

A flash of psychogenic fire lit up behind his eyes.

"...so when you go back and kill them, make sure to bring all their parts to Blazon. Serve they shall."



The evening was alive with the sounds of the dead being put out of their misery, the splintering of burning wood giving under its own weight, and the groans of those still fighting around the village of Bantriahah. Stinging smoke did nothing to mask the odors of recently-expended hard rounds, of spilled blood and death-slacked bowels, and the tang of the machine exhaust spilling out of the Grafter's hall at the center of the village. Bantriahah was home to a small tribe, the Black Quill Clan, and it was not ready for the Forsaken warband that descended upon it that day.

The Quills were still Baniss and they put up a hell of a fight. Baniss war cries continued to echo from elsewhere across the quarter square mile of village under siege. The occasional shotgun blast would silence the shrill cry of a Harpy, a howling "For Joan!" would drown out the growls and shouts from a Buzzblade or the roar of when their only Warhead fell to Forsaken blades. The Black Quills fought as hard as they could, but it took just a few hours of bitter fighting and bloodshed for the humans' greater numbers to have the last of their tribe surrounded in the village courtyard. This was a place normally reserved for ritual and public ceremony, but it was transformed into the site for their last stand. Armored Forsaken warriors slowly circled three of the most important members of the tribe.

"Come, come and taste death, Ashkelonian dog!" Father Lacerus spat at the Death Knight closing in. Tall and lanky even for a tribal father, his body was corded with tense muscle and flecked all over with gore. Rivulets of Forsaken blood ran down the edge of his long-bladed sword, which he held steadily aloft despite the odds stacked against him and his brethren.

"We are with you, Father," Grafter Seimia purred over the sound of her power claw wrenching open hungrily.

"Aye," chimed Ibdis. The Bone Doc was already badly injured, but the pain was fueling his will to take his attackers with him to the grave, "see you on the other side."

With a bestial growl the three Baniss warriors surged in different directions. It was their last defiant charge. Ibdis called up all of his pain and hatred, allowed it to coalesce in his mind before projecting it directly into one of Joan's heavily armored knights. Psychic energy coursed through the Death Knight's synapses like a hot brand set to a powder line, and a throat-straining screech erupted from within his enclosed helmet – immediately before his burst eyeballs followed.



# IN DEATH'S WAKE

The sand-blasted expanse just beyond the Death River Valley was normally a lonely place that any sane being would avoid whenever possible. Wild fell jackals and rock sloths hunted the area frequently, and small groups of travelers were preyed upon often. The weather shifted quickly there, blasting heat just minutes before calling up flurries of driving rain, and the Skarrd hunted just a day's walk away. During the day it was a place to be avoided.

Being out there at night, as he currently was, seemed to be inviting disaster.

Jon Woe sat on a large stone, his augmented eyes scanning the landscape with sharp clarity, his visor removed. It was not often that the heavily-grafted warrior was able to move around without the mask enclosing his face, but he secretly enjoyed these rare moments of relative solitude. Rubbing his spiky hair with his calloused hand, Jon closed his eyes and focused on the dusty wind blowing against his bare face. Even his scars felt better in the night air.

It was unfortunate that recent circumstances had not afforded him many of these times. Father Johann's drive for Skarrd unification under his colors was going remarkably well on the surface, but the signs were there – not everyone climbing onboard really had their hearts in it; figuratively or literally. Johann had devout followers, followers like Jon himself, from his days as “merely a Saint.” They gave up their protected lives behind New Ashkelon's walls to wander the desert and go to war against their former neighbors. They killed, bled, and sometimes died for him. The majority of his followers had joined the Baniss way and became Skarrd along with Johann, Jon included. They adopted the ways of mutants, grafted men, and even cannibals – all in duty to their savior. Even as their Saint altered his own body to the massive form of Tribal Father as it is now, they held on to the man and his mission of freedom from the Prevailer theocracy.

