

Avenger VIII: Betrayal

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As the Dark Elves begin their fight with their High kindred, Coreaux struggles to survive in the wilds, pursued by an unseen foe. Meanwhile, Jacques attempts to free his former master from the pits of Nagashizzar, and Jean hurries back to the cursed city of Mousillon. And as Coreaux struggles to regain command over Mousillon, it becomes clear there is a betrayer in his force's midst. But who is it, and why has he chosen this moment to strike?

Before I begin, however, I would just like to provide you with a brief foreword. VIII has taken a while, and is the longest so far. It is really the first chapter where I've introduced a good plot, so any feedback would be appreciated. It has been a hard rocky road to create this, but overall, I think VIII, at 34 pages and 16032 words, is the best so far. Hopefully, this will be a prelude of things to come!

I hope you enjoy reading Avenger VIII.

Jacques' footsteps were the only sound in the deserted passageway as he crept towards the pit, keeping in the shadows of the ornate passageway. In his left hand he held an ancient ring of keys.

Another undead guard marched past, and d'Eperon crouched in the shadows before hastily sneaking up behind him and slitting his throat, stabbing him for good measure as he carefully placed the body on the floor. There was no sound to be heard.

Jacques quickly jumped onto the wall as he heard more footsteps approaching, clinging to its rough surface with all his strength.

The time it was a skeleton, and d'Eperon didn't attack: bone made more sound than flesh when it hit the floor. Instead, he waited until it was past, and then swung himself across the thin passageway, using the other wall to propel himself forwards in a wall run that evaded the guards and traps he knew existed in this section of the passageway.

It had taken him years to learn this much: subtle hints and questions dropped in Mallobaude's ear, information from the all-too-willing source of Nagash's herald.

Jacques was an expert. A combination of expertise and experience made him the perfect spy, combined with his newfound vampiric strength and agility.

Another leap. This time, he swung from a brazier, propelling himself in spinning leap to a platform on the wall opposite, presumably once used for a guard post. It was abandoned now, though.

There was another just below this one, and then one a little way along. Good. These could be used as the perfect platforms to survey his next moves.

But his perspective had failed him. He leapt too short, and fell to the floor with a crash as his armour hit the floor. Damn. Someone would have heard that. And as soon as they found the destroyed zombies, it was all over.

Which meant he had to hurry. He didn't bother to jump or hide, but ran onwards, racing against time.

He slowed, panting lightly as he saw bars. A prison. Good. He had reached Arda.

The vampire was scarred all over, and bruises littered his thin form. To think that such could be done to even a vampire was horrific indeed.

His voice was filled with bitterness as Luc spoke to d'Eperon. "Have you come ... to taunt me?" he hissed through cracked lips.

Jacques frowned. "No, Master. I have come to free you from this torment," he declared, holding up the keys.

Arda smiled; as much as was possible considering the horrible deformations of his face. But his eyes suddenly focussed on something behind Jacques, and his eyes opened in fear.

D'Eperon slowly turned, to see a heavily built prison overseer standing behind him.

"I'm sorry, d'Eperon?" the head guard said, raising his whip. His face split into an evil smile, showing filed teeth and twisting the many piercings he had on his face.

Jacques drew his sword, and unleashed a swipe that nearly took the overseer's head from his shoulders.

Barret was no longer smiling as he raised his spiked whip. "You're dead, vampire."

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Fire rained from the sky, the eternal vengeance of the gods against elfkind for their mistakes.

So had spoken Kalas, Arch-mage of Cothique, during the war of vengeance between the High and Dark elves, in the time of the Sundering.

And now it seemed to have come to life. Mousillon's streets were narrow, with dark paving stones covering the ground. It had never been suited to war, however many battles had taken place in its cramped streets.

The docks were in a state of disrepair, left undisturbed by generations of rulers and peasantry. Ancient rotted timbers were strewn around the area, and rats scuttled through ancient cabins filled with boats that would likely never see the light of day again.

Yet now, elves rushed around, hacking down any who stood in their way, an orgy of bloodshed and violence. It was a chaotic battle: skilled raiders, the Dark Elves knew they would never win simply by attacking in formation. Instead, they moved in skirmish formations, attacking the High elven formations from all angles and casually dismembering their defensive formations.

It was clear the Dark elves were winning, and this way only the first wave. The High elven ship was a wreck, sinking after having been holed multiple times by the rams of the corsairs.

Great blasts from sorceresses filled the sky, every blow drained the High elves of life as the sorceresses danced around in a frenzy of blood-fuelled rage and magical fury.

In fact, the battle was already won, even though it had only just begun.

Bardanas watched from his ship and smiled. It was going well. Already the High elven corpses had made a mound of the dead, whereas the Dark elves had suffered fairly few casualties.

The High elves fought with a fury born out of reckless anger and desperation, but they were outnumbered and dying rapidly, the death toll enhanced by the sorceries of his magicians.

He drew his sword as he watched another contingent of High Elves emerge from the citadel. These were more ordered, and were fighting with their backs against the walls. Their spears held banners draping from their silver spearheads.

The Commodore smiled, watching them kill the first wave of corsairs, and then drop the sarissa, to draw their long swords. It was clear these were specialist infantry: none others would carry sarissa - long spears designed for use in a phalanx formation - as well as long swords. Obviously they were some kind of honour guard.

As he watched, a figure swathed in white robes emerged, and the bodyguard formed a defensive circle, still slaying any Dark elves that came too close.

Any magic directed at them seemed to dissipate in a white mist, and Bardanas cursed as he watched it. High magic! He hadn't expected any mages here. His sorceresses had no methods to deal with opposing magic: it rendered one of his greatest advantages useless.

The figure in white robes surveyed the docks, and his eyes met Bardanas'. In that moment, the commodore sensed intense hate in the mage's eyes as he glared at the druchii. The commodore dived aside as a blast of white magic devoured the ship he had been standing on.

With a curse, the commodore drew his long draich and charged into the fray.

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The hooded figure watched Arhia as she grew closer. The undead elf unleashed an arrow from her bow, yet it did no harm to the figure, who merely stood watching her with interest.

The elf hissed. "Who are you, and why have you summoned me?"

The vampire's voice was a low whisper, barely audible above the rippling of leaves in the trees. "I need information, Arhia. And you will give it to me."

The undead elf smiled a mocking smile. "And if I choose not to give it to you? You can do no more to me than you already have."

At once, all sounds in the atmosphere grew quiet, but for a single, mournful scream, like a howl of a thousand banshees on a moonlit night. Arhia covered her ears in pain, and the vampire smiled, standing there, as motionless as before.

Arhia fell to the floor, and the scream slowly faded. She clutched her ears in agony as a voice spoke into her mind, filled with power and ancient mystery. "Believe me, what you have suffered is nothing, elf. There are far worse torments in the pit of Nagashizzar than becoming a mere wraith. Just because you are ethereal does not mean you are invulnerable.

An arm was raised, a shrivelled hand becoming visible beneath the black robes. The elf screamed as a wave of intense cold shot through her body, followed by a wave of energy that triggered every nerve in her body, sending signals of intense pain into her agonized mind.

The vampire smiled a twisted grin, his red eyes gleaming with malice.

The elf gasped through her agony. "Who ... are ... you?"

"I have no name," replied the cloaked vampire. Clearly he wasn't going to divulge any more information. "Now ... information. What is the significance of Coreaux's spear, and who is Jean? Where is Coreaux?"

An hour later, the elf had gasped out everything she knew relating to Coreaux and Jean, waves of agony enticing more information from her, some of which she hadn't even known herself.

"Good," the vampire stated in his low voice. "That will suffice." He began to turn away, yet stopped when he caught sight of the wraith. "Ah yes, I forgot. Your reward ..."

A wreath of green flame materialized around Arhia, and as it began to die the form of the wraith vanished. The dying elf smiled, and whispered a single word, that was carried by the wind to the ears of her interrogator.

"Thankyou."

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Jacques dodged the whip, and stabbed the overseer - tried to. The guard captain had thick leather armour on that no stab would penetrate: or not without snapping the sword, anyway.

The stab did no damage, and d'Eperon jumped back as the whip lashed down, nearly catching Jacques on the shoulder.

Barret took a step forwards, pressing d'Eperon back against the wall. The overseer's grin returned as he drew a short stabbing sword.

But Jacques was prepared. He dived into the overseer's chest, knocking the hefty man backwards, and brought his sword down on the man's right arm before he could respond.

Blood fountained from the deep wound as d'Eperon stood back, still wary. Barret's whip arm was useless, flopping by his side, but that didn't mean he was harmless: Jacques had been unfortunate enough to see what he could do one day when exploring Nagashizzar's underground. He never went upstairs. He didn't need Mallobaude's warning to know that his destruction would come far sooner than he intended if he ventured higher into the fortress.

Barret grunted, gritting his teeth. The blood-soaked arm at his side swung back and forwards as he dived towards the vampire, short sword prepared.

Jacques leapt to the side, dodging the wild thrust. He quickly leapt onto the overseer's back as he regained balance.

Barret roared, and tried to knock him off, but to no avail. D'Eperon slit his throat swiftly, and leapt away from the dying guard captain.

Taking out the keys, he quickly searched for a large and rusted specimen that would unlock the prison.

"Hurry," he said, "Someone will have heard that."

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Bardanas barely thought about it as he killed another of his hated kindred, blood splattering on his spiked armour as his draich chopped the elf almost in half.

