

Chapter 1: The Lady Calls

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He was dreaming, of that Nicodemus was sure.

He floated through a black abyss that threatened to overwhelm him in its inky embrace. Yet he did not despair, he was a knight of Bretonnia! He had tasted the waters that flowed from the blessed cup of his Lady! He knew no fear in the yawning hole of the darkness around him, instead he patiently waited upon his Goddess's leisure for she had spoken to him thusly on various occasions throughout his life. Although, if he had been completely honest with himself, he would have admitted that each time was just as unnerving as the previous time.

He did not have to wait long, shades of color began rippling through the blackness and eventually a scene formed in front of Nicodemus's eyes. In this vision he beheld the image of a man lying in a cell, some kind of prisoner that had been beaten and tortured. His bearing spoke of nobility, perhaps even royalty, and his shoulders were those of a warrior born. Nicodemus watched as the door to his cell opened and a skittering child of Chaos entered the narrow room. The rat-like creature held a strange object in its hand, it pulsed with a faint green light beneath folds of withered cloth that lay over it in a futile gesture of disguising an artifact of great power. Even on the other side of an eternity looking at the scene from the detached visions of his Goddess, Nicodemus could feel the power emanating from the shrouded item. The ratman carefully removed the fabric to reveal a sword with a glowing emerald blade that had runes carved into its surface that writhed and swam in Nicodemus's vision as if they held a life of their own. Gently, the creature lifted the man's hand and placed the hilt of the enchanted weapon into his hand before chittering excitedly and scurrying out of the room.

Nicodemus watched as the man woke and stared first at the open door and then, inevitably, his gaze focused on the weapon in his hand. Gripping the sword tightly, the man pursed his lips and stood, moving towards the door. His feet padded softly against the rock walls as he made his way through the corridors of what was obviously a large stronghold until finally he arrived at a large, sturdy door. Breathing heavily in anticipation, the prisoner slowly opened the door and then Nicodemus saw what lay beyond the portal.

A large humanoid creature sat on a stone throne, its face was more like a skull than anything else, its body enlarged through what seemed to be various mutations. There was something oddly human about the shape, as if it were a distant cousin to humanity. Voluminous purple robes fell across the sitting form in luxurious waves. It seemed to be staring right at the prisoner yet did not stir as the door swung soundlessly open. Like a passing shadow, the man crept closer to the throne until he was standing directly in front of the abomination. He raised the glowing sword and prepared to strike. The world held its breath.

As the blow fell on the sitting, skeletal form some sixth sense seemed to stir the would-be corpse to some parody of life. Balefires flickered in the sockets of its eyes and it instantly took in the scene. A breathless scream echoed from the creature and it raised its hand to ward off the blow and in that regard was somewhat successful. The blow deflected off the creature's wrist, severing the hand at the joint, but flew wide of the intended target. The corpse screamed a raspy cry that shook the very stones of the keep. The scream grew in intensity as Nicodemus clasped his hands over his ears to block out the impossible sound. Higher and higher the noise trembled the very air with discordant notes of pain that set one's teeth abuzz and a trickle of blood streamed from the prisoner's eye as he staggered back from his would-be victim. A blackness welled up in the edges of Nicodemus's vision and threatened to throw him

into oblivion when the sound suddenly stopped as the skeletal figure imploded into a thousand particles that washed the room in an eerie green light before disintegrating into the very stone. The prisoner stood slowly and looked around the room in disbelief. The vision faded as he began running out of the chamber, still clutching the strange emerald blade with the caustic runes etched in its surface.

“Thus was Nagash struck down by the King Alcadizzar, a pawn to the Skaven menace that even now threatens the balance of this world,” a soft voice behind Nicodemus caused him to turn slowly, bracing himself for what he knew he would behold. He was disappointed to see another swirling vision before him instead of the majesty of his Lady, but he nevertheless looked into the vision as he knew what was expected of him.

