

**MAGIC**

The Gathering

\$1

# THE THRAN



J. Robert King

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EAN



"Fire!" the Thran garrison commander shouted. His words broke through a new malaise. "Fire!"

Bolts tore across the staging ground.

One struck a Phyrexian in the gut. The metal tore straight through him. The gray-muscled warrior did not fall, did not even slow. He came on.

They looked even more like giant spiders as they approached. Inhuman skulls, sagittal crests, horns, fangs, cords of gray muscle—yes, these were monsters not men.

The Phyrexians breached the garrison's outpost. They did not fight with swords. They needed no weapons. They were the weapons.

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## THE THRAN

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*In Memory of Dmitri Shostakovich  
who survived a real-life Yawgmoth*

# PART I

## THE CITY







### ***Thran-Phyrexian War Day One: The Battle of Megheddon Defile***

The morning dawned hot on Megheddon Defile.

It made little difference to the Thran army's vanguard. Dwarves, they loved rock and heat. Their faces seemed graven from stone. Their skin had the same rusty hue as the cavern walls that rose to either side. These were elite mountain dwarves, two thousand of them. Dust-colored canvas flaps draped their plate armor, shielding it from sunshine and eyes above. Similar cloth encased the broad blades of battle axes. Long shafts let these heavy weapons walk themselves, butts sending up puffs of smoke beside iron-shod boots. Dwarven Commander Curtisworthy ran a strict division.

Humans marched directly behind the dwarves. Though tall, brooding, and hearty, they were out of their element in mountains and desert. Many were the levies of tribal warlords on the opposite side of the globe. Thran commanders and troops marched in their midst to insure that the barbarians would follow orders. All the humans, Thran and barbarian, had bravado. Or it might be called arrogance—or belligerence. Whatever it was, they wilted in the heat of marching through the mountains. The forty



thousand human infantry shuffled along with the tired resignation of prisoners. Even the twenty thousand horsemen gritted their teeth and draped wet veils over their mouths to keep the dust out.

The elves were worst off of all. Far from the seclusion of bark and moss, they languished beneath the glaring sun. They had abandoned their leafy garments and wrapped themselves in white robes—one part desert burnoose and one part grave ceremonies. Elven hands extended from the retreating folds, skin burned and leathery. The anger in those haunted eyes had become despair. The elves had gradually fallen back to the rear of the column, too slow to keep up even with the dwarven vanguard, too weary to fight any but a rearguard action. Still, the elves numbered ten thousand, and many were mages and healers. As long as they could cast spells and heal the sick, they would aid the army greatly.

One flank of the column was guarded by lizard men. Though silent and sullen, these fighters were canny in the rocky confines. In a single moment of scurrying steps and lashing tails, all ten thousand of the Viashino could disappear within the crevices that lined their path. Fanatically loyal to the war beys among them, these reptiles would be more at home on Halcyon's volcanic extrusion than Yawgmoth himself.

To the other flank of the column marched the finest warriors of the united army—minotaurs. More determined and hearty than dwarves, more massive and violent than humans, more implacable in battle than Viashino, minotaurs were born for war. Though dust dulled their armor from jambs to randers, every minotaur eye gleamed bright with bloodlust.

Throughout the column, marching among soldiers of flesh and bone, were artifact warriors. Mantis warriors with flex-steel abdomens, metallic serpents with razor mandibles—on needle-like legs they scuttled, on grinding treadmills they lurched forward. The college of artificers had never supported Yawgmoth and had stockpiled war machines beyond his reach. When war inevitably erupted, the artificers made their machines readily available to the allied effort.

Best of all, some three hundred war caravels cruised above the defile. Their sails raked batlike beside their long, sleek hulls. They cast blessed shade down on the languishing elves.

They were ready for war. The Thran Alliance, they called themselves—the five outer city-states of the empire joined with representatives from the rest of the known world. They had come together to fight a single man—Yawgmoth.

He was no man, but a monster, a cowardly monster. At Phoenon six months before, he had struck out of the blackness of night. He had bombed his own people to keep them from joining his enemies. He had fought and fled. Vicious and treacherous, ruthless and bloodthirsty, he was no less than a demon.

A fiendish cry came from the dwarven vanguard—something half shriek and half ululation. Humans and elves, minotaurs and Viashino lifted their eyes. The army had just rounded the last bend in the Megheddon Defile. Beyond the canyon walls opened a broad desert plain. On the opposite edge of that sere space jutted a tall plateau, the volcanic extrusion of Halcyon. It seemed a wall standing in the desert, fifteen hundred feet high, with the great city crowding the plateau atop it. Once the capital of the Thran Empire, now Halcyon and every soul in it belonged to Yawgmoth.

The demonic cry repeated itself, pouring from throats human and inhuman and echoing through the rocky mouth of Megheddon itself. It was as though the allied armies raised that fiendish cry to summon the demon from his lair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmoth heard the summons. He sat placidly within an armored sedan chair at the head of his Phyrexian army.

They waited silently in an underground chamber dug to slant down into the desert floor. The wide mouth of the cavern was draped in pale muslin to blend with the sun-bleached soil. It would be nearly invisible to the advancing army until the contingent had marched past. Three other such bunkers flanked the



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marching ground, and a fourth natural cavern lay in a cluster of rocks at the base of the Halcyte extrusion. At Yawgmoth's command, the curtains would fall from these bunkers, and the five thousand warriors waiting within each would surge forth into the bare flanks of their foe.

For now, though, Yawgmoth waited. He heard the demon summons, but he did not answer it. He was no demon. He was a god.

The last six months had proven it. The canny Lord of Phyrexia had many surprises waiting for the Thran Alliance. Smiling, Yawgmoth leaned back in his sedan chair.

"None of my adversaries will survive this battle."

Even now, his enemies strode out upon the plains. They were as bold as wolves—and why not? Led by dwarven elite, flanked by minotaurs and Viashino, guarded from the skies by three hundred war caravels, supported by mantis warriors and scuttling creations of nebbish artificers—why wouldn't they be as bold as wolves? They even howled like wolves.

Hearing their insolent whooping was almost enough to make Yawgmoth trigger the attack too soon. He would not be goaded into such a mistake. This had been too carefully planned. There were appropriate steps.

Among the marching legions drifted the vast shadows of Thran ships. While the army had coursed through the defile, these ships had remained in a column above, shading them from the glaring sun and any possible attack. Now, the shadows, smooth and silent as schooling leviathans, began to slowly drift apart. No doubt the ships would circle the city, just out of range of the ray cannons on her walls, and demand surrender.

"We'll see who surrenders."

Yawgmoth reached into a flat box that held a small, three-dimensional schematic of the battlefield. At strategic points in the miniature defile and flatlands, tiny powerstones glimmered. Yawgmoth touched a certain crystal imbedded there. A high whistling sound answered the motion. He smiled.

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The marchers howled once more before the sound broke through. Then the army of the Thran Alliance heard it. It was a piercing whistle, and it seemed to come from the very sun. Soldiers squinted up toward the sliding bulk of their warships, trying to see past.

In a heartbeat, the whistle became a shriek. There was no mistaking it. The allies had heard this sound before at Phoenon. There, ships had soared into being out of blind midnight. These ships came out of the very eye of the sun.

"The one place to hide in a brilliant sky is just beside the sun," Yawgmoth said.

Phyrexian warships in their scores swooped down beneath the Thran aerial armada. Ray cannons flashed aboard Yawgmoth's ships. They tore holes in Thran hulls. They burned away Thran soldiers.

Barbarians cowered. The air over their heads teemed with streaking Phyrexian ships. Humans and elves dropped to their faces. Dwarves stood against the onslaught, some flinging ineffectual axes skyward. Minotaurs also raged against the storm of ships. Some of their blades actually connected with the hulls, only to be flung back in a lethal rain.

Splinters and smoke boomed from the Thran fleet above. A shower of charred bodies and weaponry plunged out of the shredded craft. In the wake of the shrieking Phyrexian ships, the battlefield was littered with wreckage and death.

Yes, it was a battlefield now. There could be no doubt of it. War caravels crashed to earth. They fell in a regular rhythm, like the footfalls of a running colossus. With each pounding report, soldiers were crushed in their hundreds.

"Easier than I expected," Yawgmoth murmured.

Then the unthinkable—cannon fire raked out across Phyrexian vessels. Their decks blasted open. Their hulls shattered like walnut shells. They fell from the sky, eight of them cut down in a moment.

Yawgmoth saw. A battery of his own ray cannons had been salvaged from the Battle of Phoenon and mounted beneath



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Thran war caravels at the back of the allied column. His hand reach into the schematic, signaling the next onslaught.

Even as Thran soldiers dragged themselves from beneath burning warships and struggled to cover, the ground came suddenly and horrifically alive. The soil opened beneath their feet. Some fighters fell, legs consumed to the knee by the ground itself. Others reeled back from one treacherous well only to stumble into another. They tumbled, hands, heads, and knees jutting into razor-edged holes. Horses, too, went down, hooves caught and hobbled immediately. Whatever dropped into those holes never emerged again. With a sound like shark jaws snapping closed, scythe shutters clamped down on whatever meat and bone presented itself.

Motors spun. Blades met. Blood fountained. Warriors shrieked.

They staggered back, limbs cleanly shorn shy of the knee, across the ankle, above the elbow. Some did not stagger back—those whose arterial lacerations emptied hearts and heads and bodies in one brief gush.

“My beautiful sand crabs,” Yawgmoth sighed happily, reaching into his box schematic to touch another powerstone. “Arise!”

Dismembered corpses moved grotesquely. The ground under them mounded up. From hundreds of wells in the sand, metal monsters emerged. They seemed gigantic crabs of steel, sloughing grit from optic arrays. They had been buried just beneath the surface, and holes in their backs had opened to swallow and shear off the limbs of the Thran soldiers. Many sand crabs obviously carried corpses on their metal carapaces. Others bore only the gory trails left by severed limbs. A pair of snapping claws proceeded each beast. Scuttling legs clawed their way from the holes. Pincers caught and minced flesh.

Those who fled—barbarians and elves—only stumbled onto more sand crabs. Most held firm. Humans and dwarves and minotaurs were glad to have a foe to fling their blades at. That was as much harm as they could do to the artifact creatures. Swords clanged impotently on armor. The attacks did not slow the quiet and efficient machines.

Artifact creatures hewed Thran like machetes hewing cane.

At the rear of the Thran lines, elves unleashed spells. Desert scrub brush grew rampantly, miring sand crabs and minotaurs alike. Artifact engines rusted away to dust, but so too did dwarven axes. Summoned creatures appeared—ferocious bears, giant spiders, timber wolves—but none were a match for these sand crabs; none were meant for desert battle. Only the scuttling scavenger folk in their filthy multitude made any headway. They and their specialized hex-irons and crowbars could strip an artifact in a gasp. Of course, with sand crabs, those who stripped the machine were also stripped by it. For every sand crab disabled, scores of scavengers died.

Yawgmooth enjoyed the spectacle a moment more before touching the five stones that summoned the five divisions of the Phyrelian army.

Sand-colored canvas fell from the trenches. Silver-armored warriors marched grimly forth. They seemed machines themselves. Powerstone swords and axes gleamed hungrily in their hands. These were the Halcyte guards. They strode as they had been trained, not breaking ranks, hewing their way through any impediment—wood, steel, brain, bone. Their natural fanaticism was overlaid by a war spell. They would not pause. They would not surrender. They would not stop until their foes were dead. Minotaurs and dwarves were cloven in half. Silver armor grew red as the allies died.

"They really had no chance," Yawgmooth said, a touch of false sadness in his voice.

To the north and south formed unexpected things. Tan as the desert floor, serpentine shapes rose and twisted and swelled. Cyclones? The dust devils lingered beyond the armies, gaining speed. Their wavering columns darkened, seeming to solidify.

With pernicious intent, the twisters converged on the marching Halcyte guard. Those who strode doggedly onward were caught up in the winds and flung away.



"So, the elves brought something useful after all. A pity more of them won't live to witness my next surprise." Yawgmooth touched a dark, slender crystal in the box schematic.

From the cavern at the base of the Halcyon extrusion, at the heels of the marching guard, came a massive figure. It climbed from interior spaces. Forged of black metal, it seemed an avatar of the dark cave itself. As the figure rose into the light, its form became clear. Its sloped head was the size of a mammoth. Its jaw was hinged beneath scimitar teeth. Hunching shoulders emerged next. Simian arms swung beneath, with massive hands large enough to grasp and crush ten men. A metal-plated torso, a sinewy pelvis and crouched legs . . .

"A behemoth!"

The name of the thing whispered up from a thousand lips, terror breathing through the air.

The colossus galloped on knuckles and knees out onto the battlefield, hundreds dying with each footfall. Another behemoth came on the heels of the first. It too stormed toward the terrified invaders.

The first behemoth surged into the Thran lines. It crushed dwarves with every step. Its claws eviscerated whole phalanxes of minotaurs. It seized a flying ship, bit through its keel, reached up into the hold, and yanked forth the powerstone core. The war caravel fell from the sky in a rush of sparks and splinters.

Meanwhile, the second behemoth headed up a charge of Halcyte guards. With no more care than a child crumpling and flinging blades of grass, the behemoth clutched up elves, crunched them in its claws, and hurled their broken bodies back atop the guards. Streaks of crimson marked the helms and vambraces of those who could not avoid the falling bodies. As if shooing away insects, the Halcyte guards sloughed the dying forms and marched onward.

"They'll be out of elves soon enough," Yawgmooth told himself contentedly. "Elves fight like popped corn. I'd like to see this behemoth really fight."

He got his wish. The gray behemoth's claws were suddenly full of writhing metal—artifact creatures. Many were mantis warriors. Others had the configuration of humans. Still more were conglomerate creatures, with curved backs and scuttling legs and scythes that emerged from their sides. The behemoth lifted a fragile-looking mantis warrior and crushed it in one claw. It snatched up a second and smashed it in the other. Thousands of servos groaned as the behemoth flung out its arms in tandem and hurled the mantises free.

Except the mantises did not fly free. Broken though they were, their legs and pincers still held on. They writhed but not in spasmodic destruction. Legs moved purposefully, clawing down the behemoth's uplifted arms. It struggled to shake the things loose, to no avail. More artifact creatures climbed up its legs. They were roaches swarming a bloodied figure. They tore at it, covered it, overwhelmed it.

"Damn," Yawgmooth said. "Must be Glacian's designs."

In moments, the behemoth was completely covered in spidery artifacts. It staggered a few paces more and then toppled facefirst into the ranks of clockwork warriors.

Halcyte guards drove forward, intent on liberating the fallen beast.

"No!" Yawgmooth shouted, touching stones in the box schematic. "No! Clear away."

It was too late. A high keen began. Springs wound beyond their constitutional capacity. The gray hide of the behemoth split and flung back. From beneath, thousands of metal sinews lashed out, slaying all those around. Whiplike, they shattered artifact creatures and Halcyte guards both. Blue-gray steel whipped. Silver armor severed. Red blood flowed.

"Damned Halcyte guards," Yawgmooth snarled. "They all ought to be Phyrexians."

This battle would last longer than a blazing moment. It mattered little. Yawgmooth had planned for a long engagement. His forces would hold—the Halcyte guard and Phyrexian guard, the fleet, the artifact engines. . . .



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"While the Thran Alliance is so occupied, I'll go on the offensive."

In the mountains beyond the invading armies lay a largely ignored target. It was arguably the greatest achievement of the Thran College of Artificers—a massive broadcast station that allowed the college to monitor every artifact creature in the Thran Empire. It could also shut down any mechanism that went rogue. Unknown to all but Yawgmoth, the station could even *command* those creatures.

Yawgmoth would capture the broadcast station, the Null Sphere—and with it, he would command the Thran artifact army.

Smiling wickedly, Yawgmoth set his hand beneath the control stone of his sedan chair. The craft rose, silent and smooth, from the bunker and shot toward the city above. His personal war caravel waited there, his personal crew.

They would capture the Null Sphere. They would command the artifact engines of the empire. Yawgmoth would crush the Thran and their barbarian allies and bring all of Dominaria to its knees.



# Chapter 1

## *Nine Years Before the Thran-Phyrexian War . . .*

Glacian loved the darkness and sulphur. He loved the massive machines. Gigantic cams rotated in volcanic vents. Shafts hissed with superheated steam. Boilers growled ceaselessly. Fires belched from smelters. Crystal orbs glowed incandescent. Glacian loved the Halcyon mana rig—vast and subterranean, sunk within a dormant volcano, suffused with the raw energy of the world.

He was the only one in the city who truly understood these machines—in the city and in the world! Glacian was the greatest artificer in an empire of great artificers. This, his design, was ten times as powerful, one hundred times as efficient, and one quarter the size of the rig at Shiv. Glacian was the only one in the world who understood these machines, and the machines returned the favor. They were the only ones who understood Glacian.