The lethal blade carved through armour like a hot knife through butter as Bardanas chopped down on another warrior's head. His green, scaly cloak protected him from harm as a high elf attempted to stab him. It was too late for the elf as the draich took his head from his shoulders.

Granted a blessed moment of respite, Bardanas looked around to battlefield to see his target. The mage was still surrounded by his bodyguard, now using his powers to heal his warriors. The commodore cursed. That way the High elves could last for hours without being defeated: it would have been far simpler and easier if the mage had resorted to fiery blasts. That created a higher death toll, but in the long run, it was worth it.

The commodore panted as he hacked down another of the puny high elves, barely pausing as he ran towards the mage: this had to be finished, and soon.

He swung his draich in a long arc as he ran, killing another elf, and decapitating another who was too slow to dodge. But how many he killed was of little importance: what mattered was killing the mage that was slowly but surely killing replenishing the High elven host and killing his corsairs.

Blood sprayed across his face as he snapped another elf's neck with the backswing from his blade. Another died, skull crushed, as he brought his blade down onto the weak elf's cranium.

His matted hair whipped into his face as he began to run harder than ever before, sprinting to reach the mage. Around him, his own corsairs were dying in dozens, unable to kill their light kindred.

But something was wrong. Bardanas paused in confusion. The mage he could see was simply casting fireballs, not healing his warriors. There had to be ... there! A glimpse of white on the tower roof!

But the other mage stood in his way. The commodore frowned, then began sprinting, a manic run to get past the formation.

Then, he fell into a crouch next to the defensive formation. Unseen by the high elves, he used all the strength he had left in his body to propel himself upwards and into the formation.

Then he began swinging his draich in earnest, and chaos descended with the screams of dying elves and the cracking of skulls.

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Jacques was right. Someone had heard them ... and it was the worst person possible.

The Herald of Nagash cast a black shadow over the chamber, his imposing form looking even more powerful than usual. Jacques couldn't help but notice that the Herald's robes were creased and ruffled: clearly he had just arrived back after a journey. Jacques swallowed: he had never seen the Herald administer judgement, but it seemed unlikely he would be sparing.

The figure's voice was filled with malice. Though Arda's teeth were chattering in fear, his red eyes only glared at d'Eperon. "Treachery ... I expected no less, fallen tactician."

The herald took a step forwards, dwarfing the lesser vampire. "You come into my halls ... and you betray me by killing my guard captain and stealing the keys for Nagashizzar itself!" His voice became a sibilant hiss. "A life of torment in the pits will not suffice for this betrayal of trust. But for now, it will have to."

D'Eperon shuddered, looking at Arda and beginning to understand what was going to happen to him. As realization dawned, he began to turn to flee - where to he had no idea: anywhere, everywhere - but the Herald was too fast, and raised a hand, red eyes glowing with hate and ancient evil.

Green light flashed from his withered hand, silhouetting Jacques' figure on the stone wall. Jacques tried to draw his sword, but the light reached him first, the lightning striking like a cannonball, and throwing him back across the corridor.

Jacques' last sight before blackness descended was of Arda being dragged away by two zombie henchmen.

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A high elf flew through the air and landed with a sickening crunch on the hard flagstones.

Bardanas used his momentum to continue in a fluid movement, knocking down another three elves as he dashed towards the mage once more.

But something was wrong. The magician wasn't defending himself. He wasn't casting fireballs anymore. He wasn't even healing his warriors. He just stood there, a faint glow around him, staring into space. It was as if ... he was trying to control something, and failing.

But whatever the danger, he couldn't let the elf finish his spell. Bardanas roared in hate, and leapt towards the wizard. The leap took ages; time seeming to slow as the commodore dived at the mage.

The magician's head turned, and his eyes widened. An eerie wind seemed to blow, whipping the mage's hair into his face, and making his robes lash around violently. This wasn't a controlled wind, such as was used to move the ships: this was an erratic hurricane formed by pure energy.

Bardanas struck with his sword as he reached the mage, and time sped up in an awful convulsion that shook the docks.

Flame exploded from every pore in the mage's body as the sword struck. Bardanas was thrown aside by the force of the explosion, and his head struck the marble floor of the citadel.

And with a sound like reality itself being torn apart, a daemon began to materialize ...

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Jacques smiled as they walked past the rows of racks, the winches and painful-looking handcuffs. Thumbscrews also featured, as did many other instruments of torture that he hadn't seen: he presumed they originated somewhere in the South from the Herald's homeland.

The swish of robes paused, and d'Eperon stopped. Was this his moment of judgement? It didn't look too bad ... he could cope. He had seen what had been done to his master, but he could cope. He could be strong ... if in part simply to prove his strength.

The Herald's voice was as quiet and cutting as always. "This is not what I will be using, fallen tactician. I have had plenty of time to experiment on my subjects and I have found the most effective torture on vampires not physical, but mental.

"However, these do serve a useful purpose." The figure smiled from within the depths of his hood. "These racks are designed to hold people and creatures in position." The smile widened as the Herald began to tie d'Eperon to a rack.

"And now, fallen tactician, you will learn the true meaning of pain."

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"Materialised" fails - on quite an epic scale - to describe the pure horror of a daemon taking possession of a mortal's body.

For Balathir, an educated scholar, no word could contain the sheer horror and terrible magnificence created by the sight of the great beast tearing its way into reality, using the broken body of his fellow mage as a portal.

It was exactly that: a portal. The sheer amount of blood contained inside a single elf was one surprise; another was how damaging flying sheets of skin and bones can be to an entire formation.

Blood fell like rain. It is a phrase that usually emphasizes the level of slaughter, but in this case it was justified: blood literally fell as thickly as rain.

And if that did not stop the human heart with fear, the creature emerging did.

It was not a lithe keeper of secrets, nor was it a pus-ridden, slow daemon of Nurgle. It was not a beast that mutated as it walked, or a perversion of nature, time and space. It was not a physically enhanced man, and nor was it a great sorcerer of the damned.

The creature has had many names over the centuries. "Lord of Skulls". "High-handed Slayer". "Eternal Slayer". But the one that is most terrifying, that captures its very essence best, that freezes a mortal soul, is perhaps the most simple: "Bloodthirster".

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Jacques did nothing as his captor prowled around him, locking the crude shackles in place around his wrists. He did not struggle: there was no point. Escape was far from reach right now. All he could do was stay calm: that was the only way to master his fear. And fear did writhe within him. It clamped around his heart as he braced or the ordeal begin, it sapped at his mind, eroding his sanity and whatever impulse kept him from screaming. The waiting was horrible; lying not knowing his fate, blind to the vile antics that filled his torturer's mind, unable to do anything but stay put as the pain sailed ever closer. But he couldn't give in; he would not show his fear. He glared at the herald of his doom with defiance and spat. "Do your worst vampire."

A twisted smile crept across the vampire's face, his eyes filled with some sort of fanatical fervour as he replied in a manic voice: "Oh I will, fallen tactician. Your young mind has never felt true pain ... now you will come to see why nightmares are not just unhappy dreams!"

Jacques screamed slightly as his chest was ripped open, simply torn from his body and leaving his flesh bare to the elements. But his flesh had not been taken from the outside: something had broken out from the inside. Hordes of scarabs and beetles poured from the wound, biting and feasting on the grand bastion of the captive's body. His heart pounded in fear and he screamed even louder when even more of the fiends rushed from it, travelling along his veins and bursting them in unison, setting every nerve in his body screaming as the tide of black swarmed him, tearing flesh from bone and crawling around places no creature should venture. He felt terror grip him as they began to crawl from his eyes, some looping through his nose and ears. The creatures couldn't be real ... but the pain he felt coursing through him couldn't have felt more real.

But he had to fight it. He couldn't cave in yet. He would stand where his master had fallen. He would remain stiff where he had broken. He did nothing to fight the pain, though: he accepted it in his arms, and like the aftermath of drinking, the pain subsided gradually, lessening until all that remained was a slight tickle, barely noticeable to him in his present state. He looked at his foe's eyes, and felt triumph in his heart. "You have to do better than that to claim me, monster. I could face that for an eternity and still not yield: I certainly hope my master did not fold to such a feeble attempt."

"Ah ..." the Herald muttered. "Clearly ancient Khemrian tortures do not work as effectively as they once did. Perhaps a taste of your homeland will cure your accursed stubbornness."

This time d'Eperon had no time to retort. Sheer pain pulsed through his body, rushing alongside his blood as it reached every corner of his body. This was no manic vision of horror, this was torture down to the basics; and it hurt, a lot! He resisted as best as he could as his muscles seized, unable to restrain the pain that coursed through him like a poison, blocking out all else as it slowly finished him off. No mental image to defy, nothing to keep himself from thinking ... the pain was real, and real pain can't be stopped. Or so it seemed, but Jacques had a rare stroke of brilliance cross his mind. He made his own mental image, focussing on it like nothing else mattered, gnawed on it as though it was his only life source. He screamed a bloodcurdling shriek as he imagine, a great pendulum swinging above him, every swing of its silver blade cleaving a great scar into his chest, and sending searing pain through his body: not a nice image, but useful and adaptable ... it could help him to master other pain. And even as he concentrated, the pain began to fade from his mind ...

But his tormentor was not so lenient as to allow him small periods of mercy; rats scurried up through unreal holes in a surreal floor, coming in their thousands to feed upon the warm flesh of their victim, digging out holes in his bone marrow and nestling in to make a new home in his body. A living tide of pain, they reached Jacques and attacked in a flurry of hate. D'Eperon shuddered in pain as every bite tore flesh from bone, every nip sending a wave of agony through his pain-filled body.