In the last few months, however, more of the Saint has slipped away, replaced with a more monstrous Skarrd Father. Johann and his lapdog Dexus have pulled together a menagerie of hideous things at Fort Retribution, and any of the old followers of the Scorpion Saint are shoved aside and forgotten. They have been consumed by the Skarrd mentality, becoming savages, or literally consumed by those already indoctrinated in the Baniss ways. Some of them have even been given over to that horrible necromancer witch Blazon for use in her unholy sacrilege. The last vestiges of the Followers were being assimilated into the Cults, and while Jon enjoyed a position of power in the Skarrd infrastructure – he too felt that Johann was running from his roots.

Jon remembered the old days. Chasing that cur Hoj from stockpile to stockpile, wetting his claw against the Forsaken forces sent to bring his Saint to justice, and late night discussion about the future and possibilities of grafting science. The last few years have been good to them both, but something about this current crusade has made Jon feel like just another soldier in the “Highfather's” grand army of vengeance. Some might call it entitlement, but Jon *deserved* to be held in higher regard than these others. He was one of the first wholly loyal to Johann. Loyalty, like a nest of bloodworms, must be fed if it is to grow – otherwise it will surely eat itself into oblivion. From Jon's point of view, Father Johann's forgotten worms were getting awfully hungry these days.

“Speaking of worms,” something shifted under the sand a few dozen paces away, something big. It was probably a rogue zmei that escaped from the Church shepherds' pens; they were always tunneling between the fence stakes and getting out of the Fort. By the size of the collapsing soil around it, Jon was sure this was one of the larger specimens, probably being groomed to be part of Dexus' newest crop of nightmare juggernauts. “If you can hear me, you overgrown bait worm, you had better not try to make meal out of me. I'm tougher than I look,” he

“Thirty-nine?” Hoj whistled, refusing to be intimidated despite the odds all around him. He had faith that Mongo had his back like he had so many times before, even in his adoptive home town.

“You doubt our records?” Judge Books sneered, wrinkling his brow.

“No, no,” the veteran warlord shook his head with a half-laugh, “I honestly thought it could have been more.”

“The Court only deals in the proven facts, scavenger,” Books kept a stern face and shut the book, “no matter the source of the hearsay.”

“Good to know,” Hoj nodded. “But what do these facts mean? Do I owe you? Community service? Maybe some bludgelt might - ”

“No!” The slam of the Judge’s infamous Gavel – a plated block of concrete speared with sturdy rebar – against the stone could be felt throughout the courtyard and the sound of the impact carried for blocks. “Money spent for Brute lives might as well be branding them slaves to be bought, sold, or indebted upon! You are treading dangerously close to contempt of my Court, sir.”

Upon the mention of the word contempt, both marshalls drew their massive hand cannons and levelled them at Hoj.

“Whoa!” the warlord held up his hands and took a step closer to Mongo. *Maybe they won’t risk hitting one of their own*, he thought inwardly. “I meant no disrespect at all, Rem- uh, Your Honor.”

“Cut him some slack, Books,” Mongo added, “it gets really hard up north for li’l guys like him!” The titan patted Hoj on the back as gently as he could, but the warlord still had to take a half-step forward to avoid falling. “He likes having us around for the tough stuff. You can’t go blamin’ Hoj for them gettin’ murderin’d out in the wastes. Without our back up, he’d be bones in a Skarrd outhouse for sure!”

“Thanks, pal.” Hoj looked up at Mongo with a cocked eyebrow and sarcasm dripping from his words.