“No! No! You festering scab!” Glacian said, cuffing a much-abused goblin on the back of the head. “Bleed vents five and nine, not four and seven! You want to blow up the whole rig? You want to blast Halcyon from the face of the globe!”

“Bleed five and eight,” the jangled creature said, struggling



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to count on hands one finger short.

"Not five and eight! Five and nine! Count your thumbs, too!" Glacian growled, whapping the creature again. The man's hair had gone prematurely gray from dealing with creatures such as this one. Though he was only forty, Glacian seemed fifty-five. Short, skinny, and stooped, he was a craven creature suited for the sulphuric darkness he loved. "Go! Get out of here! I'll do it myself! Go! Keep going until you reach the Caves of the Damned! You'll be more useful to them roasted on a stick than you are to me."

That much was untrue. As at Shiv, this machinery was designed to be run by goblins. The crawlspaces would not admit humans. Though plenty of Thran artificers had helped build the rig, no Thran were willing to work in the broiling blackness, forever at risk of searing to the side of a blast furnace. The citizens of Halcyon would not deign descend from their floating paradise above, even though their paradise was held aloft by the powerstones from the rig. Neither could the prisoners in the Caves of the Damned ascend to work the rig. Only goblins had an affinity for the dark spaces. Only goblins would put up with the rancorous Glacian. Even his own apprentices disliked their teacher. It was just as well. Glacian preferred the company of goblins.

Glacian stalked across the floor amid steaming stacks and clanging grilles. He reached the vent-gauge matrix. A tepid flame burned dimly above the sooty array, casting dim light down. Glacian fetched a filthy rag from a nearby hook and wiped the grit from the gauges. Checking levels, he bled pressure from vents five and nine, bringing them into line.

"The little muckers could use a few more fingers. They're constantly losing them under the orbs." A deep rumble began in the passage beyond the machines. "Ah, there's one just now."

Glacian strode toward the sound, past flanks of sweating steel. He knew every contour of these vast devices. He'd seen them all in his head months before anyone had seen them in reality. Schematics forever cascaded through his mind. He



thought in three-dimensional layouts as others thought in words. An idea for a new engine could be born at the beginning of a breath and be fully formed and articulated in his mind before he exhaled. It was only his hands that slowed him down. He couldn't set his ideas to paper fast enough. People slowed him even more. A third of his inventions remained unbuilt for lack of money and a third more for lack of desire. The final third appeared around him just as this vast rig had—one moment of inspiration realized over a long decade by a thousand workers. The very heart of that inspiration rolled just ahead.

Glacian emerged from among the machines. He entered a long corridor with a padded groove down its center. The groove sloped gently down toward the crystal charging chamber to his left. To his right, a glorious vision approached. Out of the darkness loomed a gigantic crystalline orb. It was perfectly smooth. A solid sphere of crystal, the orb would measure twenty feet in diameter and would weigh over a hundred tons. Glacian knew these facts instinctively. He rarely thought of facts when he saw the vast globes roll toward the charging chamber. He thought instead of beauty. It was his one true connection to beauty—

Except for the ubiquitous goblins that impelled it on its way. They thrust crude wooden staves beneath the orb, some behind to roll it forward, and some before to slow it down. Glacian could have provided them with an engineered tool, but wood was soft enough not to scratch crystal. Goblin bone was not.

"Get out of the way!" Glacian shouted, striding toward the work crews. He yanked one of the little creatures from its staff, which was caught beneath the advancing sphere. "Watch your claws, you little dung beetle! You want that thing to roll over you?"

Glacian had strictly forbidden workers from being caught beneath orbs. Still, every month another one was crushed, marring an orb with tooth and bone scratches. Glacian often wished for a draught that would soften goblin teeth and bones,

preventing such damage, but the dark arts of medicine were forbidden since the civil war.

"Let the staff go," he advised the goblin and dragged him back among the machines. "It'll be splinters after the orb is past it." Man and monster stood side by side as the huge ball rolled past. The thing was three and a half times Glacian's height. Even in its smooth track, it shook the floor. "A single orb that will break into a thousand powerstones. A thousand stones charged in a single irradiation." He shook his head, laughing. "They're glad to get a hundred stones a month from the rig in Shiv."

A mewling sound came from goblin at his side. "Aww. Wouldja lookit that? Aww, dammit!"

"What?" asked Glacian. "What?"

"Lookit my stick." The thing lay, pulverized, in the track. "Dammit."

Glacian pushed the critter aside. "Typical scrot! A priceless jewel rolls past you, but all you see is a line of sawdust."

"Dammit," the goblin agreed, kicking at the splinters. "Dammit."

Glacian shook his head. Goblins were only slightly less perceptive than the average citizen of Halcyon above. Were it not for Glacian's dark machines, his hellish rig, and its incomprehensible minions, none of the city's heavenly splendor would exist. This very orb was destined to provide the foundation stones of the Thran Temple, the loftiest building in all the city. Though the people of Halcyon lived on, in, and because of Glacian's work, they resented and distrusted him all the same.

Ignoring the despondent goblin, Glacian followed in the wake of the rolling orb. Goblin teams prodded it past humming machines and into the chamber at the corridor's end. The space centered on a six-foot circular well in the floor. Atop this well, the orb settled. The curving walls contained similar holes, each leading to shafts that would admit sunlight from mirror arrays across the desert. The rest of the chamber was silvered, so that none of the light energy of the sun or the



heat energy of the volcano would be lost. Even the vast curved door that had admitted them was mirrored within.

Glacian walked about the globe. Chattering goblins polished it with long cloths. The man meanwhile stared into the depths of the stone. So deep, so perfect a crystal was black at its center. Whatever light streamed into it was diverted around its heart. The future lay there, in that unseeable center. It was but ten feet away through clear crystal, and yet it might have been the hidden core of another world.

"All right, that's enough," Glacian said to the goblins. Any dust or oil on the outside of the stone would be flash-burned in the first moments of irradiation. "Clear the chamber. Secure the door."

As goblins poured from the space, jabbering, Glacian withdrew to a curved stair. He climbed it. The steps followed the outer edge of the charging chamber. At the top lay a small room—his control room. Within was a solitary seat before a powerstone console. A small black portal peered into the charging chamber. Only when bombarded with energy enough to melt basalt would the mirrored window give any glimpse of what occurred within.

Glacian seated himself before the console. A cluster of speaking tubes emerged from its center. He flipped the tubes open. At the base of each rested a gleaming powerstone that would convey his words over yards and miles.

"Lock down the doors!"

"Doors locked down," came the reply.

"Slide thermal hatches!"

"Hatches sliding."

"Open spectral channels!"

"Channels opening."

"Align mirror arrays three, six, and nine!"

"Arrays aligning."

The wall of the control chamber began to buzz, and a dim twinkle pierced the blackened glass.

"Align arrays two, five, and eight."



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The light intensified. Shafts around the chamber poured light into the orb. Heat energy blazed up from below.

"Align arrays one, four, and seven."

The glow grew intense. Fingers of light and fire reached into the black heart of the orb. The secret center that once bent light away from it could no longer hold back the brilliant flood. The stone beamed like a second sun. Volcanic heat spread upward through the crystal. It rumbled and rattled. The glare was unbearable, but Glacian did not look away.

This was his very mind—immense and perfect, shot through with a power so magnificent it could not hold it.

Cracks spread through the crystal like lightning through the sun. Jagged fissures rushed from the heart outward in all directions. The fissures met and multiplied along fracture lines. Soon what was ragged became regular. Instead of uneven shards of stone, the great orb was splitting into perfect jewels—tetrahedrons, hexahedrons, octahedrons, dodecahedrons, icosahedrons. . . . They were packed into tight, concentric shells all through the vast orb. Where the geometry of the space would not permit regular solids, other glimmering shapes appeared—briolettes in a starburst around the inner core and marquise gems proliferating across the outer edge. Some were the size of heads, some of hearts, some of eyes, and some of tiny teeth, but each was a perfect form.

All those facets caught the light—a thousand new lenses and a hundred thousand new mirrors. It intensified again. The orb trembled violently. If it broke apart now, all those stones would be only so many hunks of fine-cut glass, but if the sphere held together a moment more—

"To cling past impossibility," Glacian whispered avidly. His own eyes glared with the fury of the transformation. "What a vision."

He slammed an inch-thick visor over the window—just in time. The light that burst into being beyond was enough to shine through solid steel and clearly outline his own finger bones in upheld hands.

Within the chamber, enough raw energy sluiced to energize

every separate stone in the orb. The facets remained, perfect and immutable, but the material within each stone was transformed from matter into pure energy. A stone the size of a tooth could light a whole room. A stone the size of an eye could propel a sedan chair around the city. A stone the size of a heart could heat a home in even the coldest winter. A stone the size of a head could send caravels racing through the sky. A stone the size of a man could provide a foundation for an aerial temple—the Thran Temple.

Glacian stood. There was no more to see. Every gauge across his console rattled in overload. The shuttered window beamed like a hundred torches. The speaking tubes roared with reports from crews far and near. Glacian ignored it all. If all was right, the chamber now held a thousand powerstones. If even a single fault occurred, the implosion would gut the whole mana rig and bring the city crashing down. There was no stopping the process now.

Glacian opened the door to the control room and placidly descended the stairs. The stone wall beside him, ten feet thick, blazed with light and radiated heat that curled the hairs on his arm. He whistled happily. By the time he reached the base of the stairs, the reaction was waning. Broiling air hissed from release valves all around the chamber and would have killed any creature who stood in the wrong spot. Glacian set his hand in the latch. With gentle pressure, he released the seal. The door flung wide.

There, before him, the massive orb stood. It gleamed brilliantly, a thousand charged powerstones in matrix before their creator. Tiny lines of smoke hissed up from every crack to circle ominously against the mirrored ceiling above. Glacian drew in the scent of them. It was a sharp and killing odor, the smell of lightning just before it strikes.

A goblin brought him a wooden staff, as the creature had been trained to do. Glacian lifted it overhead and brought the staff down on the twenty-foot sphere. Gemstones cascaded. They made bell tones as they slid down around their maker.



Glacian stood in the gleaming flood of them. He thought how these stones—the largest of the thousand—would bear up the temple his love was building.

Yes, it was not merely the machines and stones that understood Glacian the genius. It was also his beloved, Rebbec.

As the crystals settled to the floor around him, Glacian muttered to the goblin, "Behold!"

Only it wasn't a goblin. The rank and decrepit figure beside him was human—an Untouchable from the Caves of the Damned. They escaped their deep prison whenever they could, sneaked up into the rig like curious rats. This one leered up, his eyes lit with animal fury. He clutched one of the new powerstones in his hand.

"Welcome to the company of the damned!" The twisted little man rammed that perfect stone into Glacian's belly. In the next moments, there was only thrashing and blood and the dim recognition that the Untouchables were rioting through the rig.

Glacian slumped down, bleeding atop the glimmering stones he had made.

There was not to be blood on these gleaming crystals. There was not to be blood on the foundation stones of the Thran Temple.

"Forgive me, Rebbec. Forgive me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebbec rushed down the infirmary halls to a junction. She paused and raked disheveled blonde hair from her eyes.

"Which way? Where is he?" She pounded a fist on her leg, sending a puff of cement powder into the air.

She thought she knew these white and winding passageways. After all, she'd designed the building. Long banks of windows showed the glorious city, meant to provide hope to those who were sick. The curving walls and frosted skylights were meant to emulate clouds. The meandering paths were to seem gardens in the sky. Merely walking and breathing in this infir-



mary should have restored health. All of it, though, in this dire moment, had become a maddening maze.

Recognizing one of the healers, Rebbec rushed down the hall toward her.

"Do you know where he is? Where Glacian is?"

"Glacian?" the woman asked placidly within her white robes.

"Yes, Glacian! The genius of Halcyon," Rebbec insisted, clinging to the woman. "Do you know where he is?"

A light of recognition entered the healer's eyes. "Oh, the man stabbed during the mana rig riot—? Yes? He is just ahead, in the room on the right."

Normally Rebbec would have thanked her, but she was too intent on the doorway.

Beyond, Glacian lay on a marble table. His arms and legs were splayed out over its edges. Each limb was held down by a huddling healer. Three more worked above. Their white robes were painted in blood, their sure fingers trembling with uncertainty.

"What is it?" Rebbec asked anxiously. "What's happening?"

One of the healers—an elderly man with eyebrows as broad and white as feathers, looked distressedly into Rebbec's eyes.

"Our healing magic. It isn't working with him. It only seemed to make him worse. It only seems to heat up the crystal."

Then Rebbec saw it, a stone the size of a man's heart rammed into a gory wound in Glacian's belly.

"The powerstone must be interfering with the magic. You've got to pull it out," she insisted.

The healer's eyes grew wider, still. "Our faith teaches that the hand of magic is to remove any foreign object, lest fumbling fingers further injure the—"

Before any healer could stop her, Rebbec reached in and drew forth the sanguine stone. It was a briolette-cut gem. Glacian's blood ran down its edges. Rebbec stared for a moment at the horrific thing and then thrust it at one of the healers.

"Take it. Until the stone is gone, the healing magic will not

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work."

A young man received the stone with a wordless nod and conveyed it quickly from the room.

Rebbec stroked the sweat-speckled face of her husband. "It's out, Glacian. The stone is out."

The man's convulsions had ceased. He lay now like a wrenched rag on the bloody table.

"There's more . . ." he rasped, "... where that came from. A good . . . hundred for your . . . temple."

"Temple be damned," Rebbec said. "It's you I'm worried about. Let the healers do their work. Let them close the wound."

Glacian smiled, a rare sight. "This one . . . feels deep. Feels like . . . it might never close."

Before Rebbec could answer, a great roar shook the infirmary. There came a rending sound and shrieks—a powerstone implosion.

A healer came from the hall. "Come quick! Half the building is gone! Half the building is gone!"

Rebbec stared in dumb amazement.

"The stone," Glacian gasped out, "it must . . . have been . . . imperfect."

"How could that be?" Rebbec wondered, dread veiling her face.

Glacian bleakly gasped, "What perfect stone . . . could have stabbed me?"





## Chapter 2

Yawgmoth stepped off Pilgrim Way and stood on a rocky overlook.

The desert was a vast, dun-colored disk far below. It did not seem so much a place but a nonplace. From this height, scrub brush and stunted trees seemed only lichens clutching an infertile stone. Footpaths and game trails formed a fragile net across the ground. A single long highway cut through the desert, linking the other eight Thran city-states to their capital, Halcyon.

Yawgmoth had walked every step along that highway. The Elder Council had revoked his banishment, had summoned him from the ends of the world, had demanded that he leave his exiled comrades and report to the capital of the empire, but they had apparently felt no need to provide transportation. While he walked Pilgrim Way, hundreds of skyships had passed overhead. Cargoes of grain and ale were apparently more precious than Yawgmoth.

He didn't mind. Yawgmoth was young—only thirty-five—well muscled and taller than most other Thran. His tanned skin withstood even the blazing desert sun, and thick black hair formed a natural visor over his eyes. Dirty and tattered travel robes hid a body tuned to hard labor and deprivation. He didn't mind the deadly journey or the council's insulting disregard. He was used to both.



## *The Thran*

Before receiving his summons, Yawgmoth and all practitioners of “medical healing” had been officially banished from the empire. Their exile concluded a civil war that had begun a hundred years ago. It had been a war of city-state sovereignty. When Halcyon solidified its position as the capital of the empire, the war became politicized as a battle between “artificers” and “eugenicists.” Artificers believed in improving the Thran by building them bigger and better machines. Eugenicists believed in improving the Thran by dissecting and understanding the machines of biology. Both wanted to improve the Thran. There was no conflict between real artificers and real eugenicists. Each faction, though, was championed by a political party—the artificers by the elite imperialists and the eugenicists by the republican rabble. When at last the rabble were defeated, their eugenicist champions were scapegoated and exiled.

Yawgmoth and his two hundred followers had wandered for five years among lizard men and minotaurs, goblins and orcs, studying the diseases that plagued them. The only other Thran the eugenicists ever saw were outcasts—lepers and lunatics. It was no matter. Lepers and lunatics aided Yawgmoth’s research of pathogens and contagions. Though the Elder Council had thought banishment would punish the eugenicists for their “unorthodox approach to healing,” it only provided a crucible in which to perfect their art.

Disease and dysfunction were not caused by “evil spirits” or “blocked mana pathways” or “lunar cycles.” They were caused by tiny creatures that invaded a body much like an army might invade a nation. They were caused by malfunction of physical processes. The human body was no more than a complex mechanism, a machine like a mana rig. The Thran needn’t rely on healers and their attendant monkery. A rigorous study of living organisms, proper function, common dysfunction, and disease species could render a completely material and mundane program for healing.