The worst part was when they bit. Illusions cannot help when every bite is erratic, every scratch coming when you least expect it, tearing through your flesh.

This was too much. Jacques began to yell and scream, his roars of agony heard by none except his unseen tormentor. But it didn't stop. More pain ... more rats. Bile rose in his throat, his body convulsing in a desperate bid to throw off these persistent attackers. But it did nothing. They continued their assault. His eyes widened in utter despair as the rats tore him apart: he could see the spark of excitement in their eyes, like a child eating a birthday cake; they had no intention of leaving the icing alone, they would keep going until nought but dust was left of him. No trace would be left of the man Jacques d'Eperon: he would become a shadow, recalled by none other than the man that had called upon his doom.

And then, it stopped. No pain. No sound, apart from the heavy breathing of the fallen tactician. Then ... wings. Shrieks. The beating of a thousand wings, some feathered, some leathery.

The first attack was a bit, sucking blood from his body in small quantities - but, oh, so, so painful! A scream rend its way from his shaking throat, ripping the sore inside of his throat apart with the pain.

Then more bites, and then - in the exposed wounds - pecks. Sharp beaks tore at his flesh. Vultures triggered pain signals in every nerve in his body as they tore at his living, warm flesh. Warm? Still? How long ... how long must this go on for? Was this not enough punishment?

As if in answer to his thoughts, the pain slowly subsided, the birds shrieking their way out of existence.

But it was only the calm before the storm. Physical pains can only cause a certain amount of damage to a person. It is

possible for their mind to remain strong, however much pain they suffer.

No pain, this time. Only a hunger. A growing hunger, for something warm ... fresh. For blood. Jacques' eyes snapped open, and he saw The Herald grinning like a poker player finally revealing his hand: a royal flush, or possibly five aces. Such evil should not be possible, yet it is. Somehow, such weapons seem like cheating.

D'Eperon felt his fangs lengthen as his hunger grew, that craving for warm, flowing blood. A crimson elixir. His eyes glowed red, and he began to pant, as he grew more desperate. His eyes shot around the room, seeking any feed. He needed blood, and this foul Herald was draining him of life! He must have blood!

"Painful, isn't it?" the Herald said casually, watching Jacques as his body thrashed in pain and desperation. "I remember that pain, too ... which is why I deem this torture so apt. I had to suffer it. Whys should you not feel the same as I did, all those years ago? Coreaux did too, you know."

The hunger deepened, leaving a gaping chasm inside his body. Jacques couldn't move: the effort to lift even a finger was too great. He felt ... drained.

Then, the draining stopped consuming him. It ... paused. And then, images flickered into Jacques' pain-filled mind. His family. His father, smiling at him. His daughter. His son, riding his steed for the first time. D'Eperon smiled, yet suddenly the images turned to a horrific perversion of all that was dear to him.

His house, burning. His fields desolate and barren. He felt his hunger growing. In his mind, he entered the house. The house some inner thought told him he had just left. He looked down, the flames barely touching him.

Bodies on the floor. Pale. Drained of blood ... his family, Wounds on their necks, His family. Dead. He had killed them. His family. Not alive. Dead. At his hands.

A heart-rending scream tore from Jacques' lips, and slowly the images began to retreat. "No!"

Panting heavily, d'Eperon slowly allowed his body to fall into unconsciousness.

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Imagine a Sabretusk, and then make it twenty times larger. Lengthen its fangs. Give it wings, and a cunning intelligence. Add in a stir of the joy of slaughter, and you're halfway there. Harden the skin, making it a dark red, and give it a mane of black hair. Oh, and then add bronze armour, and an axe (possibly other weapons to taste, depending on how much tomato sauce you like ... well, certainly red. Sauce may describe it quite well, actually, but "tomato" could be stretching it a little.).

What you will arrive at is fairly close to a Bloodthirster. Fairly close: nothing can quite contain the sheer majesty of such a beast, blended with the horrific level of destruction it can deal out to its environment: in fact, the Bloodthirster is the poker player with six spare aces ready to deal out if necessary. (Never trust that innocent looking person next to you ... mages, poker players, they're all the same. All daemons inside.)

It took a few seconds for the Bloodthirster to actually appear, though it seemed like hours to the waiting elves: showers of blood are a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, meaning for some reason they always seem longer than they really are. Not many people will be able to tell you why, but it's probably because of the well-known principles of the Plot Hole. It takes a few seconds to describe an everyday occurrence, but hours to describe a Bloodthirster tearing its way into reality. It's probably because of quantum reality, or at least a theory some scientist has created to explain why he can't explain about something (it's not the how. It's the why. Science is a lot easier when you stick to that principle. After all, it generally boils down to "I don't know", which is fairly easy to write about).

But, philosophy aside, the moment took aeons, the daemon growing in size until it reached the size of a dragon (monstrous buggers. Ask any hero ... that's how they get to be heroes, you see. Don't believe me, eh? Find a hero that didn't kill a dragon, then). And that was when the slaughter began.

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It is strange how much a daemon can unite two warring factions. The High and Dark elves worked together, each force attempting attacks on the Bloodthirster ...

But to no avail. The daemon was as high as ten men, and with each sweep of its axe dozens of elves flew threw the air, landing with sickening crunches on the stone floor. The daemon roared in horrific ecstasy as blood flew through the air, and lashed its whip out, catching a few elves and knocking them to the floor. It was clear this was no mad beast, though: the way the Bloodthirster acted, it seemed more like a dragon than a mere beast, fighting using tactics, as opposed to striking at whatever that moved.

The howl was like the roar of a great tiger magnified thousands of times, and it sent fear into the hearts of the elves. But that fear was their salvation: for while they saw their hated kindred stand strong, they would do the same. But it was also their downfall ... if one regiment broke, they all broke.

The great beast roared again, bounding forwards and knocking evil and good elf alike to the side. Elves screamed in agony as the axe crushed their bodies and sent blood splattering onto the axe head, where it slowly faded, leaving just dull metal.

The sorceresses tried in vain to banish the daemon, but nothing could stop it: the onslaught did not even pause as magical bolts lashed against its magic-strengthened armour. The few blows from mortal weapons failed to even pierce the thick hide.

It was clear this was a battle elfkind could not win.

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Jacques stared out into the dark passage, longing to be outside. The Herald had broken his freedom and will momentarily, but it hadn't lasted. He would prove his strength where his master had failed.

Arda lay slumped in the corner, still shuddering slightly. Every now and then he gave a small scream, or a twitch: nightmares of what happened every waking hour.

D'Eperon understood his plight, yet he had no time to empathize ... his primary concern was escape, even if Lucius did not share his dreams of freedom. The vampire's pessimistic mind had caved in after just the first few days.

A black shadow blocked the flickering torches, and Jacques moved back into the shadow. Surely the Herald had not come again?

He had not. Jacques, looking closely, could just make out the glint of armour, old armour ... Mallobaude's armour. It was a dark silver colour, barely reflecting the light as the vampire strode swiftly down the corridor, black cloak shrouding him from the watchful eyes of the undead guards. His thin face was mostly shadowed, but to Jacques he looked troubled. What was the vampire lord doing here?

Another glint of metal. Keys. The vampire lord bent down, drawing his cloak closer around him, and carefully opened the ancient door. The creak was too faint to be heard from upstairs.

Mallobaude gestured for Arda and Jacques to leave. "Quick," he hissed. "Don't question my actions ... this is vital. I will tell you more later."

Jacques hesitated only a second before leaving the cell. The vampire lord had never lied to him yet, or even threatened him. Arda, however, remained in his cell. Mallobaude frowned, and gestured for Lucius to follow him.

Arda did nothing, his eyes darting around like a cornered animal's. Then he opened his mouth wide, and began to phrase the words "guards".

He never even started speaking. The vampire lord drew his sword and beheaded the vampire in a fluid motion. Fascinated, Jacques watched his former master crumble to a fine dust. He couldn't help but feel a faint regret, but he realized it was worth it. His freedom was worth more than his master's life.

"Hurry!" Mallobaude hissed. "We must leave quickly, or else that damnable Herald will find us here."

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Arkhor's eyes snapped open, and light filled with vision: a thin light, but light and colour nonetheless. What had happened? Arda had killed him ... the bastard. Wait ... how could he be dead? He could see ... something was wrong: clearly he hadn't been quite dead enough.

He mused for a moment on why he wasn't a pile of dust, but realizing it was a fruitless musing, turned his eyes to watch his surroundings. He was exactly where he last remembered Arda spitting on him after he pulled his sword out of him. He slowly reached down, and felt a gaping hole in his armour and stomach: not his heart. Lucius had missed his heart. So that was why ...

Around him lay a mound of the dead, but as he watched, limbs twitched and undead raised themselves from the dust. Was that why he was back? He had been in the void, but necromancy returned him to his previous unlife ... no, that wasn't right. It couldn't be! Slowly, the former vampire reached up and felt no fangs. No hunger for blood. His eyes widened. He was a wight.

What had Arda done, and why? Was this Luc's doing, or of his own unwitting devising? Arkhor frowned, wondering if his half-brother or the Herald had called him back. He hoped not. He wouldn't be a slave again ... he had a new life, and with it a chance to live again.

The corpse beneath him began moving, and he hastily leapt off, feeling a faint regret at his lack of vampiric strength. It had benefits, though. Tradition had never dictated what wights did, so now technically, he was free.