Images flashed before his eyes and he watched as Alcadizzar wandered through the wastes, his own flesh wasting away as he staggered on, his eyes unseeing. Any creature that stood in his path was quickly struck down by the cruel blade that the maddened king held in his hand. Scenes played out of the King’s life, a short and cruel existence thereafter that ended with a violent death brought upon him by his ongoing addiction to the power that the sword had granted him. Upon his demise the blade fell back into the hands of the Skaven and was whisked back to their underground cavernous cities where warlords squabbled over the weapon with a demonic fervor.

“The weapon was too powerful for any one mortal creature to handle for any given time and so it was quickly passed between the short-lived skaven like a bad disease until it came to a certain gray seer by the name of Karsak, who saw an opportunity.” The vision shifted and showed a rat-creature with curling ram’s horns sprouting from the top of his skull holding the blade. “Using the blade as a template, this creature forged a new, more powerful version of this Fellblade, by utilising copious amounts of wyrdstone and making several demonic pacts that granted this new blade ever greater amounts of power from both this world and the world beyond.” Nicodemus watched as the new weapon took shape. Karsak summoned several demons who each in turn imbued the blade with even greater power all the while snarling at the rat wizard with an unfettered fury.

“How was he able to control the demons?” Nicodemus queried.

“By using forbidden and long since forgotten sorceries and an unusual amount of bravery and focus from such a cowardly and mantic race. However, these rites proved his undoing. Fatigue from the ongoing exposure to these two powerful artifacts mixed with anticipation of the weapon’s completion led Karsak to make a fatal error. In his final summoning he did not complete the ritual correctly and the demon burst through its bonds and tore Karsak to shreds rather than imbue the blade with its final enchantment. When his remains were finally uncovered the blades were seen as simply magical weapons and were again passed from chieftain to warlord until it came to rest in one of the nest cities underneath your beloved Bretonnia. It was here that the Lichemaster Heinrich Kemmler discovered the blade during a raid on the ratmen. Realizing what he held, Kemmler constructed a powerful scabbard that was capable of containing the unfinished weapon and he stole it away to Mousillon among one of his many caches in the vast necropolis cities that have been built there. His intentions were to keep the blade in order to challenge Nagash himself should he ever rise again, but Kemmler’s demise was foreseen long ago and has recently come to pass, much to our dismay.”

Nicodemus shook his head. “I do not understand why you are showing me these things.”

“You will understand, listen and it will become clear.” The images before Nicodemus shifted and showed an infernal gathering of undead ghouls and elven warriors gripped in the throes of battle. Far behind them some infernal

ritual was being performed, a dark amethyst light lending a foreboding light to the massacre happening all around it. "Nagash has risen again, the original Fellblade was a key component to his resurrection, among other infernal ingredients," at this the Lady's voice seemed to sneer in disgust, "but now the lord of the undead is once again made mortal and his existence has become a key piece of this world's salvation." At this Nicodemus could not hide his shock.

"You mean this abomination will save the world?" He sputtered.

"I mean that he will be part of its salvation. But not the only one."

"How can that be? He defies the very order of nature! How can his continued existence be a good thing?"

"That is not for you to question, my servant, or have you forgotten your place?"

Nicodemus fell to his knees and bowed his head. "I am sorry, my Lady! Please forgive me!" There was a long pause that seemed to stretch over the knight like stones placed on his shoulders.

"You are forgiven, but you shall not question me again," Nicodemus nodded and the voice continued, "The Skaven have long been aware of the loss of their fabled weapon and have come to search for its copy, knowing that it was last seen being taken by Kemmler into Mousillon. They have sent an army to reclaim the weapon, and to destroy anyone who gets in their way. The Ruinous powers have also taken note of this weapon, realizing its potential use against their enemy, for they see Nagash as a threat to their Grand Game. They, too, have dispatched their champions to rain down destruction on your homeland. While my champion, Gilles le Breton has gathered the armies of your nation to him and prepares for the onslaught, he is unable to stop the coming violence as he prepares for another mission for which I have prepared him. You are the last hope for your people in this regard. I want you to go to Mousillon and find the Blade. You must keep it safe from the grasping hands of Chaos. It is imperative that you do so. If not, all may be lost."