Now the Elder Council was in need of Yawgmoth’s new science. The great artificer Glacian was rotting like a common

leper. Magic only made him worse. He had languished for a year in this pathetic state. At last, the outcast had been summoned.

A smile spread across Yawgmooth's lips. His own people finally realized they needed him. Now that they realized it, Yawgmooth would never let them forget it.

Below lay the desert. Above hovered beautiful, fabled Halcyon. Pilgrim Way connected the two, twisting its way up the sheer face of the volcanic extrusion. It was a steep and treacherous passage. Always, the road from hell to heaven would be so. Now Yawgmooth stood only a few dozen paces from the gates of that heaven.

A white marble gateway towered above the narrow road. It was twice as wide and thrice as tall as any creature that could have made the journey to the top. Niches within the columns held ornately carved figures. To one side stood a nude and muscled man and to the other a nude and muscled woman. They were the Thran's image of perfect beauty, their limbs massive and yet posed with a supple ease across their hairless frames.

Yawgmooth laughed darkly to himself. He had seen human bodies inside and out, exploring every inch. Even healthy bodies never resembled these perfect figures.

"Of course they rejected my theories. They don't even know what their own bodies look like."

Between the figures, gigantic gates of iron stood wide open. Powerstones winked in the stout bars—jewels enchanted to repel rams and slay attackers. Through the gates fanned a white marble threshold, fronted by a clear stream. Architectural symbolism. When folk entered the city, the dust of the world below was washed from their feet. When folk left, their first steps beyond made dirt cake on their shoes.

As he approached Yawgmooth stared in amazement at the artificial stream. "What sort of people divert a river across their gate?"

"We do," came a woman's quiet voice from the other side of the stream. "Welcome to Halcyon, Master Yawgmooth."

He lifted his eyes to see a young woman wearing the white robes of a council member. The ceremonial garb fit her poorly. Her



hands fretted impatiently within the bulky sleeves, and the stole around her neck was uneven. Her tanned skin and sun-bleached hair showed she was used to working outside, and her pale eyes were keen and impatient above the fussy robes. Even now, her gaze dipped toward the garment, and she smiled in apology.

"Forgive my appearance. I came right from the infirmary. I had expected you would arrive there by way of the aerial transport I dispatched to Phoenon—"

Yawgmoth waved her off. "After piecing together water passage from Jamuraa and walking all the way to Phoenon, I wasn't about to accept charity."

Beneath her tan, the woman blushed prettily. "Yes. My apologies for that as well. I had a battle even to get your banishment revoked. The council forbade me to send an escort."

A glinting smile filled Yawgmoth's face. It was a dazzling smile, and he knew it.

"So, you are the one who fought to bring me back?"

"Yes," the woman said. "I am the one. My name is Rebbec."

"Ah, *the* Rebbec. Architect of empyrean spaces!" Yawgmoth said, impressed.

The flattering blush returned. "You've heard of me?"

"Even among outcasts and lepers, you are known, yes," Yawgmoth said. He looked down at the clear, cool stream that separated them. Rebbec stood on white marble, and Yawgmoth on dust. "But we haven't heard of this—"

"It is a ritual ablution," Rebbec said, again smiling an apology. "It is meant to remind us we are rising from the dust of the past into the clean skies."

"What sort of people—?"

"It's my own design," Rebbec broke in, "and I carved the Father and Mother Thran there beside the gates and designed much of what lies within—just so you know."

Yawgmoth patted dust from his canvas backpack. "No little trickle will be enough to wash the world from me. I've got it under my fingernails and ground into my skin. Even my blood is one part mud."



She stooped beside the stream and gestured him forward. "Come here. I couldn't get you an aerial escort, but at least I can wash the feet that brought you here."

Staring intently at the bowed figure, Yawgmoth said, "Perhaps Halcyon welcomes me, after all." He stepped into the stream.

Chill water snaked past laces and leather into the ragged stockings he wore. Mud streamed away in brown clouds. Rebbec's fingers deftly worked the laces loose. She tugged one boot off and then the stocking. Her touch was firm but gentle as she laved away the dirt of the road. She massaged calluses and soothed aching muscles, then she eased the other boot loose.

Yawgmoth stood while she worked. His eyes traced the gate. "Do you do the gem cutting as well?"

"That is the work of my husband," Rebbec replied. "The one who lies ill. The one you have been summoned to heal."

Yawgmoth pulled his foot from her hands. "Your husband?" He picked up his dripping boots and stockings and stepped from the stream onto the white marble threshold. His wet feet slipped.

Rebbec caught him. She was strong and surefooted. She laughed. "That was an oversight of my design. Wet marble is slick."

The laugh was contagious. "I see the symbolism. An outsider such as I can enter the city only with the aid of a citizen—"

"Else he might fall on his ass, yes. Splendid symbolism," Rebbec said wryly. "Here, lean on me until we reach the sedan chair."

"I have no other choice."

"You could fall on your ass."

"Not in such lovely company."

Yawgmoth leaned upon Rebbec as the two made their way beneath the shadow of the arch. Ice-colored stone formed a short tunnel. There was a gentle curve built into archway so that no one could glimpse the city before crossing the threshold, and

none in the city could glimpse the outer world without leaving. The slowly rising path reminded entrants they must ascend, and to ascend is work. Beyond the curve, Yawgmoth caught his first glimpse of lofty Halcyon.

The city was splendid. Its sparkling districts rose through eight terraces toward the highest point, the western plateau. Streets of white brick mazed among three- and four-story town-houses in limestone. Roofs of blue tile topped the smaller and more conventional buildings. On the highest terrace towered minarets with onion domes, flying archways and slender buttresses. A great stadium stood there, and beside it the amphitheater, Council Hall, and high court. Libraries, archives, noble palaces, temples . . . the city crowded the eight terraces to the sheer edge of the extrusion. A wide white wall surrounded it all. Archways in the wall led to five aerial ports, where merchant caravels hovered.

"A beautiful city," Yawgmoth said. "A vision out of a dream."

"That building there, with the stacked white terraces and the ivy-covered apse, that is the infirmary. That is where we are headed."

Yawgmoth nodded. "I was about to observe that it seemed a pile of dishes ready to be washed—but, of course, this was one of your designs?"

She cocked her head. "You catch on quickly." She gestured at a nearby sedan chair. It was a low-slung seat encased in a fanciful framework of slender white bars. "This is our ride."

"This?" Yawgmoth asked, gesturing to the delicate contraption. "I'm used to riding in wagons filled with manure."

Rebbec already was climbing in. Her bulky robes hung up on the sedan chair's frame, and she irritably tugged it free.

"Stick with me, Yawgmoth, and the city is yours."

"It sounds as though I will." He settled into the seat beside her. It was covered in needlework of blue and black, and the dust of Yawgmoth's robes sloughed off on the fine fabric. He gently eased his pack into a small hold behind the seat. "I brought all my rather meager supplies."



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"Oh, the infirmary has every possible supply," Rebbec said, checking the skies overhead. "The healers are well stocked. I'm sure they have everything you could need."

"Knives, bone saws, curved needles, tissue clamps, leeches, shunts, opiates, soporifics, spirits . . . ?"

A grim look came over Rebbec's face. "I'm glad you brought your supplies. I forgot how—revolutionary your treatments are." She cupped her hand beneath a powerstone in a raised setting of silver. Her fingers gently contacted the stone, and she pulled upward. Though the stone did not lift, the craft did. It glided smoothly and soundlessly up into the air. The vast gate fell away. Blue-tile rooftops replaced white-brick streets.

Yawgmoth stared, intrigued. "Speaking of revolutionary."

"Imagine that this gem is the sedan chair. By pressing the base of it, I lift the craft and us into the air. To turn, I merely press on one side or the other. To lift the bow or stern, I apply pressure there."

"And what if you let go?" Yawgmoth asked, pulling her hand away. The jewel remained where it had been, suspended on its mounting, and the craft remained in place, as well.

Rebbec smiled. "It is my husband's design. You cannot fall from the sky. A chair could hang safely forever."

"Unless the powerstones failed," Yawgmoth said as the craft nosed out above retreating rooftops.

"Powerstones don't fail," Rebbec said.

"They do fail," Yawgmoth said. "They will fail."

The white streets of the city jagged by below. "Once charged, they're harder than diamonds, than adamantite. They are geometrically perfect, and unless geometry changes, they will not fail."

Yawgmoth pointed toward the edge of the infirmary, where workers clambered among scaffolds and cement forms.

"What happened to that wing of your infirmary?"

Rebbec stared sharply at the man, but the craft never faltered. "You heard of the accident, then? Talk on the road?"



"I had time to sort among traveler's stories . . . determine what emergency brought me," Yawgmooth replied simply.

"That was an anomaly. That stone had not yet cooled when it was . . . when the Untouchable drove it . . . I think blood compromised its matrix."

"I heard there was blood on many of the gems. Did you dispose of them?"

"Here we are," Rebbec said, bringing the sedan chair to land lightly atop the infirmary. Several other craft perched on birchen platforms that jutted from the tile rooftop. A set of stairs led down from the spot. Rebbec released the powerstone, climbed from the craft, and descended the stairs.

Yawgmooth grabbed his pack and followed. "You did use them, didn't you?"

A doorway opened below and Rebbec walked through it. "We cleaned and checked every stone before employing it. None showed any sign of flaw or weakness."

"The truth is, you don't know what caused the implosion." He strode beside her down a gently lit corridor. "You don't really know how powerstones work. You've created a whole city that relies on an energy source you do not understand. 'Magic!' you say. 'It's magic!' Oh, how clever. And then when the magic fails, you say simply say, 'It must have been more magic!' Look at this infirmary! It is a monument to superstition and quackery. You've placed your hopes in fakes and phonies. It's no wonder your genius husband is dying of a wasting disease." He had said this last as they strode through a doorway into a room where sat a gray-haired man.

The patient—he was clearly that in his powerstone-driven wheeled chair—was wan and haggard. His eyes and cheeks were sunken, his shoulders slumped. He looked up toward the two arrivals. His eyes settled first on Rebbec and then shifted to Yawgmooth.

"You must be Yawgmooth. I am Glacian, the genius husband dying of a wasting disease."

Into the awkward silence, Yawgmooth said, "Not any longer." He slung the pack from his back and strode confidently toward

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the man in the chair. Yawgmooth shucked his travel cloak on the floor, set his pack on the bed, and flung back the flap. Dust settled onto the spread. He poured water from a pitcher into a basin and washed his hands to the elbows, then turning to his pack, he gingerly pulled forth a small knife, a set of tweezers, and several stoppered vials. "No more muggery. We're going to discover the cause of your illness. We're going to heal you."

Glacian cast a long-suffering look at Rebbec, and he gave a raspy sigh. "You have to understand, you are no savior, Yawgmooth. We are done with real healers. They have exhausted their techniques, and now in desperation we turn to you. We aren't setting aside witchery. We are summoning it." Glacian fixed the large man with a level stare. "Your so-called methods are only too well known to us. I was among the elders who voted for your original banishment. If it were up to me, you would still be stuck in far Jamuraa, poking sticks up the backsides of syphilitic mules. But my wife fears for me, and the council and city are terrified to do without me, as I am the only one who truly understands the machinery beneath this city. They are willing to try anything. And you, Yawgmooth—you just barely qualify as anything."

The men's eyes met. Hatred leapt like sparks between them.

Glacian continued. "You got one thing right, though. I am dying of a wasting illness. I am resigned to it. Only in that resignation do I let you poke and scrape. You cannot make me worse than death itself will shortly."

Breaking eye contact, Yawgmooth laughed lightly. "You wouldn't say that if you were a syphilitic mule."

Glacian joined the man in laughter. The sound set Rebbec to breathing again. She had not caught a breath since entering the room.

Her husband coughed raggedly and then said, "Even if I were a syphilitic mule, I would still say it."

"Well then," Yawgmooth said, "it is up to me to convince you otherwise. You, and the whole city." He crouched beside the chair. "Now, travel talk says there are lesions. Let's have a look."



Glacian's eyes flared. "Travel talk?"

"The whole empire is worried," Yawgmoth soothed. These words calmed the man's ego, and the fury in his eyes dimmed. Yawgmoth said, "In fact, you are not the only one suffering from this condition. In some of the city-states, it is becoming endemic, if not epidemic. Many of the poor have been infected. Your own Caves of the Damned are said to be rife with it. Even a few of the elite suffer from it. But, of course, you are the first national treasure to have the disease. Now, let's have a look."

"The worst spot is on his back," Rebbec said, hurrying to her husband's side and drawing the dressing gown back from the man's shoulder.

"Can you lean over?"

"I lean over for no man," growled Glacian. "As soon you will discover."

"Then it's the bed," Yawgmoth said. Glacian was suddenly in his arms. Yawgmoth's movements were so quick and assured there was no time for objection. He conveyed his patient onto his belly on the bed and drew the robe summarily back from the man's body.

Glacian lay there, small and panting. His ribs showed through flesh the color of mushrooms. The skin was covered with a large mass of suppurating lesions. A hundred dark smudges schooled across one scapula. A white substance oozed from the spots. Each lesion showed a dark tail that sank away into muscle.

"When did these first appear?"

"Just after the attack," Rebbec said. "They came one by one. The healers only made the spots worse. There are also sections on his belly and his left buttock."

"Ah," Glacian snipped, "he'll want to be seeing that."

"No," Yawgmoth said. "Not today. Today, what I want to see is this." He took the small knife he had brought from the pack and lightly scraped some of the filmy liquid from the lesions. Careful not to touch the substance himself, he wiped the stuff from the knife onto the lip of an unstoppered vial. He fastened the lid. "This fluid will tell me much about the source of this

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ailment. It is lymph, one of the body's defenses against illness. Its composition will tell me what sort of disease your body fights."

"Shall I spit and piss in your jars, too?" mocked Glacian.

"Soon enough," Yawgmooth replied smoothly. "First—" With a pair of tweezers, he lay hold of the end of one oily hair that protruded from a lesion. Tugging back and forth on the hair, he slowly cracked the skin around it. Glacian twitched with each pull, and his hands clutched the bed. Persistently, Yawgmooth worked the hair until it pulled free, trailing a tattered section of flesh. He gingerly deposited it in another vial. "This is a follicle, a specialized tissue. The effect of the illness on it will tell me much about the disease's means of spreading."

"Why don't you just carve up my back?" Glacian protested.

"Yes, why not?" Yawgmooth replied. The tip of his knife sliced into the healthy skin just beyond one large lesion. With a slow precision that might have seemed relishing, Yawgmooth insinuated the blade beneath the lesion, cutting deeply enough to take the tail of the infection along with the main body. Glacian's knuckles grew white on the bed. Yawgmooth finished the cut and drew the disk of skin up in a pair of tweezers. Dark blood welled up in the hole he had made. "And this—this is the ailment in microcosm. This will tell me how it develops." He deposited the bloody item in a third vial. Gore began to run from the cut, and Yawgmooth absently dropped a piece of bleached wool on the spot.

"I'll say this for your methods," Glacian said. "You understand how to inflict pain."

Yawgmooth smiled his dazzling smile. "I have ways of preventing pain—opiates and the like—but I don't imagine you go in for that sort of witchery."

"Next time I will," Glacian said. "Next time I will."

Yawgmooth nodded, stowing the vials in his tattered backpack. "In the meantime, Rebbec, you must avoid touching any infected sites, the lymph or blood from your husband, even what appears to be healthy skin. We do not yet know how this disease spreads, person to person, and you are at grave risk of becoming infected yourself."



Rebbec objected, "But for over a year now, I have touched him."

"You must cease," Yawgmoth replied sternly. "No skin-to-skin contact, no fond caresses of hair, no kisses or hand holding or embraces unless a clean linen separates you."

"You've been here only moments, and you're trying to wrap me in cerements!" Glacian said.

Yawgmoth quickly covered the man in a blanket and deposited him in the chair.

"I'm trying to keep your wife out of cerements. I'll be giving the same instruction to the healers who tend you." He closed his backpack and lifted it and his cloak. "Now, I need a bath and a rest and someplace to work over the samples."

Rebbec crouched beside her husband's chair. Her hands nervously shied from the man's skin and clothes.

Distractedly, she said, "I've arranged apartments nearby—a short walk—so you can easily reach my husband at any hour. There is a workspace—tables, cabinets, ample light, a splendid view—"

"Another of your designs?" Yawgmoth teased. When Rebbec nodded, he laughed. "'Stick with me,' you said, 'and the city will be yours.' " He took her arm and drew her up, away from her husband. "I'm sticking with you."