He stared into the distance, watching the sandy plain with interest, and noticed a solitary man standing, hands raised in some sort of primitive ritual.

A necromancer.

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Balathir could see he was going to have to intervene: it was that or suffer the sight of his guards being torn apart by a daemon. He knew it would probably be his last spell, but if it worked ... he could save the lives of hundreds of elves and men.

Watching from the tower, he raised his hands as he had been taught: not a necessary motion, but helpful. As he did so, he began to form an image in his mind, of drawing power from a great ball of white light: but no normal ball of light, no sphere of the mind. No ... this was the pure light, the light that can be seen sometimes in the mornings, when a cold sun lances down upon a cold landscape.

It took a lot of his mental and physical strength away as he formed winds around him, creating a great channel of magic into the sky, but it was worth it. A single ray of light, increased in magnitude, descended through the clouds. Balathir's eyes glowed as he stared into the maelstrom of energy, the great typhoon of the air.

But the Bloodthirster had seen him too. He had to hurry ... even now, at the corner of his mind; he could sense the unholy being leaping into the air, vast wings unfolding as it carried itself into the air, leaving the elves behind to wonder about its ascent to the tower.

The light grew brighter, and the elves beneath turned away, at the risk of being blinded, but Balathir stared on into the maelstrom. Now the light blazed brighter than a thousand suns, forming a glowing halo around the mage. Light streamed from the mage's eyes as the marble floor grew unbearably hot, a channelling inferno that filled the sky.

The Bloodthirster flew higher. Every beat of his great pinions sent him nearer to the mage, nearer to its victory over elfkind.

The light went out suddenly, and everything appeared to go dark for a moment, but for a faint halo surrounding the mage. The sun retreated, and the magical energies slowly returned to their former patterns.

Then, in a blast of pure white light, the mage struck. This time it was not a controlled beam, but a great lashing storm of clean light, purging all evil.

It lashed at the Bloodthirster like the whip the great daemon held in its hand, and Balathir exerted his full mental strength, determined to end the great creature's life. The light intensity greatened, and a great stream of light struck like lightning against the seemingly resistant beast. With a great roar, the Bloodthirster began to fall, wings collapsing as white fire erupted around it.

Balathir stopped the magical flow. There was no point ... any more and he would die himself. His last sight before he fell to the warm floor, unconscious, was of the daemon meeting its end on the flagstones below, slitting many of the great sheets of stone as its daemonic life was ended.

As his eyes flickered, the arch-mage finally allowed himself to smile. He had victory.

Bardanas watched the High elves mill around in confusion as they saw the aftermath of the great daemon's onslaught. But his own elves were not so disorganized: already they were making battle formations. The commodore smiled, seeing how much of a target the High elves were. "Corsairs, attack!"

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Jean watched his column of wights as they marched towards Mousillon. It was a fairly small host, yet an army capable of reclaiming the city, anyway. Wights were powerful warriors, and he had two hundred.

Their steady marching shook the ground, heavy armour clanging, but Jean was aware it may not be enough: in fact, there was no way it could be enough. If an army had been able to destroy Coreaux's guards, it would be able to launch a reasonable defence.

He steered his steed back to the front, the mortal creature by now used to his undead state: the rider controlled their minds, but they were still mortal.

If Jean's expression had been readable, however, it would have shown his fear and anticipation: why had his master called him to return to Mousillon?

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The hooded figure looked at Adrek with interest. The young knight showed promise. This would be easy ...

"Vampire, I believe you do not understand my point. I mean Coreaux ... he only serves his own purpose, not Mousillon. I know you hunger for power, yet deep inside ... I can feel your resentment. You shall have power, young knight, but you must understand that your master does not serve this land as he should. He serves only himself, and while he does so he grinds this land into the ground."

Adrek frowned, watching his knights slay the few remaining villagers. "Who are you? You come here ... and tell me something that is close to treason ... and you expect me to believe you?" But while the knight spoke these words, he couldn't help but feel the cloaked figure was right: Coreaux did not serve his fiefdom as he should; as it deserved.

"I have no true name, for a name is also a weakness. But knight ... you are young, and may yet understand my cause. You have hundreds of years yet to live. I have few, for destiny has shown me my fate. I stand here, and give you my last hope for this land. Already my own master plots my untimely demise ... should he be successful - and I have reason to believe he will - it is up to you and your knights to ensure this land remains pure.

"Others share this ideal: Jean, Coreaux's herald, is one of these. Jacques d'Eperon is another, as is Arkhor."

Adrek frowned. "Arkhor? But the vampire was killed, wasn't he?"

"Not so, my impetuous friend. Even now he walked the land again, though I fear he may do more harm than good in his mission."

The Blood Knight Champion didn't reply. Instead, he let his doubts surface yet again. "Who are you?"

"I have been known by many names over the years, and Walach is one of them, as is Maldred. I have no true name that I can recall. My present name, you wonder? I think you already know that, friend."

A slow smile crossed Adrek's face as he watched the figure stride away and mount a horse, his cloak revealing dark armour.

"So," he mused. "It has begun, after all these long years. The Return."

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It was quick and simple: the High elves were rounded up and killed, either pierced by crossbow bolts, or cut down mercilessly by powerful swords. A few were herded onto the ships for use as slaves.

There was one thing left to be dealt with: the mage. Bardanas sighed as he entered the citadel. Where was the mage? He would not enjoy this. Killing elves with a small chance was acceptable, but to murder an unconscious mage ... that galled. He was going to kill an innocent, who had helped him deal with a Bloodthirster. This would not be a task he would enjoy.

The steps were long, and every step drained Bardanas' resolve as he climbed the stair up to the top of the tower. Inside his head, voices sapped at his resolve, draining his will to carry on. How long would this go on for? But even as he thought it, he could see the roof ... some kind of spear-holder was attached to the top of the tower, but he didn't question it or even think about it.

His primary concern was dealing with this mage.

Balathir turned, to see a figure in black armour ascending the stairs. His eyes widened. He had no power left: no chance of killing this foe.

A sudden shock filled him as he realized he was about to die. He stood next to the rail, and leaned on his staff. He didn't draw a sword: what was the point?

The Dark Elf was very near now, just approaching the windswept balcony. Balathir spoke, his words barely audible. "I always thought your kind was similar to my own in everything but foes and cultural differences, but it appears I was wrong ... to kill an unarmed foe is truly barbaric." The mage's eyes blazed, although possibly with the effort of concealing his lies. "I saved your life, and this is how you repay me?"

The Dark Elf gave no reply. Instead, he calmly walked up to the mage, and drew a dagger, pointing it at the High elf's heart. But then, just as the dagger began to move towards the mage's stomach, the Dark Elf seemed to pause. Some inner regret, some memory made him stop ... could he really kill his saviour?

It was all Balathir needed. The mage swiftly struck the elf on his exposed head with his staff, and stood back, in a surprising burst of speed for such an exhausted mage.

He then kicked Bardanas towards the rail, and pointed his staff at the cornered elf. One quick spell ... and he could kill the commodore. Bardanas had no regret. He had just enough energy left, and the Commodore was, after all, one of his hated kindred, one of those who had slaughtered his family.

Balathir muttered a word of power, and Bardanas was thrown backwards and upwards, over the rail. But the Dark elf swiftly grasped it with both hands, hanging from the tower. Balathir tried to cast another spell, yet he couldn't cast it: he had finally exhausted his supply of magical energy. Instead, the mage drew a dagger, and advanced towards the commodore ...

Bardanas watched the mage approach, and smiled. Good. He had a chance yet. Bringing his feet up to rest on the edge of the balcony, his fingers brushed the draich on his back. Treacherous elf. The commodore would have no regrets this time.

As the High elf got close, Bardanas swung himself over the rail, using his draich to crush his foe's chest. He smiled, pushing the mage away, and sheathing his bloodied sword. It was done. The High elves had been defeated.

Balathir coughed, blood spewing onto his pristine white robes. The damned Druchii ... he had killed him ...

The mage turned to watch the Dark elf walk away, and hatred filled his mind. He tried to speak, but only blood came from his mouth, a hacking cough that only further damaged his shattered windpipe.

He leaned on his staff as strength left him. He was surprised he was still alive, but the Dark Elf must have missed his heart. You could never trust Druchii to do anything, even kill you. The thought made Balathir smile slightly, yet it was gone in a second as pain lashed through his dying body.

Balathir's hate filled gaze was still focussed on Bardanas' retreating form as he fell slowly to the ground with a dull thud. In a barely audible whisper, the mage hissed. "You'll regret that, Druchii," he warned, as the last vestiges of strength left his exhausted body and everything faded to pure white.

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The vampire's face was shadowed as he addressed Bardanas, but it was clear from his voice he was annoyed.

"You agreed! Mousillon was to be mine!" he hissed, losing his temper; a rare occasion, and a sign of how annoyed the vampire was.

Bardanas adopted a level tone to disguise his anger, watching his repeater crossbowmen surround the vampire. "I don't know what was agreed, vampire, but Skulliot is dead. Raise his corpse from the dead, and then discuss it with him! Anyway, what was Skulliot to get in return?"

The hooded figure calmed slightly, his face returning from bestial anger to calmness, albeit calmness that could return to anger in the blink of an eyelid. There was hope yet. His voice was low and broken, similar to his appearance. "Power. An army. Never to be frowned upon again, or tortured. Employment in the service of Nagash himself; as a raider working in his pay. And whatever the High Elves were searching for."