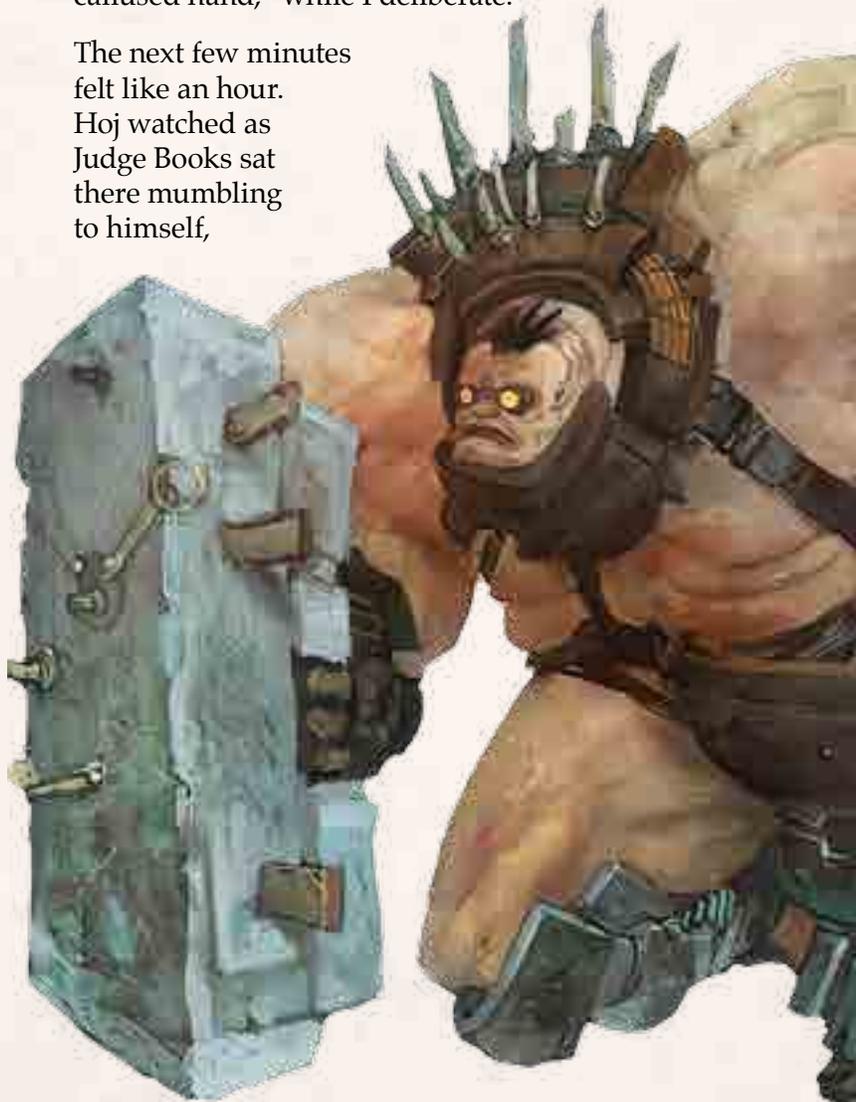
“Is this true?” the Judge’s question forced the warlord to return his attention to the dais. “Would you be some cannibal’s leavings were it not for our

kind’s help?” The huge brute smiled knowingly. “And please remember that this is all being recorded for testimonial later, if needs be, so be *clear* in your statement.”

“Ah... well...” knowing that his reputation was on the line in the future but his neck was on the line right then, Hoj took a deep breath and remembered his best stage presence from a misspent youth. “Undoubtedly, without the aid of the many Brutes in my past employment... *gainful* employment, I might note, I would not be in the place I am today. Many of my past successes have been due to the involvement and the selfless push for victory made by those very same Brutes.” Hoj exhaled, trying to rid himself of the taste left behind from laying it on so thick. “First and foremost among my Brute alliances... no, *friendships*... is this big lug right here.” He patted Mongo on the lower back – which is as high as Hoj could reach without a stepstool.

“Wait one moment,” the Judge held up a callused hand, “while I deliberate.”

The next few minutes felt like an hour. Hoj watched as Judge Books sat there mumbling to himself,





# HISTORY

## — DECAY CULT —

Feeling the other cults' ideologies were too focused on conquering or surviving rather than reveling in the death of the world around them, Father Lasombe directed his people on a veritable jihad against them. Killers without honor, Rot ambushed their comrades at Baniss gatherings and in the dead of night. They murdered their brethren without call for quarter or care for mercy. Over four years of slaughter turned the Cult of Rot into one of the worst enemies their own kind ever knew. Wherever the Deathmongers would strike, the dead would rise and feast upon the living. Like predators that thirst for life itself, the monsters would tear into anything they could get their hands or claws upon. Nothing was safe.