## Chapter 3

Yawgmoth sat up in bed, sheets draping him. He'd spent months in this apartment. It was beginning to feel like home.

Morning sunlight streamed through eastern skylights. In the high windows above the western wall, the upper city floated in golden panorama. This was typical of Rebbec's designs. Her architecture always drew the eye upward and the feet afterward. Entryways lay in the east, the place of origins, and on the lowest level. By rising through a gentle turn, the entrant came to see a spectacular view of the west, the place of destinies. Council Hall, amphitheater, palaces, temples—the skyline of the eighth terrace presented a visual feast. By way of gentle stairs, the viewer rose toward that vision.

The Architecture of Ascension, Rebbec called it, transforming all who entered.

The bed was another entranceway, admitting a person from the land of dream. Yawgmoth had just arrived from such a place. He had been visiting Rebbec there. His dreaming eye had seen her approach, bearing a perfect world in her arms. Except it hadn't been a perfect world, but her disease-ridden husband.

"Phthisis," Yawgmoth yawned.

Glacian suffered from phthisis—progressive degeneration. Magic only exacerbated it. Removing the powerstone from Glacian's wheeled chair had allowed the lesions on his back to



clear up. Other advances came more slowly. Yawgmoth had found plenty of microbial organisms—"little beasties" was the name he used—in the various samples harvested from his patient, but all were secondary infections. The primary microbes were elusive. Yawgmoth began to wonder if the creature he sought bridged the worlds of flesh and magic—affecting both but residing in neither.

"I just may find out today."

In search of answers, he was bound for the filthiest, darkest place in Halcyon—the Caves of the Damned. This warren of caverns below the mana rig was home to the criminal outcasts of Halcyon—the Untouchables. They were rife with phthisis. Surely Glacian had been infected by the man who stabbed him. Find that man, and he would find the source of the disease.

The Caves of the Damned had once been a penal colony, where the city shipped all its incorrigibles. Thieves and murderers were sent down into brimstone darkness. There they were to farm mushrooms and catch blind-eyed fish and carve obsidian. There they were to learn communal cooperation or die. Some learned too well. They banded together, overthrew their counselors and facilitators, and took over the caves. Every attempt Halcyon made to force a surrender resulted in dead negotiators. War was declared. The Halcyte guard marched down to reclaim the caves. The prisoners fought viciously in their own element. At last, the city relented. It sealed off all but one entry into the caves and posted a garrison there to prevent upward incursions.

Though the city had lost control of its penal colony, it had not lost a repository for its human refuse. Every day, chained parades of prisoners trooped down into the darkness. Their crimes were serious enough to result in the renunciation of their citizenship. Citizens of Halcyon were allowed to descend into the caves to visit relatives, to minister to the ill, to do whatever they dared beyond the reach of law and reason. One's weapons were identified, and the citizen could not emerge unless all weapons came back with him. Some citizens even

drifted down there to remain—lunatics and indigents, laggards, disaffected youths, pervers, brawlers, and any number of others who found life in heaven more hellish than life in hell.

As Rebbec had once said, Halcyon was a place of ascension, and some people preferred to descend.

Today, Yawgmooth was one of those folk. He donned his old travel robes. The leather was cleaned and mended, at Rebbec's insistence. Even when tattered, they had been proof against daggers in the back. The metal plates and ring mail sewn into the lining made that sure. These were robes that had guarded him against attacks of orcs and lizard men. Surely they would ward off the diseased. Into one interior pocket, he tucked metal flasks and a set of scalpels. Into another, he slipped three powerstone lanterns. Two long coils of rope lay in bags by the door. About his waist, Yawgmooth strapped a wide belt with daggers, darts, and a pair of swords, all dipped in poison.

Yawgmooth felt at home in the company of the damned.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There is nothing we can do for you once you descend!" shouted the guard captain from the embankment above the Caves of the Damned.

"There was never anything you could do for me," Yawgmooth called back over his shoulder.

He stood above a stone shaft that descended into utter darkness. The space seemed a mucousy larynx—Yawgmooth had cut one open once—and a chill breath came up from the black heart of the world. The thousands of others who had descended here had etched a switchback path along one slanting wall.

Yawgmooth had no patience to descend as others. He stooped to check the cable he had knotted to the stone column and then flung the vast coil out into the unlit space beneath him. Rope unwound. The loop disappeared down the giant stone throat. It yanked tight and slapped the wall. Wrapping the rope



once about him, Yawgmoth stowed his lantern on his belt. He donned steel-palmed gloves, clutched one hand on the rope above, and clamped the other on the strands below.

"They'll find out you've no kin there. They'll strip your weapons and kill you and eat you," the captain insisted. "Cannibals. Madmen. Monsters!"

"Madmen, monsters, and me!" Yawgmoth declared.

He flung himself out into empty air. He hung there a moment and then plummeted. Cord whirled through his hands. The lantern flickered. Its gold light cast a ring across the cave walls. Yawgmoth tightened his grip. The rope snapped taut. Yawgmoth extended his legs, seeing his own shadow loom up across the wall. His feet struck stone. He pushed off again and released the whirring line. Rippling walls slid upward past him. He plunged.

The cave air grew colder and wetter as he descended. Blackness above and blackness below. Yawgmoth inhabited a slim ring of light. Each time his feet struck stone, the lantern flickered—a loose powerstone—and threatened to go out. It was the sort of claustrophobic moment that would unhinge the minds of most men and women, but Yawgmoth needed neither light nor solid ground to be at home. He needed only himself.

One bound brought him down beside a ledge. His circle of light revealed a pile of bones—the remains of travelers who had slipped from the path and landed in broken heaps. The fall had killed them, and something had eaten them—cave crickets, roaches, mice—perhaps the damned themselves.

Down farther, Yawgmoth passed a rag-garbed woman making the ascent. She cowered in the shadow of a stalagmite. If she had a light with her, it was hidden beneath her shabby clothes. Yawgmoth's swift approach must have been terrifying to her. He looked directly into her eyes and flashed her his glittering smile. Her look of fear deepened. Yawgmoth brought his boots thudding to ground beside her hiding place. He locked his gaze with hers. Then he pushed off and plunged farther.

## J. Robert King

The woman clambered from hiding, ignited her own light—a crude thing of oil and wick—and scrambled up the treacherous trail.

Yawgmoth continued down. For a time, there was only the whirl of line through steel-palmed gloves, the rhythm of boots striking stone. The first rope had been a thousand feet long, with knots along its last fifty feet. He reached those knots now and stopped to tie off the five hundred foot length he carried at his waist. It bore him down past more of the same until the knots in its end struck his hands.

He pulled up short, dangling in midair beneath an overhang. He fetched the lantern from his waist and held it out. The shaft descended straight away into murk—but in that murk, figures moved.

They were human or once had been. Perpetual darkness had given their skin an otherworldly pallor. Their eyes were wide and black in their faces. Frown lines creased their mouths. Blade scars creased cheeks and jaws. Filthy clothes draped gaunt frames. The larger males wore the thickest, cleanest, and newest garments.

A giant of a man stood at the center of the crowd. He was taller than Yawgmoth and double his weight. Garbed in warm wool and provisioned with weapons, he was a man of considerable influence—and ability.

"You better start climbing back up, spider!" the man growled. "No guards here."

Dangling above, Yawgmoth said. "I am not a guard. I'm a healer."

Angry laughter rattled among the damned. The giant said, "A man who heals with swords?"

"A healer who knows blades both small and large," Yawgmoth replied.

"Why would a healer come here?" asked the giant, circumspectly motioning some of his folk to climb to the ledge above Yawgmoth.

"I seek a man, a man with a deadly disease—a disease that is ravaging your people," Yawgmoth said.



Craven figures made their way up the path.

The giant hissed. "My people? My people? Since when do you parasites care about my people?"

Yawgmoth saw no reason to lie. "Since the artificer Glacian has become infected with the plague. I want to find the man who stabbed him—if that man still lives. It was in the last raid on the mana rig, a little over a year ago. A prisoner stabbed a white-haired man who stood in the charging chamber. I want to find that prisoner. I want to study the disease that is killing him and Glacian—and many others here, as well. If I can map the stages of the degeneration, if I can discover the factors leading—"

His words were cut short, along with the rope that held him aloft. Yawgmoth plunged thirty feet toward the cave floor.

Prisoners scattered below him. Only the giant remained.

Yawgmoth dropped to ground and rolled. He came up standing, a pair of blades flashing out. They struck the giant's own blades, already converging to take off his head. He flung back the steel and ducked under and away.

The giant man lunged after him.

Yawgmoth was too quick. He spun. His swords cracked against the prisoner's metal and cut a shallow trough in his side.

Yawgmoth staggered back and caught his breath.

The giant paused. He dragged a bloody hand from the wound. "If I am going to add this sword-toting healer to my five hundred thirty kills, I would like to know his name."

"I am Yawgmoth. Soon all of you will know that name—will know it and be glad you know it." He charged the giant, his swords carving separate arcs toward the man. "All but you. You will be dead." Yawgmoth batted back his foe's defenses and speared inward. Steel darted tonguelike and tasted the man's blood again. The sword emerged crimson. "And what underworld king have I the honor of killing?"

Gore draped the man's teeth as he staggered back, smiling. His underlings sniggered in the shadows.

"King? I am only a gate guard. I am Dorin the Gate Guard."

As though insulted, Yawgmoth sheathed his swords. "You're not even that anymore."

His hand flicked from his belt. A dart leapt through the air. It quivered in Dorin's forehead. He stood for a moment more, the poison spreading through his brain. That gory grin was his last expression. The man went down like a felled tree.

Yawgmoth calmly walked to the fallen man and stepped onto his back. He turned slowly about. His eyes pinned the others, one by one, to the wall.

"I have more poisoned darts here, enough for five of you. There are also daggers and swords and other devices. Everyone will get his turn. Or, perhaps, you can believe me and conduct me inward."

An old woman spoke out of the darkness. "Who but a soldier would come looking for the man who stabbed a genius?"

"It no longer matters to you what I am—soldier or healer. It only matters that I turn my attentions on someone else. Do you care if I plan to kill the man? Care instead whether I will first kill you."

"I'll take you to him," said a boy. The voice was shrill and determined—and immediately drowned out by a chorus of objecting adults. They clustered about him, and someone began to drag the protesting child deeper into the caves.

"Away from him!" shouted Yawgmoth. He charged toward the mob. "Anyone near the boy will die."

Like frightened rats, they scattered back once more. Only the boy was left. His cheeks showed red marks where someone had clamped a hand over his mouth. Fear shone in his wide eyes, but he did not stagger away like the others.

Yawgmoth halted before him and went to one knee. He fixed the child with a piercing stare.

"You know who stabbed the man a year ago in the manarig?"

The lad nodded.

Yawgmoth extended his hand toward the lad. "Lead me to him."



## *The Thran*

The boy led Yawgmooth forward into a low, sloping passage that wound unevenly down into the darkness. The boy was surefooted on those rumpled stones. Yawgmooth was less so. He clung to the child with one hand and held out his powerstone light with the other. The light flickered feebly before them. Behind came the furtive steps of others, following. Here and there, dark archways opened into side chambers. Haunted eyes stared out. Steel glinted. The boy turned down none of these.

Yawgmooth spoke, his voice watery against the stone. "Where are we going? Where is this man?"

The boy answered easily. "He's in the quarantine cave with the others."

"Ah. Very good," Yawgmooth said with a nod. "A quarantine cave."

"Whenever somebody gets sick, they send him there."

"To keep it from spreading," Yawgmooth supplied. "That's good."

The boy shook his head. "Still, it's spreading."

They reached the base of the winding passage. It opened out on a lofty shelf. Below spread an enormous cavern. It seemed a valley in the world above, its vault dark with night and its base glimmering with tiny fires. All about those fires, faces huddled. Figures slept in cold bundles nearby. There were thousands in that cavern. A few lifted their eyes to see the new arrivals—the tall man and the small boy, their light stabbing uselessly out into the overwhelming darkness.

"This is it?" Yawgmooth asked, stunned.

"Yes," the boy said. "The quarantine cave."

"Everyone here has the phthisis—the sickness?"

"Everyone."

Yawgmooth crouched down beside him, not this time to look him in the eye, but to steady himself, to hide his own eyes from the sight before him.

"He is here—the man who stabbed Glacian? The man from the mana rig?"

The boy's tone was utterly solemn. "Yes, he is here. His name is Gix."



## Chapter 4

In the warm light of morning, Gix and Glacian sat across from each other. Hatred—natural to either man—gashed the air between them. Glacian had immediately recognized the Untouchable who had stabbed and infected him. Gix had immediately recognized the Halcyte he had tried to kill. Given a chance, each man would have repeated that long-ago fight, attempting to end it differently.

Fortunately, Glacian and Gix were too ravaged by phthisis to fight. The hatred they shared was slightly less powerful than the disease they shared. Lesions moved across Glacian's body in slow swarms. He had not improved in the months since Gix's arrival. Gix had improved significantly. That was good. He had been little more than a living skeleton when Yawgmooth had found him. The disease united these foes. So too did their hatred of the man who was their healer, captor, and tormentor—their only hope and their likely doom.

Yawgmooth worked with unusual energy this morning. He moved efficiently from his work table to the windowed alcove where he conducted his healing sessions. Every morning after breakfast, the two patients were brought from the infirmary and deposited in the alcove. Throughout the day, Yawgmooth worked on them, teasing away tissue samples, applying salves, insinuating strips of metal beneath the skin, compelling draughts and powders down their



throats, recording outcomes and devising new treatments. . . . He worked like an artist in a lofted studio—manic fits of inspiration interspersed with long periods of languid brooding. He paced furiously, improvised implements from cutlery, brewed foul concoctions, and all the while, spoke to his subjects.

“—only substance that has had any real impact on the disease has been powerstone contact, and that impact is negative—” Yawgmooth muttered to himself as he set down a tray of gleaming philters on a small table between his two patients.

They regarded him with narrow-eyed suspicion. Gix, strapped upright in his wheeled chair, stared angrily at him.

“Why these? Why more poison?”

“Because he isn’t trying to cure us,” croaked Glacian. “He’s trying to cure the disease. He cares nothing for our comfort and health, only for our contribution to a cure.”

Yawgmooth blinked mildly at the two men, his thought diverted for a moment.

“But we’re not just test subjects,” Glacian went on. “We’re *famous* test subjects—the stricken genius and the man who struck him. The whole city watches Yawgmooth. Everyone prays that he succeed. The very council—the body that once expelled him like a rotten hunk of meat—now offers him every aid in his endeavor. They fear they’ve invited civil war again in their midst—some even call for Yawgmooth’s exile—but meanwhile they pray for him and his efforts. He is the sculptor and we the hunks of stone he chisels and cuts.”

A wry smile entered Yawgmooth’s handsome features, and he bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“In fact, the sculptor has a few more cuts to make this morning.”

Both men groaned. Gix hissed an Untouchable vulgarity.

Yawgmooth drew the robe off Gix’s narrow shoulders, exposing a cluster of lesions on the man’s stomach. He produced a scalpel and began deftly nicking the center of each dark spot.

“This morning’s salves must be absorbed directly into the infections.”

"Ah! That stings!" Gix shouted as the first drops struck the oozing wounds. The man struggled against the linen straps that held his arms to the chair. "Bastard!"

Yawgmoth placidly continued applying drops. "Yes. That would be the alcohol suspension. It speeds absorption."

"He adds substances to speed absorption, to decrease viscosity, to stabilize composition, to intensify interactions, but never to dull pain, never to make the unpalatable palatable," grouched Glacian.

Yawgmoth finished with Gix and turned toward Glacian. As he set down one scalpel and picked up another, Yawgmoth's attention strayed past the windows to the glimmering height of the city. Beyond the dome of the Council Hall, something gleamed brilliantly.

"You'll get your wish today." He drew aside Glacian's robe and began cutting into lesions on his shoulder. "I have an appointment elsewhere today. You'll both be sleeping through the effects of these salves."

"Oh, no," Gix protested. "Not me. Not today. Every time you put me to sleep, I wake up missing another hunk of skin."

"Shut up," Glacian advised, hissing as drops soaked into his back. "You can't refuse. He'll just inject the stuff and be none too gentle doing it."

"You shut up!" Gix spat. "You're as much a prisoner as I am. At least I act like a prisoner, not a lapdog."

"You act like a savage, an outcast."

"That's what I am!"

"—a ceremony today I am required to attend—" Yawgmoth mused absently as he finished with Glacian's shoulder. His patients were in a full-out verbal brawl now. He seemed to hear none of it. He set aside the philters and drew steaming liquid from a cup into a bladder. Fitting a hollow needle into the end of the bladder, he stuck Gix's hip. "—and it will take a few hours before the salves have run their course. It would be painful, were you not asleep, and I'll be back before you awaken."