Bardanas frowned. "And you'd have the means to accomplish this?"

"Of course not for such a lowly captain as Skulliot, but for a commodore such as yourself I would be able to persuade my master to-" Bardanas' sword flickered near the vampire's neck.

"Tell your master - if he is Nagash, which I doubt - that Bardanas of the Corsairs serves no master but Malekeith and Khaine, vampire."

The figure hissed, throwing back his cloak to reveal an array of daggers over a black robe. A dozen skulls were also draped from the belt - which looked like human skin - and some of the elves recoiled. Bardanas did not even flinch. "I am not cowed by such displays, vampire. I have told you before, and I won't tell you again. Leave!"

The vampire hissed again, and his voice carried in the winds, a cutting whisper. "I am the Herald of Nagash, and you have just made the worst mistake you could. With your foolish words, you have doomed you and all your corsairs to a life of torment in the Pit of Nagashizzar, pirate. I will return, yet when I do it will be with an army beyond reckoning at my back. Hear these words and fear me, corsair!"

Bardanas adopted a fighting stance, and spat at the Herald's feet. "I have heard of you ... Herald. Your threats are empty, with no real meaning, for you have no power with your master, who sits in his chamber, isolated from the outside world." The sound of crossbows loading their lethal bolts filled the air, and the Herald looked around, suddenly out of control of the situation.

The vampire hissed, and green threads surrounded his body as he transformed into a hideous bat, which flapped its colossal wings and soared off into the night.

A Dark elf approached his master. "Captain, were his threats in vain, or was that bluffing?"

"In part, I was right. He has no power with his master, yet on the other hand, he is a formidable vampire himself." Bardanas hesitated, before turning to his surviving warriors. "Corsairs, prepare for war!"

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Jacques frowned as he followed Mallobaude through the narrow side passage leading out of Nagashizzar: what was his master's true intent, and why?

Without warning, the tall vampire began to speak, as if reading Jacques' thoughts. "I imagine you wonder about why I am freeing you," he began, his voice no longer a carrying hiss, but a quiet, barely audible, whisper. "It is because I care for Mousillon," the arch-vampire stated cryptically, as Jacques began to see light at the end of the tunnel.

"Yes, I care for Mousillon. And what becomes of it, unlike my master, who seeks to grind it into the dust. I was born in Lahmia, city of vampires, but it is here I have lived most of my life. And I have always had it under control ... until now."

Jacques frowned, intrigued. "Why? What happened?"

"Coreaux is what happened. His actions got the Herald interested in Mousillon, and therefore it became filled with civil strife once more. Other races have become alerted to its presence and the power it commands, the last truly vampire-controlled land in the old world. The elves that you know have infiltrated Mousillon, they are just the start of this: more are coming, even lizards from the far west, some say.

"And Coreaux uses it like my master would, should he gain control. A tool, an instrument of power ... merely a lever to propel him into the highest of ranks.

"And the Herald thinks the same, too," Mallobaude continued. "Nagash never had much regard for the lands he defiled, and neither does his servant. Mousillon would become a barren waste, a great summoning ground for countless necromancers. Preferable to a cleansing at the hands of Louencour, perhaps: but not much.

"And at the heart of this is the spear. You grew up here, you know of it. A great weapon: unbelievably powerful. And now Coreaux has it, he has the means to tear the land he 'cares for' apart. And worse, no one else can use it to stop him." Mallobaude frowned, leaving only the sound of dripping water, at least until Jacques' voice pierced the silence.

"Why? I thought anyone could wield it, or at least, a lot of people have."

Mallobaude paused momentarily. "A good question, young vampire. The answer is that when it was used as a great weapon, it was in its separate components, which themselves are very powerful. When combined, they form a lethal combination, but the incantation used means only one man can wield the full extent of its power: the Black Knight. If he is not such a man, only a small amount of power will seep through."

"Then how can Coreaux wield it?" Jacques asked, puzzled. He was making the most of his master's oddly sociable mood, but even if he hadn't been, he would have asked that: the question must be spoken, and he dreaded the answer. "I thought Jean was the Black Knight?"

Mallobaude laughed, the sound carrying through the tunnel: they were far enough from Nagashizzar for volume not to matter. "Of course not ... but then again, you have no way of knowing why. That was my fault ... it should be Jean: in fact, it seems logical that it was only Jean." Jacques stood stock still, his breathing slow and steady: he needed to calm himself, as the answer may shock and surprise him in equal measure. "But it is not," Mallobaude continued, his voice seeming slightly more strained than usual. "Coreaux is the Black Knight of Mousillon ... if you remember, early on, when he had just received the Lady's blessing, the knight slew Abhorash, my servant, and unwittingly took the curse upon himself. Though I summoned the vampire back from death, the harm was done. The person Jean killed was little more than a husk of Abhorash, with little skill or power left. By that time it was too late, though. Coreaux had become Black Knight and there was nothing I could do about it: he is the true master of the spear, at least until someone kills him." A gasp ripped from Jacques' throat: if what he had heard was true, one of his greatest enemies now had the power to destroy most of the Old World. But it made sense, however much it shocked and horrified him: he remembered a scribe's

talk to Louencour's court - which had included Jacques at the time - about the Black Knight being Abhorash and his role in Mousillon. Jacques paused for a second as Mallobaude began to speak. Would the arch-vampire finally reveal why he had told Jacques this?

"So you see, d'Eperon, there are few choices left to you: support Nagash or Coreaux, and grind your homeland into the dust; or try to stop them, and die."

Jacques' throat went dry. Was that why he had been freed ... to die? "Is there a third path?" he croaked.

Mallobaude smiled. "Aye. Join me ... and attempt to stop them using guerrilla attacks, cunning and subtle manipulations. It takes time, but is far more thorough and more effective than any other method." The vampire lord turned to Jacques, blazing red eyes staring into the tactician's own pits of darkness that were his eyes.

"So, those are your choices, fallen tactician of Mousillon. What say you?"

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"Undead, to the west!" yelled an elf from the wall, and Bardanas sprang into action, a coiled spring suddenly released. Dashing to the top of the city wall, he peered at the cloud of dust approaching. He couldn't make out much - he was a sailor, not a general - but it was clear a host of undead was approaching.

His voice rang out over the city, and as he spoke, bells began to toll and Dark Elves rushed to find poisoned daggers and crossbow bolts. "Friends, Druchii, Corsairs ... our time has come! This day, we shall prove our ultimate supremacy over life and death! Khaine shall feast, for today the enemy shall finally know death. Thousands of years the dead of this land have been risen from their final rest, yet upon this day we shall grant them that peace!

"Today is the day Malekeith became king, and today is the day we shall, like him, claim leadership over Mousillon. This day, the day of Victory, shall have its name proven yet one more time!

"Elves will say: I was there on the Day of Victory, when we fought as brothers, when we pushed back the undead. They shall relate how they were there when we finally claimed leadership over what is rightfully ours, for that is what we shall do upon this glorious day, this day of Victory!

"We stand alone, yet united as brothers of the sea we can bring a new age to Mousillon: an age where elfkind reigns supreme, an age where we, masters of sea and land, stride unchallenged through what was once the land of the short-lived humans.

"So wear your dragon cloak with pride, for today we shall prove again the mettle of our pasture! Like the hydra, every aspect of force shall act as one being, and so we shall have a fluent defence. Like the manticores we shall strike righteous fear into our foes' hearts, and like the dragon we will destroy the enemy, upon this day, this Day of Victory!

"Druchii ... ready yourselves, for our time has come, and the new age is upon us. But will we fall back when the new age comes crashing down? No! For it shall be an age where Druchii wield the hammer that will strike the anvil, and our foes shall be the metal that takes the blow and shatters.

"Corsairs ... we will fight, and shall win! On this sea of dust and bones our arrows shall strike true, and the very sight of a corsair shall strike fear into the hearts of our foes.

"And as the foes approach, our cries shall once more rend the air ... "For Malekeith, Naggaroth and for Khaine!"

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Coreaux's horse beat a steady rhythm on the hardened ground as he rode towards the undead host near Mousillon: Jean had finally arrived. The wight had taken his time, but Coreaux was grateful nonetheless.

He spurred his steed on as the horse's barding slapped against his feet: if he was fast, he could take command of the

wights and take Mousillon himself. He would enjoy the chance to take back what was rightfully his while he was fully conscious.

If only he hadn't sent Adrek away ... wait. Dark horses with black barding were just visible a short distance away, slowly riding towards Coreaux from Jean's host: Adrek was here. It appeared luck was with him today: victory would be his this day, and his troops would be re-heartened to see him retake the ancient city with the power of the Damned Spear.

But something pierced his veil of arrogance and seemingly impenetrable confidence ... the way Adrek's knights were moving didn't indicate good humour or that they were pleased to see him ... rather, it seemed to indicate they were ready to fight, and kill. Why? What had happened?

Dread filled Coreaux, yet even as he turned his horse, Adrek's riders had encircled him; their fangs still red from feeding. Desperately, the vampire lord tried to blast them into oblivion, but nothing happened: the spear remained as effective as a normal spear. Every time he began to weave a spell, the weavings fell apart, sheared by an unseen knife.

Coreaux snarled, catching a glimpse of their black banner flickering out of the corner of his eye. Adrek smiled, exposing long fangs. "Coreaux ... why fight? We come not to kill, or to destroy you. No, we are merely an escort. Though, unfortunately, should you resist, we will be forced to fight you." As an afterthought, the vampire added: "Oh, and our banner is stopping all magical effects of your spear. This fight will be won by skill alone, master."