The death and the destruction they caused sent several smaller tribes scurrying toward each other for safety, their surviving members clinging to one another to avoid the dark predations of the Cult of Rot. One cult in particular suffered more than most – the Blood Cult. Father Mayhem was, at the time, but a young Salt Nomad child, still learning the extent of his own role in the world and the potential of his genetics. While he was becoming familiar with a butcher's sickle, slaughtering beasts in the wild, he watched from afar the terrifying work of the Deathmongers and their grave followers. The Skarrd would eventually come together and stamp out Father Lasombe and his cult, but not before they left their mark on history. In a way, it was the sheer, unabashed violence of how the Cult of Rot tore through the Blood Cult while he watched that kept the young Mayhem thinking about bloodletting, suffering, and wholesale murder for years – decades – to come. It is this, the memory of the Cult of Rot and what it almost did to the Skarrd, that surrounds a new cult rising within their ranks.

When Blazon joined Father Mayhem in the attack at the foot of Mount Dodrun, her psychogenic visions implied that something “wonderful and

horrible” was going to happen to her. Without fear she skipped toward this strange future, running her blades through her enemies with glee as she got closer and closer to her mysterious fate. Then, in the middle of the conflict, Councilwoman Lilith's neutron bomb was detonated. In a flash of atomic energy, Blazon's entire world changed forever – and so did the Skarrd.

The combination of the nuclear blast, an ancient fungus, and atomized xenosathic particles mixed into the perfect slurry to settle onto both the dead and the dying. As if Samaria itself was choosing who would live and who would die, some were swallowed by Dodrun and never emerged. Others rose up as part of some enigmatic, powerful, telepathic network between the dead and the living. It was this web of necropathic connections that steered dead flesh to do amazing things, and at its center – broken but happy in her revelations – was Blazon. The mistress to monsters survived the blast and found herself mentally travelling down roads unknown previously to anyone.

Drawn by the light of atomic fire to the very edges of death, Blazon called this journey her “Blazing Path”, and she claimed that it was where she gained half of her newfound powers and abilities. Others were introduced to the Blazing Path at Dodrun, rising up as irradiated Skarrd horrors, and they all bent the knee to their remarkable matriarch. Being forged in the blast was a bond between the survivors – and many of the casualties, too – that rode on waves of radiation and unseen power between them. They were riders of fire, glowing bright with the power of mass destruction, and hungry for energy capable of erasing entire areas in a flash.

There were also many who walked the spiritual path of Those Beyond – the way of the dead. A mutated fungus, called “necrosis mold” by outsiders who fail to see its splendor, took up

body began to hiss and leak foul gasses – right before it burst like a piece of fruit left out in the sun. Chunks of dead meat and supernaturally rotten tissues flew in all directions, throwing a sheet of utter foulness over Joan. In an instant the disgusting coat of clotted gore began to creep into any crevice or unarmored point on her body, the stinging from acidic goo already starting to set in. The Saint’s free hand rose to her face, wiping furiously at the sickening, sticky fluids assaulting her eyes.

The skull-masked grave robber shot forward, his weapon whirling up and around in a wild arc, taking advantage of Joan’s momentary blindness. A blade sharp enough to shear flesh and bone was heading directly for her neck, a killing blow for sure.

“No!” the Sin Eater leapt in the way of the attack at the last moment.

“Riley!” Joan cleared her eyes just in time to see the scythe’s blade bite deeply into her soldier’s chest cavity, the fanglike tip stabbing out of his back.

His bisected heart tried to beat twice more, but the broken pump could move no blood and the popped lung beside it could hold no breath.

Riley was already dead by the time the

Reaper yanked his weapon out to one side, opening his torso up like the lid of a canning tin. Turning around on one heel, the murderous warrior howled in glee before preparing a new swing at Joan. “Not this time, bastard!” she hissed at him, slinging Damocles up and around the haft of the gravescythe. With a grunt of

effort, she drew the Reaper in close to her – far too close to make the best use of the huge weapon.

“Won’t save you...” the Skarrd growled from behind his mask. Otherworldly energies were gathering within him, and the Saint could feel the rise of dangerous forces all around her. Steam began to curl up from the sticky filth all over her body as it started to cook from the Reaper’s psychogenic radiation, but still she kept him close. His face was so close to hers that she could see the jaundice in his eyes behind that mask and smell the rot on his breath.

Then his face exploded all over hers.