The Untouchable's insults slurred away into nonsense. He went silent and slumped forward in his seat.



## *The Thran*

Yawgmoth looked with satisfaction at the stooped figure. He turned, steaming cup in one hand and needle bladder in the other.

"Do you need an injection, or will you drink for yourself?"

"Give it to me," Glacian hissed, extending a hand toward the cup. "Haven't you cut me enough already?" He grabbed the cup and dashed its steamy contents into his mouth. The taste of the stuff was horrible, and it burned the tongue.

Yawgmoth watched his patient's throat move. "I've got to get ready." He set the empty cup on a nearby table and withdrew to his private chambers.

By the time he returned, dressed in finery provided to him by Rebbec, Yawgmoth found Glacian slumped over, a line of drool from his lower lip to his lap. Nodding in satisfaction, Yawgmoth stared down at the sleeping man.

"They're launching the foundation of the Thran Temple today. I wouldn't want you anywhere near so many powerstones. I'll tell your wife you were too sick to attend."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Yawgmoth was gone, Glacian sat upright and stared after him. "Too sick to attend," he growled. The steaming sedative soaked into the cushion of his wheeled chair. "Too sick."

It would be difficult to make his way down those sloping stairs and around the corner to the door, but Glacian was determined. He would reach the street and call for aid. He couldn't bear to ride in a powerstone-driven sedan chair, but he would reach the heights somehow. He would see his wife's triumph. He would see the vast plane of stones she had assembled, stones Glacian had created.

"I'll be the one beside Rebbec today, not that damned Yawgmoth."

\* \* \* \* \*

## J. Robert King

Yawgmoth stepped into the sedan chair outside his door. He'd grown skilled in the operation of the craft—had become a true Halcyte. In the seven other Thran city-states, sedan chairs were extravagances. In Halcyon, the skies hummed day and night with them. They were symbols of the future—the perfect marriage of Glacian's technical innovations and Rebbec's fanciful designs. Joined, their talents created devices that literally ascended.

Yawgmoth slipped his hand beneath the control stone. The sedan chair lifted from the tiled portico. It edged out over the rooftop of Yawgmoth's apartment building and soared over the infirmary. It lay on the seventh of Halcyon's eight terraces—"a place of illness and disease cannot reside at the highest pinnacle of the city," Rebbec had once said. The grandest buildings towered on the eighth terrace, above. Yawgmoth's sedan chair whirled up the cliff wall toward it.

This was the safest way for Yawgmoth to travel. The streets were unfriendly to him. Most citizens distrusted or even feared the ex-exile. The Halcyte guard harassed him. The Council of Elders entertained motions to have him banished anew. As always, Yawgmoth could count only on himself. This was little matter. He was the most reliable person he knew.

He flew over noble houses done in the old style—massive and multicolored, with ornate minarets, balconies, and facades. Beyond loomed the great gray dome of the Council Hall and the grim Hall of Judgment. These edifices and the temples that sided them were from a later period. In place of onion domes and round fancy, the state houses and temples had an angular severity—white stone pointing skyward. This district ran to the sheer edge of the basalt extrusion. Some of the farthest buildings even hung out over the fifteen-hundred-foot drop. For half a century, there had been no room for new building.

Until Rebbec and Glacian. Their Thran Temple would not rest on the ground but float above it. Its foundations would lie not in shakable bedrock but in unshakable geometry. No one had ever thought to build on ideals instead of realities. The



vision for the temple had been Rebbec's. The innovation to make it real—that was Glacian's.

Today, the floating foundations of that temple would be launched.

Yawgmoth's sedan chair topped the looming wall of the amphitheater, and he glimpsed beyond it the foundation of the Thran Temple. For lack of room, it had been constructed on its side, a wall in the center of Council Boulevard. It seemed a huge window of stained glass, tens of thousands of large powerstones fitted tightly together. The near face of that towering wall was smooth and seamless. The far side was toothy with jutting crystals. Morning sunlight struck the foundation and broke into myriad rainbows.

A huge crowd had gathered. Their uplifted faces were painted in gleaming light. It seemed the whole city was there. All wore finery worthy of their future temple. The crowd thronged Council Boulevard and spilled out on five cross streets. Sedan chairs parked atop any available flat spot. Guards prevented folk from landing on rooftops. The nearest available spot lay crowded blocks distant.

"No time to land," Yawgmoth observed. He guided the sedan chair to hover above the tiled roof of an old temple.

Someone ascended the vast gray dome of the Council Hall. A set of broad stone stairs spiraled to the peak of the dome, where a spire gave a view of the whole world. With solemn tread, the figure rose to that high spot and stood, casting a shadow on the foundation wall beyond. It was more than a shadow—morning light streamed past the figure, bearing its image into the powerstones. There, in myriad refraction, the figure took form, no longer garbed in flesh but now in light. It was the most glorious vision Yawgmoth had ever seen.

"Rebbec," he whispered breathlessly.

She had not merely ascended but transcended. She seemed an angel, a god, gleaming there—a colossus of light projected by the foundation. She smiled.

## J. Robert King

The city cheered. The sound was like the breath of a titan awakening.

Yawgmoth's shout was as loud as the rest.

Rebbec spoke. The powerstones sewn into her cloak carried her voice throughout the city.

"Welcome, Halcyon," she said simply.

Another roar erupted.

Rebbec waited for it to cease. Her calm eyes and patient lips, her keen focus—none of them and all of them at once brought the crowd to a hushed silence.

"I stand here upon the dome of the Council Hall, the highest point of our city. This is the pinnacle of our past. It is the farthest that we could rise as creatures who walk upon the ground. Today, the pinnacle of our past will become the threshold to our future.

"The Thran Temple. You have all heard these words. Now let me tell you what they mean. Unlike the temples of the past, this building will not block light *from* us but bring light *to* us. It will not merely direct our eyes upward but will also elevate us. It will not set our minds on gods above us but will gather our own images and project them outward upon our city, upon the clouds, upon the very moon and stars. The Thran Temple will not be founded on the weighty world but on the bright firmament.

"Since the start of our great empire, we Thran have sought to rise from contingency and chaos into the perfect heavens. Today, we take the first step." She gestured down to the base of the foundation.

There, crews of artificers released chains from massive anchors sunk in the basalt. Slowly, with a terrific silence, the wall of crystal began to rise into the air.

"The foundation knows its place. It longs to hang where the temple will be. Its very structure is attuned to its correct position. Never will it fall from the sky. Never will it cease to shine upon us a vision of our transcended selves."

The wall lifted magnificently upward. The light-image of Rebbec shifted and danced away in a brilliant spectacle. The foundation glowed blindingly, like ocean waves in sunlight. As



it pulled free of the crowd, their finery swam with a spectrum of color. They were cast in the angelic image of Rebbec. The old gray Council Hall was changed also. Leaves of radiance rioted across stately columns and staid pilasters. Tall windows became gleaming waterfalls. The Council Hall dome, once gray stone beneath the beaming sky, became a vast and shifting cloud. The whole upper city was transfigured.

Yawgmoth had never imagined such beauty. Among lepers and lizard men, he had come to believe that humans were no more than a precarious pile of spurting organs and brittle bones. Now he glimpsed something more—something glorious. He glimpsed the destiny of a nation.

The shimmering foundation tilted as it rose, curving toward its final, level orientation. It overtopped the Council Hall. Powerstones drifted just above Rebbec's head. The jagged underbelly of the foundation bathed her in radiance. As it passed by, Rebbec reached up fondly and ran her hands along the stones.

The foundation had only just cleared the spot where she was before it halted in air. Level now, the plane of stones sank slowly into position, just beyond and just above the pinnacle where Rebbec stood.

She spoke again, and the crowd hushed. "Here will be our temple."

Another ovation rang out.

"It lies just above and beyond our former reach. It is more than a mere step that separates it from the world below. It is a leap. Any who would enter the temple must leave the world behind and leap through clear air to reach it. Let me be the first to take that leap."

The silence of the crowd deepened. The world held its breath.

Yawgmoth actually stood in his floating sedan chair. He clung to the curvilinear white bars that encased it.

Rebbec leaped. The tiny shadow of her figure broke free of the covetous earth. She hung for a moment between the worlds. Her foot came down upon the gleaming temple.

The cry that answered that landing was like the blast of a volcano.

## J. Robert King

No sooner had Rebbec landed on the floating space than her image shot through every stone. It gleamed down in a million projections on those who waited below.

"Welcome, Halcyon!"

The frozen throng shifted and broke. Those nearest the Council Hall flooded up the broad stair Rebbec had added to the eastern facade. In moments, young men and women gained the rooftop. Their eyes were lit with idealistic joy. They ran toward the central dome and the stairway that spiraled around it.

Yawgmoth saw his moment. He sat again and grasped the control stone of his sedan chair. The craft leaped to the pressure of his hand and vaulted across the upper city. The Council Hall dome swelled out below him. He reached its peak in a moment, before anyone else. Taking his hand from the control stone, he halted the craft in midair, climbed out, and dropped onto the dome. Laughing joyously, he scrambled up the pinnacle spire. At its peak, he hurled himself across the emptiness.

The world swung vertiginously beneath him. He landed on the shimmering foundation—in the surprised arms of Rebbec.

Together they spilled, laughing, to the smooth stone floor—robes tangled in robes, arms and legs intertwined. They struggled to stand.

Yawgmoth wrapped Rebbec in a joyous embrace. "You've done it, Rebbec! You've done it!" His voice echoed through the high city.

"We have all done it!" she exclaimed in response and returned his embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

Those words almost killed Glacian. The words and the laughter and the glimmering image of Rebbec in that bastard's arms. They almost killed him.

The temple foundation made his lesions fester.

"Take me . . . back down," Glacian gasped to the man who had wheeled his chair up the steep streets. "I cannot bear the glare of that thing!"





## Chapter 5

Rebbec sat upon the Thran Temple's floating foundation. All around her, crystal footings stood, glinting darkly in the setting sun. They seemed like teeth in a huge bear trap, set to catch a lumbering god. Orange sunlight twisted through them and turned cold—fire glimpsed through icicles.

Rebbec shook her head, a shiver running through her. She had not anticipated this mood of her temple. Its other moods were wondrous. Before dawn, it caught the coming radiance and brought it down to the people of Halcyon. In daylight, it was a warming marvel that gleamed like the city's own private sun. Even beneath blue clouds, the temple teased strands of red and yellow light from the rest and sent them down across the city. When thunderheads piled into the sky, the temple made one lightning strike into twenty. It peered into the malicious heart of the storm and terrified all inside the city but also foretold the first break of sun through clouds. At sunset, though, in premonition of the coming night, a frigid, caliginous presence possessed the structure. Beaming gold became icy silver. Crimson flames became blankets of snow.

Twice, Rebbec had tried to linger in the chill temple. The place had become a cave of ice. Moonlight and starlight had spun themselves into specters and wraiths. The temple that focused daylight in upon its worshipers did the same to night, leaving the heart black and cold and haunted. Rebbec had

stood at the center of her creation and striven to endure it. She could not.

Was this truly a fault of design or art? An oracle sees what an oracle sees.

Tonight, Rebbec was determined to remain. Body weary with the day and skin dotted in sweat, she trembled. The malign presence—darkness incarnate—wrapped her and chilled her.

Leaving was almost as terrible as remaining. Rebbec's Architecture of Ascension did not allow for pleasant departures. To leave any of her buildings meant regression, slipping back from sublimity to mundanity. All that was gained by entering was lost by leaving. This structure was the worst. It had the longest, most tortuous descent of any building she had created, all of it in a region of soul-stealing dark and cold.

"With greater promise comes greater peril," Rebbec reminded herself. To invoke a private sun for her city, she had to invite also the vastness of killing space. "If I cannot bear the dark heart of my creation, how can I expect my city to?"

She drew an algid breath and braced herself against the night.

It reached out and bodily laid hold of her. Its hand was heavy and implacable on her shoulder, and it spun her about.

"There you are," came an accusing voice. A shadow loomed before her.

"Yawgmoth!" Rebbec gasped, her knees wanting to fold. He grabbed her arms to hold her up, and his fingers were icicles. She cursed. "What are you doing, stalking about in the night? You terrified me."

"Didn't you hear me calling you?" he asked. "I was shouting all the way up the dome and spire."

His hands were cold. She drew away from him. "No. It's part of the design. The temple blocks out the sound of things below. It is supposed to have pulled free of the world and its shifting demands—"

"Enough," Yawgmoth hushed gently. "You should spend more time with people, Rebbec, and less with cold crystal. You



## The Thran

love your ideas, your designs, but you forget whom you are designing them for."

"I'm sorry. I get so entombed in my work," she said. "But tonight is different. This is a vigil. It's a holy pilgrimage through darkness. I *am* thinking of the people. I'm thinking of divinity and humanity and the long hours ahead."

"I've come to get you. There is news, grave news—"

"Glacian!"

"He's fine," Yawgmoth comforted, "for the moment. Though the news does impact him. It impacts us all."

"What is it?" Rebbec asked, turning toward him.

"Not here," he said, taking her hand. His fingers now were warm. "Below. In the infirmary. I want to tell you and Glacian and Gix all at once. There's a sedan chair waiting at the base of the Council Hall. I would have landed here but—"

"I don't want anyone to land a sedan chair here," Rebbec broke in. "It destroys the symbolism."

"I know. You and your symbolism, Rebbec. You live in a world of ideas, and an attack on symbolism is for you as devastating as a earthquake is for the rest of us. I know you, my dear. I know that each building you design is meant to invite the rest of us to come live in your world of ideas. I know you build these buildings to bring us close to you, but with every crystal you place, you get farther away," Yawgmoth said. "Come with me tonight. Come back to the common world below—the world of contingency, as you call it. We have grave contingencies to discuss."

Rebbec seemed still lost behind her eyes. She gnawed her lip and said simply. "Yes."

\* \* \* \* \*

"How could such demons have built this paradise?" Gix wondered, strapped to his bed. The ceilings were clean, the bed was warm, the rooms were bright, the food exquisite, the views spectacular. . . . But the citizens—"They treat me like a hunk of meat."

Yawgmoth forever cut and stitched, impaled and infused. He

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did it all with feverish intensity, seeing the disease but not the man.

Glacian was worse. He was the monster the rest of the citizens aspired to become—bitter, selfish, paranoid, brutal. . . .

"Demons," the young man sighed.

"Shut up," growled Glacian. The man lay still, back toward the Untouchable.

"It's true. You're a bunch of demons," Gix said.

"You say that only because you don't belong here. We've built this city, and we belong in it." Glacian coughed spastically. "You and your kind built what you built in the caves, and that is where you belong."

"We didn't build the caves. You did," Gix spat back. "It's the dark shadow of Halcyon. You can't make a perfect place. You can't make a perfect life. Life is all jumbled up, the good and the bad. All you can do is try to separate them—put all the good stuff in one place and the bad stuff in another. To build your beautiful city you had to make the Caves of the Damned, where you could stash all the stuff you didn't want. To make your beautiful citizens, you had to throw half the people into the garbage."

"We didn't throw you into the garbage. You gravitated toward it," Glacian corrected.

"We aren't going to be garbage any longer. We're climbing out, Glacian. We're climbing out and looking for the people who shoved us down there. We're going to kill you."

Glacian laughed bitterly. The sound was almost indistinguishable from his cough. "You're going to try to kill us, flooding up the sewers like plague rats. Like rats, you'll end up stomped back into the ground."

"You and your people are doomed, Glacian."

"You and your people are deluded, Gix."

"We may all be deluded and doomed," came a voice at the door. Yawgmoth strode into the room. His intense eyes seemed to drag the shadows in with him. He cast a looming image across the walls and ceiling. "I have some grave news."

"How are you, Glacian?" interrupted Rebbec, rushing to kneel by her husband's bedside. In a ritual well established



over the last months, she wrapped a scarf over her nose and mouth and placed a clean cloth over her hands before touching him. Worry filled her eyes. "You look worse than this morning."

"It's this flea-bitten stoat," Glacian said, flinging a weary hand back toward Gix, "yammering on with grand delusions of genocide."

"They may not be delusions," Yawgmoth said. "I've found the cause of the illness. It could well mean the death of all of us in Halcyon—" his eyes were twin spikes—"and in the caves below."

Glacian growled. "Well, out with it! We're dying anyway."

"Powerstones," Yawgmoth said. "In great concentration, their energies are toxic."

"What?" Glacian and Rebbec chorused.