Nicodemus raised his head, at last his eyes fell on the glory that was his Lady.

"I will do as you command, my Lady." His eyes rested only a moment on the beauty before him before once again inclining his head. A soft, glowing hand reached down and once again lifted his head so that his eyes met hers.

"There is one thing more that you must see, and it pains me to show you." Her face was pulled down in a concerned look, Nicodemus nodded.

"I am ready for whatever you would require of me," he replied. In an instant the scenery changed and

Nicodemus found himself sitting in a tent beside the prone form of a woman. Her once pretty face was thinned by sickness and her eyes were closed. Her chest rose and fell in shallow gasps and her hair, normally silky and voluminous, was now plastered to her skin with sweat. The features and details of this vision were so sharp that it took Nicodemus a moment to realize why: this was a memory, not a vision. Nicodemus watched as he took a damp cloth and laid it across the woman's forehead, he had no control over the movement. He couldn't, it was a memory, and he couldn't change a memory even if he wanted when the Lady had summoned it. The woman groaned and shifted weakly on her bedroll. This was Kalia, the husband to Nicodemus's great friend, and she was dying. That could only mean that this memory...

"No! Please! Do not make me relive this. I beg you!" Nicodemus screamed from behind his eyes, the sound never leaving through his mouth because he had not said such things in his memory. A sudden gust of wind pushed open the tent flap and Nicodemus turned to see the startling visage of Kalia's husband.

Aantar had changed, he now wore a strange set of intricate, baroque armor that was tinged the color of midnight, a regal blue cape swirled behind him. But this was not the most startling change. His head was now completely shorn and his skin was milky white, but the most startling thing of all was his eyes. Once a bright blue they were now bloody red, and crimson rivulets ran down his face as if he had wept bitter tears that had carved their path through the skin of his cheeks down past his chin. Aantar barely saw his friend.

"How is she?" He asked, his voice as dry as the barren wasteland outside of the tent.

"Not good, what did you find in there?" Nicodemus's voice screamed urgency. Aantar did not even respond, simply brushed his friend aside and knelt beside his wife's sleeping form. Gently he scooped his hand behind her head and carefully lifted her up, placing his other arm around her waist he hugged her feverish body to him. Nicodemus watched again as sanguine tears tore themselves from bloodshot eyes as Aantar's body began to shake from uncontrollable sobs. Slowly the armored giant began rocking back and forth, his body a gentle metronome to the soft sounds of his grief. In time Nicodemus heard him beginning to whisper something softly into her ear.

"I'm so sorry! I tried so hard... I really did... I can't...!" He buried his face into her hair, hugging her tight with the hand behind her head, the other hand coming out to rest on his belt, "There is no other way, though." Then in one swift motion, Aantar slid his knife from its sheath and rammed it firmly into his wife's heart.

The world tilted, and the clarity of memory shifted to the exaggeration of a dream. Nicodemus knew this dream well, he'd had this nightmare regularly for the past ten years, ever since the memory had become too horrible for him to remember properly. Nicodemus's body flew to its feet.

"What have you done!?" He accused. Aantar slowly laid the body of his wife down and looked up at his friend. Outside of the tent, Nicodemus was vaguely aware of the sounds of steel on steel and the screams of dying men.

"It was the only way to save her, Nicodemus. Nurgle had her in his grasp and I was promised that if I killed her

that she would be left free, that the gods would not concern themselves with her. It was the only way! You have to believe me!" Nicodemus stared in abject horror at the words coming out of his friend's mouth.

"The gods showed me the end of all things, they showed me so many things, all of them terrible. I have seen how this world dies, and it does so to the flowing of blood and the screams of the butchered. I brought her mercy in denying her those things!" Nicodemus stood back further and drew his sword from its scabbard, the metallic smell of the oiled blade filling the tension between the two warriors. Aantar searched Nicodemus's face for something, and his face fell when he did not find it.