The Vampire lord snarled, cornered. There was no escape. His spear had a little power in combat, but too little to help much here: the only power he now received was the same as an ordinary mortal would receive, a thin stream trickling from a gushing river of power.

But Coreaux could not give in. He lowered his spear, and charged at Adrek, wishing he had trained more with mortal weapons on horseback. His arrogance gone, the Vampire lord attempted to slash at the traitor, but his spear met thin air. Adrek drew his sword as he steered his horse sideways, keeping his eyes on the Damned Spear.

Coreaux hissed, and let a red fury take over, clouding his vision. In a flurry of attacks, the vampire lord launched himself at Adrek, a living missile.

The rebel vampire smiled faintly as he dodged the attacks and brought his armoured fist down on Coreaux's head, watching the vampire crumple to the floor.

Adrek hastily took the spear from Coreaux's fingers, a gleam of exhilaration and joyfulness in his eyes.

But it was short-lived. A figure stepped out of the shadows, a black cloak wrapped around him. His hood hid all but white fangs. "Mine, I think you will find," the Herald hissed.

The Herald smiled as Adrek laid the spear at his feet, and the arch vampire nearly split into an evil cackle as the fallen body of Coreaux was laid at his feet ... it had all gone so well. But why was Adrek behaving as he was?

"My lord," the lesser vampire began, "It is an honour to serve you that only the greatest of my order can even dream of. To even see Walach himself is an honour above all others ... I am honoured."

So that was it. Mallobaude had been plotting his downfall ... but soon he would wish he had never even thought of it ... with this simple move, the Herald had killed two birds with one stone. The arch vampire smiled. "My thanks, young Adrek. It is an honour to have such devoted servants serve me." The Herald noticed a faint sign of confusion flitter across Adrek's face, but it didn't matter. The vampire was insignificant, and even if that was not how Mallobaude would talk to his lesser vampires, it mattered little.

The Herald picked up the spear, and felt power flow through his veins as he unlocked its hidden power ... power only either the Black Knight could use ... or so legends claimed. Its creator, 'lost in history', had the most right and power to wield it if anyone did.

Green flames shot up around him and Coreaux, and as his form slowly faded, moving back to Nagashizzar, the Herald couldn't help but smile, observing how little power it took to teleport compared to the vast reserves of power he had at his control.

The Old World would fall, and the Herald would be the one to make it fall.

Adrek frowned. Something hadn't seemed quite ... right ... about Mallobaude. Odd. Still, he had fulfilled his task? Given his master the spear and body?

Unease and strange, alien, suspicions filled his mind, yet Adrek got them under control, and turned back to face Jean's battle lines. What could he do now? The answer was obvious, yet it seemed too obvious: help conquer Mousillon. Some strange instinct told Adrek not to do so, however. A suspicion ... he was paranoid, perhaps because of the odd behaviour of the cloaked figure, but somehow he felt this was real. Solid. Important.

Adrek frowned, and looked up to the sky as if seeking an answer, and his red eyes widened. A layer of thick black covered the horizon to the East, a thick storm heading nearer. Exactly the sort of storm an army would march under.

His steed had felt oddly nervous today, and now he knew why: a storm, such as would shake the Earth itself. The lesser vampire breathed heavily. Had he made a mistake by giving the spear to the cloaked figure? Had it even been the right figure?

The storm clouds seemed to be growing closer. Adrek hissed, and turned his steed to the North, followed by his knights. As the knights rode away, distant thunder resounded throughout the plains.

It had begun.

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Mallobaude sipped his glass of blood slowly, watching Arkhor's face like a hawk. "This is a new age Arkhor. You know what is happening ... I trust I do not have to explain to you the Herald's motives. He now has the spear and Coreaux, meaning we may fail ... but not if you help. With your host, it is possible to push back his armies and end his twisted ambitions once and for all."

Arkhor frowned. "But what's in it for me? Last time I served you all I received was verbal abuse and torture. How can I trust that you won't do the same this time, brother?"

Mallobaude's face remained expressionless. "If we win, I can restore your powers as a vampire: no longer must you be a wight, trapped inside your own body in eternal torment ... I can grant you freedom. And this time I cannot afford to punish you ... for one thing, I will have no time. It had begun, Arkhor. The call of return has been sounded, and even now Adrek's deepest senses draw him to gather the knights of Blood Keep. And even now, the hordes of Nagahsizzar are on the march.

"And where will you stand if the Herald wins? The last true servant of Mousillon, doomed to a life of being hunted in the wilderness by vampires stronger and more skilled than you?"

As he laid his sword on the table, Arkhor's resonating voice was like greased steel. "Brother, I would rather die than that. But this is not the only option. Leave here. Why are you so devoted to Mousillon, Mallobaude? Leave and seek dominance elsewhere."

"But there is nowhere else to go that remains. Mousillon is the last bastion of the undead," Mallobaude hissed. "Here alone Blood Dragons reign, in perfect freedom. And if we can push the Herald back, it will remain so. If not, we doom ourselves to the life of an outcast, brother. And that has never been our fate - never."

Arkhor frowned, knowing his half-brother was right. His reply was as emotionless as ever. "My forces will take to the field, and when they march, Mousillon will tremble, for I march at their head, risen from death once more. Hear this, brother, and know that Arkhor of Mousillon will take to the field before this age is over."

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Adrek reined his horse in, riding over to Arkhor. "Arkhor!" he exclaimed. "I have been looking for you ... the Return has begun, and we must answer the call."

Arkhor frowned, watching the impetuous knight carefully. "The Return can wait, Adrek. Another year won't matter. There is more important business to attend to now," He proclaimed, watching a small Dwarf Dragon crawl out of a crevice in the rock and hiss at them. "If you leave now, you have doomed Mousillon: even now, the Herald's forces are on the march."

Adrek hissed, dismounting his steed. "What devilry is this?" he asked, bitterly. "Three nights ago I granted Mallobaude himself the Damned Spear ... and now I hear the Herald is still alive, and, worse, attacking Mousillon?"

Arkhor sighed. "It is your fault, Adrek. You couldn't have known, but it is, and therefore up to you to help put it right. The Herald, creator of the Spear, tricked you, pretending to be Walach, and took the Spear. Coreaux is dead. Mallobaude has finally unlocked all the power of the Spear, after all these years. And even now, his forces march to Mousillon, determined to destroy the last treat to his rule once and for all."

Adrek snarled at the accusation, but it fitted ... the odd behaviour of the cloaked figure ... the storm to the East. "And you want me to fight? If Coreaux's forces are gathering, I'm pointing my horse in the other direction. Most of them probably want to kill me now, especially Jean, as I handed Coreaux to the wrong vampire." Adrek drew his sword. "I will not be a servant again, and nothing will force me to return. I have played my part, and now I must move on."

Arkhor snarled, still watching the Dwarf Dragon intently. "But where will you run to? The World is closing in, and the only way to stop your ultimate destruction is to win here, upon the plains of Mousillon. You may be our last hope, Adrek. Like the Dwarf Dragon, a miniature version of its great namesake, you must find your place ... or die."

Adrek mounted his steed, his face contorting into a hideous snarl. "I have spoken, Arkhor. Nothing will make me return, not now. Not ever." The Blood Knight dug his spurs into his steed, and the stallion sprang into a gallop, followed by the steeds of Adrek's knights.

Arkhor hissed quietly. But he had no time to persuade the stubborn knight to join the fight: he had to reach Mousillon, and fast.

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The skill to build reaper bolt throwers quickly is not one often needed by corsairs, yet it is one of their greatest assets in a siege, in addition to their skills at defending fortress-ships. The pirates moved with an ease born of a cold calmness, and the experience born from thousands of years sailing the oceans.

And now it paid off, as five foot long black bolts swept through ranks of wights, destroying them and returning them to their final rest. Horses fell to the floor, their bodies crushed as the massive arrows smashed into their unprotected necks. Blood stained the ground as the wights advanced, but it seemed nothing could stop their relentless advance. The steady beating of armoured feet on the hard soil shook the walls of Mousillon itself as the wights marched on, blue lights blazing in the pits of their eyes.

An unseen wind blew their banners as the regiments steadily advanced, seemingly unperturbed by the gigantic bolts decimating their army. In perfect unison, the wights moved onwards, the will of their lord propelling them into battle.

Bardanas watched the Reaper bolt throwers unleash their lethal missiles like striking snakes, but even he could see it was pointless. There were so many wights ... the Reaper bolt throwers had killed almost a hundred by now, yet still they marched onwards, not faltering, not hesitating even for a moment.

The experienced corsair couldn't help but feel unnerved by the ruthless advance of the undead, but he swiftly calmed himself. Panic would mean failure, and failure meant death.

His voice wavered slightly as he addressed his corsairs. The undead were close now: barely two hundred yards from the walls. "Corsairs," he began. "Begin to load grapeshot," he ordered. A risky tactic - especially with such crude bolt throwers - but a hail of pointed weapons slowed most enemies. Some inner doubt warned him that it wouldn't work against opponents with such great endurance, but it was worth a try. Normal bolts did too little for it to be of any effect.

A rousing cheer went up from the elves as the first snap of rope and swish of flying missiles went through the air, followed by rewarding clatter and thud of weapons against armour and bone.

Bardanas looked at the wights, and could see the first rank was half-destroyed by the impact. Good. Another volley, and the enemy forces would suffer a great disadvantage in the battle to come.