"Toxic," Yawgmoth repeated. He fished a crimson stone from his pocket, a glimmering gem the size of a man's heart. "A single stone gives very little danger, but in combination—in devices such as the sedan chairs and whisper doorways, in the very homes and streets of Halcyon—they produce crosscurrents that disrupt the fabric of growing things. This is the origin of the phthisis. Your flesh degenerates because it cannot regenerate. The influence of powerstones prevents natural healing, even the provision of tissues with life-sustaining nutrients."

"That's impossible," Glacian said, hacking. "Why isn't your hand withering, then?"

"Every creature has a resistance to these effects, just as every creature has a resistance to other diseases. Some might even be immune. But for most of us, our resistance can be worn down by constant exposure to powerstone matrices. And once resistance is gone, our tissues break down and die. Eventually, so do we," Yawgmoth said grimly.

His solemn tones were interrupted by giggles from Gix. All eyes turned hatefully on the young man—even Glacian rolled over to glare. Gix was only encouraged by their ire. He laughed delightedly.

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"I told you. You're doomed. The stones that make your beautiful city possible are killing you. You can't remain here and live. You can't get rid of your powerstones without your city collapsing. You won't return to living like every other person in the world." He stopped to shriek with laughter. "You're killing yourselves, and you're not even willing to stop!"

"Your people are just as doomed," Yawgmoth said soberly. "Glacian might have at last caught the disease when you stabbed him with a powerstone, but his resistance had been worn down by long work in the mana rig. And that's why the disease runs rampant in the Caves of the Damned. The energies in the mana rig are poisoning the Untouchables."

In a moment, Gix's glee turned to rage. "Demons! That's what you are. Demons!"

Rebbec stood, approaching Yawgmoth. She dragged the scarf from her face. Imploring eyes fixed on him.

"This can't be true. I've been building the temple for two years now. It is the most powerful matrix of powerstones ever assembled. I show no signs of the disease."

"You may be immune," Yawgmoth said gently. "That is my hope. The fact you were so long exposed to your husband without catching it makes me think you are. After all, it is contagious, person to person. The ravaged resistance of one ravages the resistance of another. Infected flesh infects other flesh." He clutched her hands in his own. "I am hoping you are immune."

"Lies! Damned lies!" Glacian shouted. "You came here, an outcast, a criminal. You came because we were desperate to try anything, even your monstrous ideas of healing. Now you tell us powerstones kill? I suppose you want to do away with all artifacts, all artificers. No, this cannot be true. For thousands of years, we have lived with powerstones. For thousands of years, healers—*true* healers—have made us whole with life force, have not carved us up like butchered boars."

"Those healers have failed you," Yawgmoth said, fire flaring in his eyes. "Their very touch is poison to you—more magic to eat away your flesh. I offer the only hope. I have found the



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source of the disease. I will find the cure for it. I will save your miserable life, Glacian—and yours, Gix. I will save the lives of the citizens and the damned. I will discover a way to make all of us immune so that the city can live, so that the Thran Temple can be the glory of all ages, so that a whole race will leap into the future and not cower back from it. *That* is what this witch doctor will do!”

“You’ll do none of that!” hissed Glacian. “You’re incapable of healing, only of dissecting. I’ll see you banished again—”

“Wait, Glacian—” interrupted Rebbec.

“I’ll rally the elders against you to declare you a criminal of the state—”

“Please, husband—”

“To outlaw your practices, your lies!”

“Are they lies?” shouted Yawgmoth. He strode to a drawer, drew a scalpel, and slashed down at Gix. The blade cut through the straps from the man’s shoulders to his hips. Another deft cut laid open the young man’s bed clothes, revealing a pale chest and belly, marked with lesions. Yawgmoth set the crimson powerstone on the man’s sternum and held Gix’s hands down at his side. Even as they all watched, the skin beneath the stone turned brown and cracked. Blood and lymph welled upward. The corruption spread slowly outward. “Lies? Lies?”

Gix shrieked, twisting in agony.

“Stop, Yawgmoth!” Rebbec cried, lunging in to grab the stone. She lifted it, but Yawgmoth caught her wrist.

He glared piercingly into her eyes. “Is it a lie? Is it?”

“No,” she gasped, staring incredulously at the man’s fist. “Let go! You’re hurting me. You’re hurting him! Maybe you are our only hope. Maybe you’ll find the cure, but don’t forget the people you’re finding the cure for.”

Those words seemed to stab into Yawgmoth. His clenched fingers trembled on her wrist. Then suddenly, he released her hand, rose, and strode to the door. He paused a moment before striding through, turning back toward the woman and his two patients.

Haunted eyes stared at Rebbec, and he said simply, “Yes.”



## Chapter 6

Glacian knew Yawgmooth lied. He'd known from the first moment he had met the man. This is a charlatan and a monster, he had told himself.

Yawgmooth's latest lie was the most outlandish of all. To think the very basis of Thran ascendance was rotting the people who created it . . . to think that the foundations of the empire were so cracked and caving . . . and to base it all on eugenicist theory: that humans were mere animals, that they were animated by fluids and little "beasties," that every tissue was made up of smaller tissues, every organism of smaller organisms in an infinite regression—it was all ludicrous. Glacian knew it.

Rebbec did not. Even as Yawgmooth burned the boy and stormed out the door, he had Rebbec's ear. With that ear, he would gain the ear of all Halcyon.

Glacian tried to warn his wife. Once the monster was gone, though, she heard only the screams of the boy. She had a fragile heart. She was a glass dove in her glass temple.

The boy—a worse faker than Yawgmooth. His blackened sternum was nothing next to Glacian's lesions. Did Rebbec crouch over her own husband in worry? Did she touch his bare skin the way she had touched the boy's to lift that killing stone from him—he a phthisis-carrying Untouchable? Did she pay Glacian any mind? No. Glacian did not exaggerate his ills. He



complained only a tenth of the woes he suffered—unlike this upstaging brat.

"He's not *that* hurt!" Glacian growled at last.

"Shut up!" she had said desperately.

On cue, the faker stopped his struggling and fell into a seeming swoon. It was all quite touching. Rebbec clung to him as healers came in to make the lad as comfortable as possible. They called it coma. Glacian called it an act. Did they listen? Of course not. Glacian was only a genius, and this lad only a scurvy rat who would chew off his own leg to get out of a trap. Who would they believe but the rat?

Rebbec lingered after the others were gone. She did her level best to assure her husband. He did his level best to convince her Yawgmoth was a lying monster and the boy a faker and killer. She did not hear—she could not. Rebbec was incapable of perceiving the darkness of humanity. She had no word for it. She could look right through a monster and never see him at all.

When she left that night, Glacian contented himself with a thought experiment. Thinking was his only refuge. Just now, he thought of powerstone dynamics. It was well established that crystals were charged when their cores were bombarded with enough radiance that the matter within turned to energy. Now Glacian wondered what happened to the space occupied by those particles.

In theory, matter existed only due to a compacting of space. Crumpled space trapped energy, slowing it into material form. Smooth space was like a sheet of paper in the rain, bombarded by water but gathering little of it. As the rain continues, though, the paper warps and gathers more rain. Rills rise and troughs deepen. Were the paper bombarded long enough, it would crumple and fold, trapping the water. So too, energy bombarded and warped space. The crumpled space trapped energy, converting it to matter. If so, when matter within a crystal was converted to energy, the space would unfold and straighten. Thus, charging a powerstone unfolded—even *created*—space. Perhaps every charged powerstone contained not only a vast store of energy but a vast area—a pocket dimension.

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This thought experiment occupied Glacian's mind during his convalescence. Once his strength had returned, he would perform true experiments to prove it all. Then Halcyon would know their genius had returned. Glacian would win back their ears.

Such were Glacian's thoughts as he dropped into slumber. Such were his thoughts later—yes, he was more brilliant in his sleep than others were waking—when the hands clamped his throat closed. Suffocating, Glacian awoke to see that, once again, he had been the only one who saw the truth.

Gix sat astride him. The boy—it occurred to Glacian only then that this gaunt figure was really more a man than a boy—pinned his arms beneath phthitic knees and strangled him. Gix's pallid face was red. When Glacian opened his eyes and met the young man's gaze, the determination there stumbled. Gix must have glimpsed the true horror of his deed. The loss of Glacian would be not only to the citizens but also to the rats that ate what fell from the citizens' table.

Hands tight around Glacian's throat, Gix began to speak. "You did this to us. I used to think I had infected you, but you are the one who infected us both. You infected thousands in the caves." Each time he said the word "infected," spittle leapt from his lips. "That's reason enough to kill you."

Glacian had no air to form words, but his lips silently spoke them, "To murder me?"

"It's not murder. It's justice."

"Kill me, and you'll die." Glacian's response was little more than moving lips and a bit of whispered air.

Nostrils flaring in distaste, Gix eased his grip, allowing Glacian to suck a breath into his lungs.

It was a moment of triumph for Glacian. This one pretended to be a hero, but he had no resolve. When his own life was the issue, he would make any deal to save himself. Glacian had a damnable gift for seeing into the minds of lesser men, and every man he had met was lesser. Now, Glacian used the one lie that would save him. The lie of Yawgmoth.



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He rasped, "Spare me, and Yawgmoth will spare you. . . . Without Yawgmoth, you too are dead."

Gix's eyes narrowed still more. "I don't need to kill you. It would only be a mercy. You and I both will die. Yawgmoth can't save us." This much impressed Glacian. Maybe this boy, this man, did glimpse the truth. "But better that you die in slow agony as I do, as my people do. Better that you live long enough to see us rise from the caves and kill your people and destroy your white haven." With that, Gix released Glacian and climbed off of him. Even so, the Untouchable held a clenched fist above his foe's face. "Raise the alarm, and I'll kill you just for spite."

With satisfaction, Glacian noted the stitched scars and blackened lesions across the young man's body. "You'll never get out of the city alive. You'll never reach your caves."

"I know ways down," Gix said ominously, "and I know ways back up." He bolted for the door.

Of course, Glacian raised the alarm. With his wrenched throat and weak lungs, he could do little more than mewl like a kitten. No one could hear him. The folk of Halcyon had stopped listening. Another man was stealing their ears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebbec had not designed the Council Hall, and it was obvious. Massive, grim, gray, stodgy, symmetrical, fetid—for a century, this structure had been the height of Halcyon. It sat like a great cap atop a volcano. While all the other buildings of the city yearned toward it, this building presided over them with stout arrogance. It yearned toward nothing but itself. It was a shrine to the past. Eight massive drums held aloft the central octagon of the meeting space, which in turn shouldered the weight of the gray-stoned dome that shut out the light of heaven.

As Yawgmoth stood beside Rebbec just beneath that dome, he reminded himself that she had pluckily added a spiral stair and spire to it.

Just as pluckily, she argued now with the Elder Council.

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Beneath each transept of the octagon sat a body of elders from one of the eight Thran city-states. The largest—Halcyon and Nyoron—had fifty elders each and the others fewer. At the head of each group stood an exalted podium where the eldest of each city-state presided. At the center of the dome stood the highest podium of all, a platform reached by two opposite sets of stairs.

Clustered beneath the central podium were the “leaders”—heads of clans, seers, and geniuses. Glacian would normally have been seated among those twenty, but for his phthisis. Glacian and his phthisis were the business of the day.

“I completely disagree,” Rebbec replied to an eldest’s objection. “This is not a Halcyte concern alone. The work of my husband—of Glacian—is studied by every artificer in the land. The devices that have most greatly elevated us are his. Powerstone use was innovated by him, but even that is not the issue. The issue is that each of our city-states is utterly dependent on powerstone technology. Our cities will collapse—sometimes literally—if that technology is removed.”

The gray-robed and masked moderator called upon the eldest of Losanon—a stately woman, half a head taller than most men and as thin as a statue.

“There is no evidence of this phthisis affecting anyone except your husband and the prison hordes in the caves. Indeed, your husband’s ailment came from the caves, not from the city. Why not simply double the guard at the caves to prevent any escape and suspend visiting rights until this plague has . . . run its course?”

Rebbec was poised to respond, but Yawgmoth spoke instead, “On the contrary, I have seen this plague in three other cities en route to here and have heard of it in the other four—”

“But always among the rabble,” interrupted the Eldest of Losanon. “Always among the poor indigent—”

“No,” Yawgmoth broke in. “There is evidence of infection among the citizenry of Halcyon, among folk who have had no contact with Untouchables. I have charted the progress of this plague in the Caves of the Damned and know the beginning signs of it. I have found six other cases in the city itself—and



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I have not conducted an extensive search. In fact, I would speculate that among the nearly four hundred of us gathered here, ten are infected and do not even know it."

That caused a sensation. The moderator stood from his chair, the symbol for silence. At the doors, the moderator's enforcers tensed, ready to pluck from the crowd any who would not fall to silence. Quiet resumed. The moderator sat and indicated another speaker—the Eldest of Chignon.

The man was portly and privileged, accustomed to gaining his way outside of the Council Hall by diverting issues that might arise.

"These reports are alarming, surely, perhaps alarmist. You are one man, Yawgmoth. Three years ago, you were a banished man among lepers—an enemy of the state. You practice a brand of healing that repels most of us. Why should we listen to you? Why should we take your word? Why should we believe you have ceased to be our enemy and become our friend?"

"Don't take my word," Yawgmoth replied, shaking his head. "I want you to find out for yourself. I'm asking for a corps of your brightest minds to gather and see what I have found. They can judge for themselves. I'm asking for the chance to prove to you the reality and threat of this disease. Those who think me a charlatan can report their findings to this body. On the other hand, those who are convinced by my findings, my methods, could join me in searching for a cure."

The Eldest of Nyoron was granted the floor. "In your written proposal, you asked for more than a corps of observers. You asked for facilities, for equipment, for the right to screen citizens. . . ."

"Without such things, how am I to prove the reality of this plague?" Yawgmoth pleaded in exasperation. He flung his hands out. "Perhaps Rebbec was too quick to say this was an issue of public health rather than the health of one man. But I would think, after all that Glacian has done for this empire, that it would supply a single wing of a single infirmary in which a small group of earnest seekers could do everything in their power to find a cure for him. Even if you

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will not allot the space and money to save yourselves, won't you allot it to save Glacian?"

The moderator recognized Jameth, Eldest of Halcyon.

The woman stood. She was a regal figure in red, with high cheekbones and rheumy eyes. Jameth opened an envelope and patiently unfolded a note within.

"Since you mention Leader Glacian, I feel it is time to read this. I received it by messenger this morning. It has Glacian's seal. He asked me to read this message to the assembled Council:

Friends,

From my sickbed—dare I not call it my deathbed?—I write this urgent request and warning. Shun the man Yawgmoth. He was once rightly declared an enemy of the state and exiled as such. I plead that he be exiled once more. I have been under his scalpel and his supposed ministrations for too long, have endured excruciating programs, and have watched my body decay more rapidly from Yawgmoth than from phthisis. He is a charlatan at best and at worst a monster. I did not wish his return nor do I condone that he remain among us. Unless he is exiled, I am confident he will bring us again to civil war. If he is, as my wife supposes, my only hope, then I am consigned to die. I would rather die than live any longer as a prisoner to his violent manipulations.

Therefore, I propose that the council vote immediately to banish the man Yawgmoth, declaring him now and forever an enemy of the Thran Empire.

Glacian of Halcyon

No sooner had the final word emerged from Jameth's mouth, than in other mouths came shouts of approval, seconding the motion.



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Yawgmoth looked grimly at Rebbec, but she clutched his hand. Her strength seemed to flow across to him.

The moderator stood once again and said, "I cannot allow a vote on this proposal when Yawgmoth's own proposal remains to be considered."

"I suggest the two be combined," Yawgmoth said suddenly. "If I am not granted the facilities and assistants and provisions I requested in my proposal, I will leave this city. I will leave this empire. I might as well be banished. If you vote that you do not believe in my work, I will leave you to this phthisis, which you also do not believe in. My friends, it will bring you to civil war, not I. Civil war and utter annihilation. Disbelieve Yawgmoth to your loss. Disbelieve the phthisis to your peril. I suggest these two motions be combined into a single proposal. Those in favor of Glacian's terms for my banishment shall vote yeah, and those in favor of my terms for continued research shall vote nay."

Many calls came to second that motion.

"Then it has come to a vote," said the moderator. "All those who favor Glacian's call for the immediate banishment of this man Yawgmoth, speak aye."

The response was sullen and immediate. It echoed in the dome above as though the stolid building itself had spoken.

Yawgmoth gripped Rebbec's hands, sending back to her the confidence she had granted him.

"All those opposed to banishment and in favor of Yawgmoth's request for facilities, personnel, supplies, and so forth to continue his study, let them say nay."

The sound was almost identical, though perhaps a bit louder if only for the resolve in the voices of those who spoke.

"In the opinion of the moderator, the motion for banishment carries."