"I will not resist the commands of my lord, southlander. If you dare bring steel against me you'd best be prepared to use it!" Aantar snarled and leapt at Nicodemus with the bloody dagger still in his hand, his sword flying free of his waist in an equally quick manner. The dream shifted the landscape and somehow they were now outside, fighting across the white dunes while a maelstrom swirled about them. Shadows of Nicodemus's men fighting against great hulking brutes dotted the peripherals of the duel between the former friends, each one ended with a bloody scream followed by a meaty thunk and then silence. Nicodemus was barely keeping track of Aantar's blades, each strike barely deflected, narrowly dodged. The old knight could only see to his defense, any attacks were purely reflexive in nature. In the nightmarish fashion of this memory turned dream, Aantar's features were twisted and demonic with the exception of his eyes which combined to make his entire visage that much more terrifying. His all-too-human eyes staring out at Nicodemus, pleading with him to end it all.

As he knew it would happen, a dried up dead tree appeared behind Nicodemus. Twisting his blade to the left, Aantar's riposte tore Nicodemus's blade from his hands and in one smooth motion the northman grabbed his hands at the wrist and with his dagger pierced through both of them in one fluid motion with such force that the blade carried through into the trunk of the dead tree. Inside his own mind Nicodemus screamed.

"Why show me this?" He yelled, "what purpose does it serve?"

"To remind you of your promise," came the reply

"What promise?" Nicodemus watched what came next with a falling sensation in his stomach.

"The promise you made to your friend. The promise I am calling upon you now to fulfill." The Lady's voice was fading. Nicodemus could not tear his attention away from the events unfolding before him, he knew them by heart already but each time the pain was renewed as if there could be no emotional callous to cover such trauma. Aantar bent slowly to be level with Nicodemus's ear, the fateful words dropped from his mouth in a hushed whisper.

"I will help to bring about the End Times." Aantar paused, his eyes showing the internal struggle that resulted in his next words.

"Please, please stop me, my friend," Aantar's words trembled as he spoke. The last thing Nicodemus remembered was the searing pain in his stomach as

Aantar's sword buried itself to the hilt.

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"My lord?" The voice startled Nicodemus out of his reverie. Weeks had gone by since that dream and yet it had been so vivid as to cause his neck to break out in cold sweats whenever he called upon the memory. Looking to the side Nicodemus saw his ward, Gregor, riding beside him with a troubled look on his face.

"I'm fine," Nicodemus replied, his hand scrubbing his eyes and wiping his forehead as he spoke, "what news?"

"We've just received word from our scouts that the dwarves will be here in an hour," Gregor continued his sideways look at Nicodemus as he spoke. "Also, in a strange turn of events, a small elven fleet has anchored in our harbor, they seek an audience with the local lord. Seeing how Master Grier has escaped this mortal realm, I thought you would have to suffice."

"Elves? What on earth could they be doing here?" A small ember of hope stirred itself in Nicodemus's breast.

"That sounds like a question that you can ask them. They are waiting for you down by the docks."

Nicodemus nodded and waved his dismissal. He looked around the streets of Mousillon, a dirty city on the edge of swamplands where they met the eastern seashore. A port harbor made up the vast majority of the cityscape, one that was dotted with dirty houses and capricious towers. Here and there smaller necropolises dotted the landscape. Nicodemus had pushed his men hard to arrive in good time. He had left his post in the Borderlands to arrive here, and the march had not been easy. On top of that, many of the knights he had brought with him had deserted in favor of seeking to answer their king's call for a host to march to the Empire's aid. He had little hope in victory for the coming weeks that he knew would be bloody. He had sent for aid from the dwarven holds to the south, and they had responded swiftly that they would send what aid they could. The dwarves were indebted to him for saving several refugees, not least of which was a highthane's son, during a raid on a skaven nest. Nicodemus was glad that the dwarves were so dedicated to honoring their word. Shaking his head and sighing, the old knight spurred his horse in the direction of the docks. With any luck he might be able to convince the elves to join the fight as well. Either way, the coming weeks promised nothing more than hard work and blood for those willing to participate.

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