But no volley came. Bardanas turned to look at the corsairs, and then saw where their eyes were focussed. A ragged gasp escaped his lips.

Lightning flashed far to the East, illuminating the sky, which was entirely dark: everything was turning black, light dulled by some monstrous spell. Lightning lanced down again, and Bardanas' eyes widened. For he could not see the ground ... standing from his vantage point, to the dark east all he could see was moving figures ... a horde that dwarfed any other. At this distance they were smaller than ants, but they were there: countless moving figures, covering all the ground to the east. And - Bardanas swallowed - they were heading towards Mousillon.

His gaze snapped from the horizon as a crash dulled all other noise. He blinked, not quite understanding what he was seeing. Then realization snapped in. A ram. The wights were at the gates. "Corsairs, to arms! Fire! Fear! Foes!"

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The great dragon split the skies as it shrieked, an ear-splitting roar that shook the mountains themselves. The beast had maintained its previous instincts and skills after he had possessed it, the Herald remarked mentally in satisfaction as it stretched its vast wings.

The mountain beneath it was silhouetted for an instant as lightning flashed through the skies, followed by a great rumble: the Earth shaking in fear. The Herald surveyed his army briefly before, with another great shriek, the almighty beast kicked off into the sky with a beat of its great pinions.

Beneath him, the army marched in unison, rank upon rank of black armoured figures shaking the ground itself as they marched to war. Every one of them a wight or skeleton, the Herald knew this was one force none other could stand against. He would show his foes the true meaning of fear.

Another great spear of forked lightning stabbed through the dark sky, the wrath of the gods themselves. But this god was a vampire, a lord of undeath whose very name conjures fear into the hearts of every mortal living. Nagash. The Great lord himself had provided a portion of his power for this, final mission of the Herald, Master of the Dark.

The dragon swooped down near to the zombies, and as if in answer, throats that should not have been able to speak began a quiet whisper, yet magnified thousands of time by the number of undead chanting the single word: "Nagash ..."

The Herald's eyes gleamed red in the dark night as he watched the host of Nagash march to war.

+++++

Jean's skull-face stared into the East. If a skull could show any emotion, Jean's would have shown panic. Clearly even if he was successful in conquering Mousillon now, he had a massive battle ahead of him: the horde was vast.

Mentally, he thought through all the options available, yet it seemed the only choices left were to attack and take the city, or flee. And if he fled, it was only postponing his fate ... no, he had to face his destiny, and fight on, despite the odds.

The wights seemed unperturbed, thankfully: the ram still shook the ground as it thudded into the strong iron of the door fruitlessly.

However, Jean's greatest weapon had yet to be revealed ...

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Adrek felt adrenaline pump through his veins, filling him with exhilaration, as his steed raced through the open plains, to a fortress where some innate ability told him another vampiric knights would be waiting to heed his call.

It was a small fort, yet its gates were large enough to admit him mounted, and they swung open as he approached. Panting lightly, he swung from his steed, and entered the large hall, ignoring the guards at its large doors. "The Return has been sounded!" he declared, voice carrying across the room to a knight that stood facing him, whose face was pale, yet not openly vampiric.

"And Godfrey the Cursed will answer," replied the knight, his face showing a hint of recognition at Adrek. "When and to whence to we ride?"

It was the same everywhere else: all over Mousillon and surrounding lands, hidden vampires answered the call, once again taking up their dragon lances in the name of Walach.

But as Adrek's long hair flew behind him while he and his followers rode to yet another fortress, he knew it was something he should not have done: he should have helped Arkhor. But it was too late now ... he couldn't turn back. Unless ...

He could kill two birds with one stone: he could start the Return here, at Mousillon. And it would start with freeing the city itself.

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How long had it slept? Centuries, without thought or being. A spirit, as powerful as the wind itself. As strong as a sceptre, for that was what it had become: less than nothing, blasted into oblivion by the spell of a mere mortal - who could have imagined such power in the hands of a human?

Yet the emptiness inside had faded now. He had an identity again, a body ... he was Kor'ath the Reaper once more. Not just a voice that had whispered to a vampire to gain power, no longer a being trapped within an ancient weapon, drained of power by its master.

How the spell had been broken, Kor'ath had no idea ... when the Herald had used his essence to bind the spear; the ancient being had thought the torment would last forever.

No longer would he exist in shadow, though. Coreaux had freed him, and now he was free, he would have vengeance.

A breath of ice escaped the unbound Golem's helmet as he flexed his fingers once more, ready to wreak havoc one final time.

+++++

Coreaux gave a feeble hiss, the bindings holding back all other noise as the winds hissed around the great dragon he was tied to. In his mind, thought rushed past in rhythm with the great beating wings: where was he, and what had the Herald done?

The Arch-Vampire vaguely remembered Adrek attacking him after the lack of magic had weakened him. The treacherous wretch! He had struck just when Coreaux was at his weakest; as he had only just freed the revenant ... he hoped it was worth the trouble. If he was going to be sacrificed, he only hoped his dying act was one that would benefit his own side in the battles to come.

The wind tore at his form - which was held still with magic - as Coreaux remained stationary, considering the future. That banner of Adrek's ... why hadn't he known about it? It had nearly killed him. He doubted it would help against the Herald, but still, it chafed.

Like, he reflected ruefully, his magical bonds did.

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The wall smashed open, rubble showering all over the city. Bardanas' eyes widened in shock and horror as he stared at the stretch of wall where - once - there had been a gate. A massive, reinforced gate ... now there was just a pile of dust. And rubble. And twisted metal ... what the hell could do that amount of damage to such a wall?

Bloody hell, he thought, what had the undead brought with them? The rubble showered down like a solid rain, every piece of stone giving an elf his well needed rest. The air itself was dark grey ... Bardanas' eyes widened even further as he realized what it was ... marble. Again, his mind repeated those two words, words he had never really had much cause to use before, or at least justifiably. Bloody Hell.

Jean had never anticipated the level of destruction caused by the revenant, but he was prepared. As rubble flew into the air, his forces slowly advanced, blue fires burning in the pits of their eyes. Once again, the steady rhythm that was the pounding of hundreds of armoured feet sounded throughout the city, and Jean's skeletal face contorted into what was the closest a wight could get to a smile.

Kor'ath let his momentum carry him onwards into the midst of the foes, his vast metallic form causing havoc: a small figure, perhaps, but one with a strength born of thousands of years of imprisonment. The wall had been easier than it had looked, the being reflected: for all its height and majesty, the gate was battered and broken already. After that, it was simply a matter of emerging from the rubble to assault the foe that had gathered.

Bolts rained down fruitlessly upon his metal hide as the great golem caused havoc, his armoured fists blazing with power as he swung them around, knocking elves to the floor, and slaying dozens of the enemy.

It was good to be free again. The revenant was already enjoying himself: his blows were hitting with deadly accuracy, the suit of animated armour moving with a startling speed. His bronze helmet was tall and magisterial, fires burning in the hollow of Kor'ath's armour as he exerted all his long-trapped power.

An elf sprung at him, and he spun around, barely moving his legs as he disembowelled the elf with a vicious upper cut from a metal gauntlet. The upper half of his body spun back around, just in time to catch another elf, an elf with a heavy sword raised. This time Kor'ath kicked up the weak creature, and flung him into his own ranks. A hissing possibly something akin to manic laughter escaped the revenant's bronze helm as he watched the carnage. A fist blazed with light, and Kor'ath smashed another elf to the floor, eating him into a bloody mess on the floor with a single blow.

As he drained the elf's life essence with a simple spell contained within his armour, Kor'ath's eyes blazed with light once more.

He was free.

Bardanas watched the revenant, and smiled. This would be easy. The creature was making small mistakes already ... wasting time. Bardanas doubted he could kill the animated armour, but he had tackled golems before, and knew how to handle them: tire them, and force them into small spaces they have difficulty fighting in.

The commodore could see there was only one path of action. He paused slightly to take a deep breath, and then slowly sheathed his draich. The corsair frowned for a moment, and then proceeded to leap onto the revenant's back like an angry insect, with a battle cry that rang throughout the city. "For Naggaroth!"

Kor'ath hissed as the creature landed on his back. Easily dealt with, though. His glowing armoured fist smashed through the air, and ... missed. The elf had dodged, wretched creature.

Another blow, this time with brutal speed and aggression. The elf was knocked aside this time, and a thin hiss of satisfaction escaped Kor'ath's helm as the foolish being lay shuddering on the floor.

The metal golem slowly raised a bronze gauntlet ...

Right, Bardanas thought. This wasn't going too well. He needed to work on his dodging when he returned to Naggaroth. He'd always suspected his teachers hadn't educated him properly. He may have to kill them for that.

Turning back to the task at hand, Bardanas dived aside as the fist lashed down, barely avoiding the crackling, lightning-wreathed gauntlet. He really should stop getting distracted by-

Another blow, and the corsair lord jumped aside, drawing his draich. He couldn't dodge forever.

Kor'ath let out a great hiss-roar of annoyance as the prey dodged once more, this time attempting to hit his target with both fists. The golem swung around, and again tried to lash out with a fist, but the nimble elf darted out of the way, and some form of puny sword dented his armour. The golem's eyes glowered: the elf had actually harmed him!

Looking around, he saw that the elf had dashed back towards the gate. Ignoring the other prey, the revenant bounded towards the fleeing elf, prepared to inflict vengeance upon the foolish creature that dared defy him.