Calls came for a hand count, and the moderator granted it. Each of the eldests of the cities turned to face his contingents, conducting the same vote with a show of hands.

Though Yawgmoth continued to cling to Rebbec, his attention was elsewhere. He hawkishly watched the Halcyte

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contingent. He observed those who voted for banishment. Every face was imprinted upon the black back of his mind.

"They won't do it," Rebbec whispered to him. "They won't condemn us."

Yawmoth glanced down at her. "Do you mean they won't condemn you and Glacian, or you and me?"

Her eyes were querulous, almost hurt. "To condemn you would be to condemn Glacian."

Yawmoth only nodded. His jaw muscles flexed beneath a sheen of black stubble.

The counts were tallied, the totals taken to the moderator.

She stood and announced, "The healer Yawmoth will have his facilities and observers. The eight eldests shall see to it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebbec was at home here now. It was midnight. The moon was a grand sickle that scratched along the crystal foundation. Powerstones loomed now in starry rings all around. Light chased the myriad facets and rose in icy ghosts of doom. She was home here now.

Glacian's illness was horrible. He was her soul mate. Together—artifice and art—they had transformed the empire. When he fell ill, she ached for him but did not fear for him. She had felt somehow that she, by mere exertion of will, could keep him alive, could bring him healing. It seemed impossible for him to die while she lived.

Now, no doom was impossible. The specters of the future had risen from artifice and art. If the Thran continued in the way pioneered by Glacian and Rebbec, they were doomed to die. If they abandoned that way, they could only descend through the icy umbra of the heights they had once ascended.

This place, loftiest structure in the empire—it was the utter embodiment of a hope for heaven that led inexorably to hell. Even as it hung here, it poisoned the people. Even as it gave them visions glorious throughout the days, it terrified their nights with relentless death.



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Rebbec was at home here now. She was at home among the ghosts. She hoped, even, to catch the phthisis that ravaged her love and her land. Then she would be one with them. In all her ascending, she'd left them behind.

Only Yawgmoth could save them now. Only Yawgmoth and his mad medicine.

\* \* \* \* \*

The climb down had been hard. The climb back up was sheer agony.

Gix's body had weakened with each moment since he had released Glacian. Part of it was the phthisis, of course. The black infection in his sternum had festered. Part of it—the larger part—was a niggling fear. Was survival more important to him than principle? Perhaps Gix had spared Glacian only because killing the man would mean his own death. He hated that thought. It wasn't true—it couldn't be true. . . . It wouldn't be true once this raid was over.

The Halcytes would pay for what they had done. Glacian would pay.

When hosts of the damned flooded up through the sewers to drag them down in their own offal, the Halcytes would begin to understand their crimes. When Untouchables drove them to their knees and made them kiss the suppurating wounds on their knuckles, the citizens would know their guilt. When garbage people leapt atop *them* and stomped on *their* backs, the Halcytes would never forget.

Only thoughts like these made the wretched climb possible. Gix's body was racked with pain. When he had descended to the Caves of the Damned, he had been alone, driven downward by the news he bore to his people. Now as he climbed, he dragged hundreds of others up with him.

At least this time, the awful news he carried was meant not for the damned but for the demons themselves.



## Chapter 7

The infirmary wing granted to Yawgmoth had a glorious view of the upper city. Through a high bank of windows, the Thran Temple shone down over every apparatus. Minute images of Rebbec and her workers were cast in tiny rainbows of refracted light throughout the room. They swam slowly across the backs of the twenty-four clustered observers, across the bent neck of Yawgmoth, and across the agonized face of Glacian.

"Bad enough you murder me tissue by tissue," Glacian growled as Yawgmoth gingerly peeled another layer of skin from a large lesion on the man's stomach, "but to do it all with public sanction."

"You see these layers here?" Yawgmoth asked the observers, who craned to see. In the past months, he had convinced them of the reality of the disease. "See, even an organ as seemingly simple as skin has differentiated layers, different tissues for different functions. The body is an organism—that is, a thing composed of organs. Each has a distinct role. Disease and dysfunction are not a matter of magic but of a breakdown of one or more organs." Yawgmoth returned to the lesion, peeling back flesh. "Do you see how the phthisis has different effects in the different levels?"

"There is a similar theory about magic these days," said a young man. Xod was a healer in the traditional sense, trained



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to apply arcane power to mundane diseases. He was precocious, talkative, and—to Yawgmooth's mind—blithely wrong. "A few folk are saying you can separate magic energy into its components, each performing a different function. It's like one of these little bits of rainbow floating around the room—red, green, blue. . . . They say mana is made up of colors, some for healing, some for destroying."

"What does any of that have to do with this disease?" Yawgmooth asked testily. "You've seen how magical healing only accelerates the phthisis."

Xod's shoulders slumped. "Just a comparison. I mean nobody really believes magic has colors. It's just a wild theory. You were talking about how the phthisis has different effects on different tissues, and I was thinking how they say the different colors have different effects and are blocked by different things."

"Would you shut up about—" Yawgmooth began. His scalpel quivered in his hand, flayed skin adhering to it. A new light entered his eyes. "What was that about being blocked?"

Shrugging sheepishly, the man said, "Just more crackpot ideas."

"No! Tell me."

"Well, you know . . . they say iron blocks some magic, and silver other magic, and gold other—it's basically the five great metals. More nonsense."

Yawgmooth stared for an abstracted moment at the scalpel he held and the blackened tissue that adhered to it. The flesh turned translucent as it lay on the blade. He set the scalpel down on a small side table.

"Just nonsense," Xod repeated.

"That's what they thought of me a few years ago." Yawgmooth lurched up from his seat.

The observers were used to his volcanic motions and fell back from him, giving room. Yawgmooth strode from the table where Glacian lay, reached the implement cabinet, and drew drawers violently open. He rummaged among the knives and clamps and saws, plucking some out and setting them atop the cabinet.

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"What are you doing?" Xod asked.

"There's not enough rust on any of these," Yawgmooth growled. He looked up with sudden inspiration. "The iron rail on the balcony—go, take a knife and a plate and scrape off some rust."

"Me?" Xod asked.

"You're the one who gave me the idea. And the rest of you, dig in your pockets. I need silver and gold and copper—three coins of each."

Dumbfounded, the other observers reached reluctantly into their robe pockets while the young healer darted out the door to gather rust.

"Come on! Come on," Yawgmooth urged. "Don't be cheap. This is a cure we're concocting here."

The youth on the balcony gave out a shout. "Something's happening out here. A riot! Untouchables rioting!"

The crowd of observers pressed toward the door. Yawgmooth waded past them, impatient. He reached the door and saw it—rag-clothed Untouchables swarmed the streets. Even as he watched, a prisoner clubbed a woman in the head. She went down, blood spreading across the stone road. Two other citizens ran, only to have Untouchables swarm them like a dog pack, rip off their flowing robes, and pile on top of them. Rocks shattered windows. Fires leapt up across rooftops. Screams came from bashed doors.

Xod vomited on the balcony

"Scrape that rust!" Yawgmooth demanded. "Our work is more important! The infirmary has guards. The city has guards. This is their concern. Ours is a cure."

Protests began from the delegates. Yawgmooth silenced them, pointing violently over their heads.

"Look! Look at the skin under those rags. Do you see that phthisis? That's why they are rioting. The Halcyte guard can fight them back today, but we have the only weapon that can stop these revolts forever. Now scrape that rust!"

\* \* \* \* \*



## *The Thrän*

Gix laughed. He'd torn this iron rod from a grate in the sewer. Already it had killed five, now six, now seven. The little jag of metal at the end of the rod made a nice claw for ripping open backs. These citizens were soft. Beneath their finery, they came apart like a white cave fish. Now eight. For all the ruthless oppression of soldiers—for all Glacian's brutal words and Yawgmooth's brutal deeds—the other Halcytes were no more formidable than ripe grapes. Now nine.

Gix ran up the steep-sloping street. Twenty Untouchables followed him. Gix smashed a house window. Through it he screamed a challenge of animal fury. Another Untouchable flung a half-full rain barrel into the same house. They rounded the corner.

The home owner was spilling—half dressed and furious—out his front door. Gix charged him. The man gaped a moment. Eyes and mouth formed circles of surprise. He clutched his disheveled robes and dived back toward his door. Modesty cost him his life.

Gix's iron rod sank into the man's back. There was a flash of memory—Yawgmooth and his scalpels, patiently and tediously cutting. This was no careful surgery. Gix yanked. The man lurched but did not go down, clinging to the door posts. Two Untouchables grappled his arms and pried them loose. Gix yanked again. The man fell, an invader on each arm. Gix stepped back. A bald head struck a tile step and seemed an egg with a red yolk.

Now ten.

A shout came from above—soldiers, the Halcyte guard. At last they had arrived. They wore white and bore blunt-ended polearms. There was no need of fiercer weapons in sedate Halcyon. Helmets and face masks were painted steel with gold gilt. Gleaming shoulder pieces, breastplates, and thigh plates were sewn onto the white regalia. Buglike behind their staring masks, the Halcyte guard were clothed to scare off opponents, not engage them.

Gix was little impressed. They looked like noble boys in fencing gear. Fear, not fury, lurked in those masked eyes. Gix

## J. Robert King

knew what lurked in his eyes. He screamed a charge. The Untouchables surged up behind him.

Twenty fanatics against ten guards.

A polearm arced out toward Gix. He paused to let the staff sweep by. He gripped it and hauled hard. The soldier toppled. Gix's rod descended.

Now eleven. Now twelve . . . thirteen . . .

Another band of Untouchables welled up a nearby street. Gix greeted them with a bloody smile. Smoke rolled to the sky. Bodies littered the cobbles.

Their leader—a burly brute—shouted gleefully, "What next, Master Gix! What next?"

Gix's grin deepened. He jabbed a finger upward. "To the heights, my friend. We'll tear down the very heights!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmoth and four observers stood behind the barred south door of the infirmary. Yawgmoth wore his travel cloak and his belt of swords, though he had handed four of them to the men and women standing behind. The fifth and largest he kept for himself.

"Get ready to defend the door. Do not bar it until I return."

Xod protested. "You expect us to kill?"

"I expect you to die if you don't," Yawgmoth said simply.

Without another word, he heaved the bar from its brackets, swung the door wide, and strode into the chaotic street. Untouchable bands loped up the hill like shabby wolf packs. They stepped over or on the dead citizens who lay there.

One man glimpsed Yawgmoth and charged him. The rioter hurled a spiked board toward his head. Yawgmoth casually batted it away, noted the absence of lesions on the man, and took off his head with a quick swipe.

As the rebel tumbled in two bloody halves at his feet, Yawgmoth clucked, "Not a good candidate."

He looked up the street for a better one. He spotted a scrawny man covered with lesions and too little clothing to hide them.



## *The Thran*

The wretched figure stooped above a Halcyte woman who wept over her dead husband. The Untouchable's intent was clear.

"Perfect."

Yawgmoth strode through the stream of rebels, killing any who attacked him. He wrapped a muscled arm around the scrawny man's neck and hauled him into the air. Though the Untouchable kicked and screamed, he couldn't break free. Yawgmoth's sword carved a path back toward the infirmary, and his prisoner provided a shield before him.

Yawgmoth arrived before a trembling crew. Two rebels lay dead just outside the door. They had been dragged that far, their heads painting crimson paths across the threshold.

Xod's sword tip was crimson. "They tried to break in. All I could think was—what if they reach Glacian?"

"Excellent work," Yawgmoth said simply as he strode through the door and started up the stairs. "Close it and bar it again." He ascended.

The rebel's kicks were slowing. He was blacking out. Yawgmoth had been careful not to break the man's neck or crush his windpipe. He needed a subject who was—aside from the phthisis—relatively healthy.

Reaching the experiment chamber, Yawgmoth flung back the door and declared, "I have a subject. Is the mixture ready?"

Healers looked up from a small iron pan, wisps of steam coming from a watery concoction.

"No sign of the metal fragments. They are dissolved. The liquid has cleared and thinned, but it is still hot."

"It will cool enough when you decant it. Draw up two bladders of it—one for the test subject and one for the genius," Yawgmoth ordered as he flung the now-unconscious rebel onto a table. The man landed on his back and sprawled on the cold wood.

Xod and his three comrades entered the room.

Yawgmoth ordered, "You four, hold down his limbs. He'll probably awaken once the injection is given. Don't let him get away."

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Fevered determination showed in Xod's face. "No. We won't let him get away."

Yawgmoth gestured toward the others. "Bring up one of the antidote bladders, and someone draw another bladder from the vial of poison there on the windowsill."

An observer approached and handed a needle-tipped bladder to Yawgmoth. "Here is the first of the antidote bladders."

Yawgmoth took the item, feeling the warmth of the serum through the leathery walls that encased it. He probed for a vein in the man's neck, found it, inserted the needle, and slowly squeezed the contents of the bladder into it. Soon the bag was emptied, and Yawgmoth drew the needle forth.

"Look at that!" Xod declared, nodding toward the lesions on the man's belly.

The black spots were visibly receding. It looked as though something within the skin picked away each blemish, particle by particle. In moments, the spots were only pink, puckered sores. The black rot was gone.

"It's happening everywhere—shoulders, face, legs."

Yawgmoth smiled. "Resistance. We are bolstering the patient's resistance. The metal particles suspended in the serum block magical energies across their spectrum. It's these magical energies that are causing tissue breakdown. The serum blocks those, at least while it remains in the blood, and allows tissues to begin healing."

"A cure!" Xod shouted. "I can't believe it! We created a cure."

"I created a cure," Yawgmoth corrected. "A cure based on your inspirations and my *ridiculous* notions about disease."

There were coughs around the table. A few observers even muttered they had not thought his methods ridiculous or even odd.

"Besides, it is not a cure, only a treatment to fight back the disease, temporarily. We shall have to see how long these effects last."

All attention shifted to the patient. His eyes rolled open. The scrawny rebel looked around fearfully. He struggled to get up, but Xod and his comrades held him down.



## *The Thrän*

"Where am I? What are you doing?" the man shrieked.

"You're in the Halcyon infirmary," Yawgmoth said levelly. "And what I am doing is healing you."

"Healing me? Why would you heal me?"

Yawgmoth shrugged, motioning toward the woman who had drawn up the bladder of poison. She approached. He took it from her.

"Healing you was just an incidental occurrence of the riots. It wasn't anything personal. Just like the rape and murder you perpetrated—nothing personal, just an incidental occurrence."

The man gabbled, "Well . . . I'm glad you think so."

"And now, for your crimes, I revoke the life I gave to you."

With none of his previous gentility, Yawgmoth sank the needle into the man's neck and squeezed. Immediately, the patient convulsed, bucking on the tabletop. Xod and the others held on tightly, making sure he did not escape. The fight was brief. The man slumped. His breath left in a long gurgle. Then he was utterly still.

Most of the observers backed away in dread. Even three of the four who held his limbs let go and recoiled. Only Xod clung on, determination and terror mixing in him.

Yawgmoth snorted. "Let's see about treating our genius."

\* \* \* \* \*

While the genius of Halcyon was infused with an antidote for his disease, the rest of Halcyon was infused with destruction and death. Untouchables ruled the streets. The Halcyte guard fought hopelessly against overwhelming numbers. Many of them lay dead. Here and there, bodies burned. Everywhere buildings burned.

The city that had stood impregnable for two hundred years was now under siege from within. Those who had for so long shut death away from themselves now were immersed in it. From the sewers, scabrous and violent and hideous monsters had emerged. They rose in a reeking tide up the eight terraces.

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They slew any they encountered. Only in that last instant of life could the Halcytes see the eyes of their killers and know these were not monsters.

These were humans. These were Thran.





## Chapter 8

Rebbec was at the Thran Temple when the riots began. She and a crew worked in the northwest corner, building an open-sided spiral stair. Each crystalline step was shaped like a wide wedge of pie with a bite out of the tip. The shimmering blocks were stacked in offset, forming a self-supporting tower of stairs with a hollow core. One side of the stair gave views into the gleaming sanctuary. The other opened over the abyss at the edge of the city. Folk not prepared for the dizzy climb could misstep and fall fifteen hundred feet. The ascent was an allegory: to attain the heavens, one must pursue the quest with courage, balance, diligence, and sobriety.

Rebbec and her crew were setting a stone on the third turn of that lofty stair when they first noticed columns of smoke rising from the city.

"Someone—Jonas—go look off the eastern approach and tell us what's happening," Rebbec said.

The young mason ran off on her bidding. The others continued laying steps.

Jonas returned with startling news. "It's an invasion! Somebody's attacking the city. They're everywhere. . . . Bodies and blood—they're everywhere!"

"What?" Rebbec asked, brushing off hands as she descended. "What?"

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"A war—or something," Jonas said.

"A war?"

"Something—?"

