Her flesh prickled everywhere with pain, and her legs nearly gave out. She stumbled, but the reclaimer steadied her gently, with the concerned attentiveness of a parent for a toddling child.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm not dead, am I? At least, not anymore." The reclaimer made no response, merely keeping his arm under her to maintain her balance. Only when he did not reply did she remember who she was in the presence of.

As the smoke cleared, he turned toward a nearby patch of ground. Following his gaze, she saw dozens of bodies. Soon she could discern the uniforms of several: Cygnarans, Khadorans, and to her dismay, what appeared to be the remains of Cryxian warriors. Seeing these brought a flash of memory, of hissing shapes shrouded in darkness, tearing at her with barbed axes. Then she saw the body of one of her fellow exemplars, and the memories rushed back to her. A pack of banes had ambushed her and her knights as they scouted a region of the Thornwood.

She ran to the nearest knight and cried out, "Martus!" Looking around the clearing, she saw the remains of her exemplar brothers and sisters among the dead.

"They all fought so bravely," she whispered to herself, her voice heavy with sorrow. She turned to her silent companion. "Why was I brought back and not them? I don't understand."

The reclaimer only stared back in silence.

"I died last, cutting my way through as many banes as I could. But then..." She turned and stood in front of the reclaimer, her words coming faster as she recalled something of vital importance. "I saw it! A vile and unholy structure. I saw it nearly pull in the souls of Martus and Tayla. It almost pulled in my own before that wretched skarlock captured us. We must destroy it at once. It is an abomination."

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Asphyxious cursed his luck. Of all the reclaimers it could have been, it had to be the most powerful one, the one who was also a warcaster. When the smoke cleared, he was not surprised to find the entirety of Perfido's retinue reduced to ash. What did surprise him, however, was seeing that the High Reclamer was not alone. One of the fallen knights, a young woman, now lived and was speaking to the warcaster. That should not have been possible. *Fascinating . . . Perhaps facilitated by my delivery of the soul?* No, he had to focus. There was no time.

The iron lich commanded the Stalker to move silently around the clearing, to get close enough to hear the pair's exchange but never letting them out of his sight. Yet as the lithe bonejack was still making its way toward them, the exemplar woman picked up a sword and began walking south. In the direction of the soul cairn.

*No, Asphyxious thought. She couldn't know. Could she have seen it somehow?*

Before she could get far, the High Reclamer put a hand on her shoulder. He said nothing, but both the iron lich and the

exemplar knew what the gesture meant. *We must leave.* The woman turned to face the reclaimer and seemed to lose her composure, engaging in a heated, if one-sided, argument.

The iron lich could not leave anything to chance, even the slim possibility that the knight could change the High Reclaimer's mind. In a moment of inspiration, Asphyxious guided his Stalker around the clearing at full speed, randomly disturbing bushes and shaking tree branches as it went. It was crude, but it worked. The illusion that a larger Cryxian force was on its way seemed to deter the young exemplar. She turned from the silent warcaster, gathered up the relic blades of her fallen comrades, said some quick foolish Menite prayer, and left the clearing with the High Reclaimer, heading east.

Asphyxious had the Stalker follow them as far as his mental range would allow, then ordered it to return and cut off their link.

He sat down in an ornate throne-like chair and declared to his subordinates, "The threat has been handled. The reclaimer took the bait."

"Success!" Caligari proclaimed.

"Congratulations, my lord!" Noxilena crooned.

"Let's not be too hasty. We still have much to do!" Lychus said.

Asphyxious ignored the prattle of his skarlock servants. He picked up a scroll and quill and began jotting down notes regarding soul collecting and the evident expansion of reclaimer power he had witnessed. Celebration was an indulgence for which ambitious beings like he had no time. Joy was a distraction meant only for mortals, rest a luxury only the living could afford.

## AFTERMATH: THE TEMPLE GARRODH

What Asphyxious referred to as "the soul cairn" in the Thornwood was, in fact, one part of the greatest temple ever built by the Orgoth, which had been buried but left largely intact. Sited on a fulcrum of necromantic energies originally exploited by the Lords of Morrdh, the Temple Garrodh proved to be an exceedingly powerful soul cage, capable of trapping and harnessing an infinite number of mortal souls. This machinery offered Asphyxious the possibility of limitless power, and he foresaw that it could facilitate his dreams of apotheosis.

Asphyxious' schemes would not be easily achieved. Mastery of this complex would require time as well as carnage on a horrifying scale. Shortly after the High Reclaimer's investigation, Asphyxious engineered a great battle on these grounds between Cygnaran, Khadoran, Menite, and Cryxian forces. The bloodshed awakened the power of the site, but this was just the beginning. For his plan to succeed, Asphyxious needed to lure the Harbinger of Menoth to the fully excavated structure, then ritually sacrifice her to steal all of the souls protected within the City of Man in Urcaen. It was for this purpose he had originally dispatched Goreshade to the Protectorate. Yet other great prophetic forces were at play as well, each trying to shape these events which threatened to imperil the very future of the Iron Kingdoms.

## COURT OF KINGS

### The northern Thornwood Forest, Khadoven 27th, 605 AR

Tendrils of strange black fog crept up from the forest floor. They moved like hunting snakes, winding among the dark branches to spread up into the sky. The autumn moons glowed in the clear night, etching the edges of the fog with delicate traces of light.

Vladimir Tzepesci, Great Prince of Korskovny and recognized by some as prince of all divided Umbrey, stood atop Zerkova's Hill staring at the rising fingers of darkness and whispering a soft word of prayer. This creeping mist was not natural, and looking on it made his blood prickle with cold. His lineage was blessed with the gift of sorcery, and he sensed the touch of fell magic in the night air. Something evil was about to take place.

The dark prince stood at the perimeter of his encampment, facing the great Thornwood Forest. For weeks, Cygnarans from Fellig had attempted to use the forest as cover to strike at the supply lines of southern Khador feeding the armies in Llael. Since arriving at the forest's edge, Vlad had sent platoons into the thick brush to flush out any enemies hiding in the trees and drive them into the open fields to the north and west. There, his heavy uhlans trampled them under iron-shod hooves, and Widowmakers picked off any survivors as they tried to return to the trees. It had been joyless but necessary work, and it took them far from the front lines of battle in Llael. Vlad saw exhaustion on the face of every soldier he passed, tempered by understanding that such brutalities were simply a part of their effort to eventually reunify Umbrey. One did not need to take pleasure in such a task. Any pride would have to be derived simply from the completion of their work.

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Almost an hour after first spotting the black fog in the forest, while his Winter Guard companions baked rye cakes on hot stones set next to cooking fires for the night's final meal, Vlad witnessed a second portent. A white owl with eyes like two golden wedding bands glided silently overhead. The bird was a harbinger of the grave, a sign of endings. One of its soft feathers came loose as it passed over him, floating down to land delicately in his waiting hand.

"Your signs are not subtle, Old One," he mused, twisting the feather between thumb and forefinger.

"Something troubles you, my Prince?" asked Karlof Omirov as he approached. Omirov had fought alongside Vlad for many years and was as close a friend as the great prince could allow a subordinate to be.

"Only the thought of eating your cooking," Vlad said with a somber smile, letting the feather fall from his hand.

He and Omirov were walking together back to the camp when a crashing sound came through the trees. Soldiers dropped their meals to scramble for their weapons. A sentry posted near