Bardanas let out a yell as he dashed through the city, towards the gate: a yell of terror, but more a yell to attract the golem towards him. Somehow "I'm over here" would not have the same impact.

The elf rolled over masonry in a fluid movement as he ran frantically towards the gate, his draich now sheathed. The scale cloak on his back shielded him as he swung himself off a beam and inside a cavity created inside a wall next to the gate.

Breathing heavily, Bardanas relaxed momentarily, though his eyes still darted around, searching for the metal form of the golem.

Had it worked? He dared not think about what would happen if it hadn't.

Kor'ath's metal form strode ever faster as it followed Bardanas with relative ease. He couldn't help but admire the elf, though, for his agility and speed: he was almost as fast as Kor'ath himself!

The metal golem rounded a corner, and looked around for the elf. Nothing. Pausing, he turned to look for the elf, scanning the masonry for any sign of the corsair lord. If any expression had shown on the golem's face, it would have been puzzlement.

Then ... he caught a glimpse of some metal ... a sword. A body? Was that his prey?

The revenant slowly turned ...

Bardanas tensed himself, seeing the great metal bulk next to him slowly turn around, and he gripped his draich tightly, clinging on to it in desperation.

But he knew it was of no more use as soon as the golem turned. The sword clattered to the floor, ringing around the deserted area of rubble. The sound was eerie and loud in the silence. The golem turned a bit more, and Bardanas thought he could just make out glowing eyes in the pits of the metal helm.

He breathed heavily, no longer caring about being heard. The golem knew he was here. The creature turned a fraction more, and its gleaming 'eyes' focussed on the corsair lord, who exhaled a long, slow breath.

Then, the Commodore leapt out of the crevice, pushing with all his strength and propelling himself directly into the golem's head.

The revenant staggered back, seemingly blocked of sight, and flailed out with a hand. But the elf was too quick, and

dodged. The fist missed, and Bardanas, dodging a second blow, drew a long dagger. Another swipe, and this time, the elf grabbed the towering golem's metallic arm, attaching himself to it like a limpet. A thin hiss escaped the revenant's helm, and Bardanas had to move around the arm to dodge another ferocious blow.

Wind rushed past him as the arm was smashed at lightning speed against a rock, but Bardanas leapt up again, this time latching onto the revenant's back, dagger still in hand.

A smell of old metal greeted him as he pressed close to the golem, evading blows by lying flat. The dagger shook slightly in his hand as he swiftly coated it in a warpstone-based poison sometimes used by skaven. He swiftly drew out some oil, and wiped it just beneath the revenant's helm. He was ready.

But before he could act, a blow knocked him to the floor, and the golem raised a fist, finally ready to kill this annoying elf. Bardanas' eyes widened, and he rolled aside, leaping onto the revenant's leg in a single, fluid motion. Hands slick with oil, he climbed as fast as possible, dodging the blows aimed at him until he came to the creature's back. The corsair lord then suddenly kicked off from the golem's back, staggering the creature slightly and propelling the elf into the air, dragon cloak whipping around him as he fell back down with an increasing velocity.

It was simple, and easy ... his long dagger hit precisely where he had added a thin coating of oil, and the risky move paid off. Bardanas' dagger slipped into the crack between the helmet and back armour, the corsair lord's momentum driving it deeply into the suit of armour, deadly warpstone poison touching and corroding the armour.

The golem's arms thrashed about wildly as the warpstone potion took effect, slowly rendering his form useless and killing the magical spirit held inside.

Bardanas leapt away, watching the gigantic creature slowly fall to the floor, arms slowly losing energy and lying still as the metallic creature hit the floor, sending vibrations through the ground.

A cloud of steam seemed to hiss out of the armour as it finally lay still, cracking the pieces of metal and making the helmet roll away slightly. Bardanas sighed in satisfaction. The golem was dead.

A wry thought filled his mind, and he smiled. Perhaps he missed his path in life. He should have been an assassin ... it appeared he was good at this inhuming business. Inhuming giant, animated suits of armour with spirits trapped inside, anyway.

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But it wasn't over. The smoke hadn't cleared yet. The undead host hadn't retreated ... no, if anything, Bardanas had more to worry about.

The mist parted, unseen and un-felt winds tearing the white walls apart. And slowly, figures became visible, ghostly winds blowing black armoured figures into the city of Mousillon. A sound echoed throughout the city: the tramping of hundreds of feet.

Bardanas' eyes widened, and he turned and ran, leaning backwards slightly as he jumped over the masonry. A scream emitted from his wide-open mouth as he fled, running from the wights, running from the blazing blue eyes of death. "Fire! Fear! Foes!"

He wasn't entirely sure where the "fire" came into it, but hopefully his elves wouldn't shoot him for ordering them to "fire".

The corsairs had formed into a defensive line by the time Bardanas reached him, and they stared at him expectantly. What did they want? He turned, and looked behind him, shading his eyes with a hand to stop the moon blinding him - more for style than use, really.

"Oh," he said, seeing no undead. No mist. No ... "Ah," he said, his voice showing he had detected something. A shape in the mist. Momentarily off-guard, the Commodore pointed to behind the formation. He swallowed. "Er," he began, unsure of what to say. But he may as well tell them the truth. "They're over there, my lovely carbuncles. Not over here, I'm afraid, though you may enjoy staring at me ... was that an excuse to smile?" Bardanas drew his pistol, annoyed by their blank stares. Sometimes pirates can be as bad as golems in that respect. Very worrying stares. Even at this time, they still managed to find some flaw with his plans.

"Go kill them, then!" he ordered, exasperated. He could have sworn he heard a corsair saying something akin to "the captain's acting a little strange" before he turned to face the foe, but all such thoughts were forgotten as the wights reached the disorganized battle line ...

Bardanas swore as he attempted to raise the sails by himself. This wasn't working ... he had formed a wonderful plan. It was brilliant ... he left, leaving his crew to die, and he could say he was the one survivor when he returned. No fleeing involved, except when a vast undead horde outnumbered him by as thousand to one.

And no lying, too. He was good at lying, though. His mother had once told him he had as much honour as a serpent, and though at the time he had no idea what she meant, he had strived to live up to her expectations.

But now ... grr. He, an experienced sailor, was struggling to get his ship to sail. After all these years ... he was disappointed in himself. "Commodore Bardanas" was his name, yet how did he deserve it if he couldn't sail a reaver ship by himself?

Darras covered his eyes with a hand, watching his captain attempt to sail the ship. The bosun couldn't help but be ashamed by the self-styled Commodore. Sailing away by yourself simply lacked the style that a corsair needed. How could anyone look at Bardanas and not be ashamed?

Around him, corsairs were falling in dozens, the wights using their long swords to massacre the weak elves. Darras frowned as he decapitated another undead warrior. There was clearly no way to win ... even now, the sounds of fleeing pirates were beginning to resound throughout the city (pirates have an unfortunate flaw in their character: they can't flee quietly. It's all to do with style).

Darras glanced back to his captain, and reached a decision. "Pirates, back to the Dagger! Hurry!" He thought the captain must have been drunk when he had chosen Dagger (What sort of person stabs someone with a ship?), but the name wasn't important now. What was important was stopping the ruddy commodore escaping with the ship!

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Jean approached the lone figure, who was standing, with an empty in his hand, watching the retreating Dagger. The wight king frowned. This was a Dark Elf ... why hadn't he fled like the others when they holed the ships and fled? The elf appeared to be drunk - or at least, his words seemed to show some kind of drunkenness. His voice seemed fairly normal - as normal as an elf's voice ever gets.

The wight's voice was hollow. "Who are you, elf?"

The elf seemed to think this was unreasonable, or that something was wrong. "No rum. I always suspected the buggers, but they left me no rum, the bloody pirates. Nothing to drink. Unless you can drink a pistol, me summoned carbuncle. Which I doubt even you can do, yer high wight." Jean frowned, and repeated his words, but the pirate wasn't listening.

"No rum ... why is the rum always gone? Bloody pirates." Jean's voice displayed his distaste. "Take him to the brink."

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Arkhon watched the storm. It was getting closer to Mousillon. It always was. And he needed to reach there before that storm: when its first prongs touched the city, all hell would break loose.

Behind him, his own army marched steadily, the footsteps of countless zombies filling the air with a rhythmic beat, the steady marching of skeletons providing a snare drum of rustling footsteps while the ghouls scattered around, adding the shrieks of electric guitars. It was a small force, but Arhor hoped it would be enough. He dreaded to think what would happen if it wasn't enough.

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Adrek watched his knights form up, observing the way they formed formations with ease. It gave him a sense of pride to watch them adopt such formations, and to know he had the finest warriors in the world at his command: not many, but enough.

But even now, he knew a storm was coming that would dwarf all others, and he would have to ride in the eye of the storm. Hissing faintly, he felt a wind brush against his back. Good. They had a favourable breeze: they would need it, if they were to reach the cursed city in time to save it. His voice pierced the air, as he turned to the knights that had assembled. "Blood Knights, we ride! To Mousillon, and Victory!"

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"The board is set, and the pieces are moving. But the enemy has the move, and against such power, what can a mere pawn do to stop the onslaught. No ... only by working together can the pawns hope to defeat the queen that is the foe, to be in the right place at the right time, and to become the dragon.

"This World is changing, and as the pieces move, the board itself twists in strange ways, shaped by the actions of the pieces themselves. And as reality itself twists beyond all possible imagination, will the storm be weathered by those who ride further into the maelstrom?"

Mallobaude, Lord of Mousillon.