The words seemed nonsense to Rebbec. Her head was swimming with tangent calculations. The ghost of buttresses not yet built rose in her mind to converge around the stairway. War? What could he mean? There was smoke, of course—but no army had ever marched across the desert to lay siege to Halcyon.

"Let's go see," Rebbec said. "Let's call this a break and go see Jonas's war."

Workers pulled sweaty gloves from their hands and tossed them down atop piles of rope. They joked about wars in Halcyon as they crossed the powerstone foundation—walking on glittering waves. Rebbec had warned them of the risks of phthisis, but no workers had quit. This building site made them feel like gods.

The group neared the eastern approach. Smoke twisted into the air, sooty parodies of Rebbec's heavenly ascent. Rooftops burned. Fires spread. The streets were littered with the fallen. Dark figures darted between broken doorways. A tide of them rose even then to the eighth terrace and started spilling down Council Boulevard. They smashed windows and slew citizens and set fires as they went. A group of ten Halcyte guards rushed into the street and formed a line to hold them back.

"Look," Rebbec said breathlessly. "Look, the . . . the guard is forming."

The invaders crashed into that line of white soldiers and rolled over them. The wave continued on, reaching the broad stairs at the side of the Council Hall. Faces lifted—human faces ravaged by hunger and bleached by darkness and marked with phthisis.

"All right. They're coming," Rebbec noted. "Everybody find something—a mallet or a drill or a pry-bar, something. We've got to keep them out of the temple. They'll have to jump from the pinnacle one at a time—maybe two or three but



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no more. We'll knock them back. Get some of those support poles. Get all of them. Feed them to us, to me and Jonas. We'll stand in front and knock down anyone who tries to jump over. If they get past us, you'll have to fight them. Understand?"

There were nods all around.

"Then go!"

Pallid and wide-eyed, the builders scrambled for makeshift weapons—and the courage to wield them.

Rebbec meanwhile looked down where the fastest of the rebels began the spiraling ascent up the Council Hall dome.

\* \* \* \* \*

The second time the healers unbolted and threw back the infirmary door, they all were ready. Yawgmoth led, a sword raking out before him. Xod came behind, wielding a blade painted in blood. Three other observers-turned-soldiers also carried swords and emerged swinging them. Behind them were sixteen more, armed with table legs and bed knobs and even poison-filled needle-bladders. It was a motley assortment of weapons but better than those the rebels wielded.

Yawgmoth decapitated an attacker and said through gritted teeth. "After we put down the revolt, I'll ask the council for a store of real weapons."

The observers nodded grimly. Table legs rose and fell, downing a pair of rebels. The group fought its way into the street. Behind them, Glacian's guards barred the door.

Xod's blade tasted blood again. He rammed it into the belly of a gap-toothed Untouchable. The blade tore through emaciated guts and out the man's back. He toppled to the cobbles. Xod yanked on his sword to free it. The wound sucked against it. He planted a foot on the corpse's side and hauled hard. The sword came loose. Xod took a moment to wipe the septic gore from it.

A ragged swarm of Untouchables flooded up around the group. Three observers died in that onslaught—a staved head, a knife in the eye, a gushing throat. The others fought all the

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more fiercely. Table legs chopped cleanly down and came up mantled in red. Metal rods rang bell-like against skulls. Healers leaped beneath tangled weapons to inject poison. All was yelling and thrashing and blood. Then, the last of their attackers lay dead on the ground.

Yawgmoth and his remaining corps of fifteen moved on.

"Where are we headed?" Xod asked.

Yawgmoth nodded toward the half-built temple, gleaming above. "Up. We're headed up." He killed two more while he took a breath. "That's where Gix will be."

"Gix?"

"He's the one who sparked the revolt," Yawgmoth replied. "He can end it."

"But will he end it?"

Yawgmoth patted the interior breast pocket of his cloak. "He will when I inject him with this cure."

\* \* \* \* \*

Five minutes ago, Rebbec had never killed anything more than a mosquito. Now she had killed ten men, eight women, and three boys.

The first was the worst—a boy no more than thirteen. He reached the pinnacle before anyone else because of fast feet and a young heart.

"Get back!" Rebbec shouted. "If you jump, we'll block you. We'll kill you!"

He flung himself across that yawning gap. He did not hesitate, but Rebbec did and Jonas too. Their poles swung numbly out to bar the way.

Ducking, the Untouchable scrambled beneath them and drove a knife into the throat of one of the workers.

The next moment was a blur. Rebbec saw someone grab the boy's ragged shirt and yank him to the edge and throw him down to crash brokenly atop the dome. Only then did she realize she was the one who had done it.



## *The Thran*

She had killed a boy.

Yes, but he had killed one of her workers. He had given her no choice.

When Rebbec lifted her pole again, it felt slick in her grasp. The workman's blood covered her hands. It soaked deep into the lines and calluses. She grimly wiped the blood on her white work tunic and grasped the other end of the pole.

"That was my fault. If I hadn't hesitated—"

"Here comes another!" Jonas shouted.

It was a young woman. She might have been pretty had she lived in Halcyon. The Caves of the Damned had turned her skin into a shroud and her body into a skeleton. The woman's eyes were so wide as to seem lidless. She jumped, a pale lizard in air.

Rebbec swung her pole. It struck the side of the woman's face and knocked her back. The rebel landed half on the platform and clawed blindly to pull herself up. Gritting her teeth, Rebbec rammed the bloody tip of her pole again into the woman's face. She went limp and slid free. Even the sound-dampening temple did not mask the wet thud of her impact.

"Damn it! Damn it!" Rebbec shrieked. "You're going to have to kill some of them too, you know, Jonas! Damn it, you've got a pole too!"

White faced, he killed the next one, and Rebbec the next three, and he another. No longer did the rebels fall with a sound of bone on stone but now with the flap of meat shoveled atop meat.

It was grim work, made none the easier by exhortations from the builders behind them. One part encouragement, one part expiation, one part consolation, the shouts only tore at Rebbec—"Stop this one!" "Nice hit." "That was a hard one." "He had a knife." "You warned him." "He gave you no choice."

Ten men, eight women, three boys, and one workman. In her hesitation, Rebbec had killed him—just as surely as she had killed the others. His blood, his corpse, was projected in rainbow rays throughout the city below.

"Damn it!" Rebbec shouted.

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\* \* \* \* \*

It had taken months for Yawgmoth to turn his observers into healers. It took only moments to turn healers into killers.

To his left, a woman bashed brains with a table leg.

To his right, a man tripped phthitics and jabbed them with poison.

Behind lay a wake of headless bodies.

Before, Xod hurled heads into mobs of Untouchables.

Xod. He had vomited at his first glimpse of battle. Now nausea was forgotten. Regret was gone. There was no time for fear. There was only killing.

Enraged Untouchables rushed Xod. It was just the reaction he'd hoped for.

Xod strode to meet them. His sword chopped into a man's chest. It caught in ribs, a gradual kill. Xod hurled the flailing man sideways to crash into a woman. Both struck the ground. Wrenching his sword free, Xod strode across their backs to his next kills.

Some fell bloodlessly. Others fought on though they fountained. It was really quite interesting. There was as much science to slaying as to healing. Rigorous science, practical . . . and fun.

Xod had no shortage of subjects. He and the band were surrounded by phthitics. Each died differently.

I can use this one, Yawgmoth thought. He'll become something even more deadly.

Though Xod was having fun, this fight brought Yawgmoth no closer to the Thran Temple. That's where the real battle would be. He glimpsed an untended sedan chair. Whistling over his shoulder, he signaled Xod to his side.

As eager as a dog called to the hunt, Xod bounded toward him.

\* \* \* \* \*



## *The Thrän*

"I knew I would find you here. The best way to get back at the two men I most hate is to kill you!"

"Gix!" Rebbec gasped, staring dumbfounded at the man. The phthitic rebel stood at the pinnacle of the Council Hall dome, just beyond the reach of Rebbec's staff. "Glacian said you threatened this, but no one believed—"

"Bastard though he is, your husband is the only one who sees the truth," Gix said, "except for me." He jumped toward the temple.

Rebbec was slow with her pole. Jonas flung his out.

Gix was expecting it. He had watched the others fall. He had learned Rebbec's strategy. Ducking his head to one side, Gix grabbed the pole and pulled himself up to land on the temple threshold.

Jonas let go of the pole to avoid being pulled over the edge.

Too late. Gix had solid footing. He whirled, bashing Rebbec's staff and smashing her fingers.

She dropped the weapon.

Spinning, Gix struck Jonas in the back.

The young man arched and howled.

Gix hit him again. Setting his feet, he flung the young man from the temple.

Jonas fell as the Untouchables had fallen. He died as they had died.

The workers surged in, but Gix was too quick. He knocked one man unconscious, stole the feet from a woman, and drove the others back with quick jabs of the staff. He was quick in other ways too. Behind him, Untouchables lowered a stout wooden door across the gap between pinnacle and temple. They flooded up their makeshift bridge.

Rebbec had no pole to fling away the door, and Gix struck her thrice with Jonas's staff. She retreated among the others.

Across the bridge they came—three, seven, eleven, eighteen—more than they had killed so far. In mere moments, the rebels equaled the workers. In moments more, they outnumbered them two to one. They kept coming.

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Gix advanced at their head. He wore a devilish grin.

Rebbec and her host didn't get far. There was nowhere to go. Untouchables surrounded them. Their ragged figures gleamed in the crystals all around.

Above his toothy smile, Gix's eyes were almost sad. His voice had the quiet tension of a winding spring.

"I know what you are trying to do, Rebbec. Everyone knows. But you are rising by climbing across our bodies. Your husband's mana rig kills us. Your temple kills even your own people. Do you care? Do you stop? Do you dismantle the horrors you have made or only build them taller?"

"Yawgmoth is working on a cure," Rebbec protested. She swung a heavy pulley in one hand, warning him back. The device would do little good against a staff with an eight-foot reach. "A cure not just for my husband but for all people—your people as well."

"Yawgmoth can't find a cure. Even if he did, he wouldn't give it to us."

"I would and I will," came a voice above. A shadow blotted out the sun.

Every head there tilted back. Every eye squinted to see who it was that spoke. A figure descended in a drifting sedan chair. He seemed robed in radiance. None could have known who it was except Rebbec and Gix.

"I have a treatment, perhaps a cure," came Yawgmoth's reply. "I have one dose here with me. Already Glacian's skin improves, his suffering eases."

Gix dropped his eyes from the blinding presence. "Lies. Lies! Why would you bring me a cure in the middle of a rebellion I started?"

"To end it," Yawgmoth said simply. "To ransom the life of this lady and the life of this city. I will give this treatment to you and will promise to descend to the caves and bring enough to treat everyone there in a week's time—if you will stop this riot, if you and your people withdraw from the city."

Rebbec could see the flush of Gix's pale face. The young



## *The Thran*

man wanted to believe. He wanted to be cured and have his people cured. Yet, he knew better than to trust this foe.

"It's poison you bring me, not a cure."

"It isn't poison," came another voice from the sedan chair. "I was with him when he invented it. I saw it cure an Untouchable. I saw it help Glacian."

"Show me this cured man," Gix challenged. "Let me talk to him."

"He is down below," Yawgmoth said. "I have no time to search through rioters to find one man."

"He isn't down below. There was no such man," Gix said. "Now leave, or I'll kill Rebbec while you watch."

Yawgmoth's shout was immediate. "No! I'll come down among you. I will inject myself with half the mixture, and when you see that I do not die or fall unconscious, you'll know this is no trick. When I inject the rest in you, you'll know it is a cure."

Gix's eyes hardened in distrust.

Rebbec said, "You told Glacian that your people would rebel because they had nothing to lose. They were doomed to die. Now, they have everything to lose. Listen to Yawgmoth. Test his cure. Let it heal you and your people and our city."

The blush that limned Gix's jowls told of the hope he feared to feel. "Come down, Yawgmoth. Show me this is not poison, and prove it is a cure, and swear to me you will provide enough for us all—and I will take my people out of Halcyon."

A large figure loomed suddenly out from the sedan chair. Without warning, Yawgmoth dropped among them. His eyes were sun-bright as he regarded Gix. Rolling back the collar of his cloak, Yawgmoth found his own jugular vein. With slow precision, he inserted the needle and squeezed.

Gix could visibly make out the progress of liquid into the distended vein.

Yawgmoth's fist tightened on the bladder. When it was half collapsed, he drew the needle from his neck. A small line of blood emerged from the puncture, wound its way down his tanned skin, and pooled in the crook of his collar bone.

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"There, you see? It is not poison or a sedative," Yawgmoth said levelly. "And for me, it is not a cure, because I am not ravaged as are you, my friend."

Yawgmoth stepped forward, bloody needle jutting in his hand.

"Don't call me friend," Gix warned. "If this is a trick, my people will tear you and Rebbec and this whole city to shreds."

Not responding, Yawgmoth reached for Gix's neck. The man shied only a moment. Yawgmoth found the jugular. He set the hollow needle and pushed it gently in. Serum flowed into Gix. Yawgmoth's fist clenched tightly around the bladder. He emptied the chamber and pulled the needle out. Blood flowed gently from the puncture.

Gix's brow furrowed. He glared at the lesions on his arm. "That's it? That's all?"

"It was only half a dose," Yawgmoth said. Untouchables began to growl. Hands tightened on weapons. "And it takes a moment—"

"Wait! Look!" Gix shouted. He gazed at his arm. The black lesions receded. Pink scar tissue filled in the gaps. He looked at his other arm, where the same process took place. The sores shrank on his chest, his legs, his face. "It wasn't a lie. It is a cure."

"A treatment," Yawgmoth said. "A temporary cure. But injections of this can keep you healthy—you and your people—until we can find a permanent cure."

"How long will this last?" Gix asked.

"I don't know. A week, perhaps?" Yawgmoth guessed. "Maybe less, since it was only half a dose."

Gix stared into his eyes. Joy was tempered by hatred. "You have a week. We will withdraw and leave you for that week. But then, you had better appear with injections for us all."

"Yes. That is the agreement," Yawgmoth said.

"You have a week."



## PART II

### The Nation





***Thran-Phyrexian War Day Two:  
Battle of the Null Sphere***

From high above cloudy folds of mountain, the Null Sphere seemed a giant pearl.

"My pearl," Yawgmoth whispered to himself. He stared down from the prow of his war caravel. Wind buffeted him. "My glorious creation."

The Null Sphere was not truly Yawgmoth's creation. It was Glacian's, but Glacian and all his creations now belonged to Yawgmoth. The lord of Phyrexia had climbed through the man's mind and knew everything. He understood the true and terrible power of the Null Sphere. Glacian could have used it to take control of the empire—but for his virtue. Yawgmoth had no such impediment.

He reached out his hand, imagining the Null Sphere in his grasp.

It was a vast metallic orb larger than Halcyon itself. The lower half of the sphere rested within a deep impact crater. Its contour perfectly matched the rocky bowl beneath it. Huge pylons anchored the orb in the crater. The upper half of the sphere formed a gleaming dome of steel among tumbling



## *The Thran*

clouds. No solid globe, the Null Sphere was a shell of causeways and grids around a gigantic emptiness. For all its vastness, the structure was very light. For all its lightness, the structure was very strong. Such was the wonder of Glacian's design.

The real wonder, though, was the purpose of all this parabolic metal. The upper hemisphere of the device was a gigantic dish aimed down into the rock. It gathered and focused the massive mana energies of the mountain. The lower hemisphere was a dish aimed skyward to harness the quintessential energies of the heavens. The orb was also infinitely divisible into vertical dishes, allowing it to pinpoint every second and dwarf-second of arc throughout the continent. In this way, the Null Sphere was an enormous antenna, drawing power from the land and channeling it to monitor and control every artifact creature in the Thran Empire. Only Yawgmoth's own armies were beyond its reach—thanks to Glacian's secret knowledge.

Yawgmoth motioned over his shoulder, summoning one of his officers.

A Phyrexian commander arrived. Her flesh was as gray and sinewy as steel cables. She wore an armored vest, chitinous leggings, and dagger-tipped boots. The horns that jutted up along her jaw formed a set of external fangs in a perpetual grin.

Yawgmoth pointed over the rail, toward the main road through the mountains.

"The sphere's garrison is stationed there, beneath that rocky shelf. Fifty warriors—enough to hold that bottleneck against a large conventional assault. We'll land on the staging grounds this side of the bottleneck. I expect you and your strike force to eat through the Thran soldiers in a matter of moments."

"Yes, great lord Yawgmoth," she answered, bowing her head.

"Not a single Thran soldier is to reach the sphere. I want only artificers within. You may join the team in the sphere only after every Thran soldier is dead."

"Yes, great lord."

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With a wave of his hand, Yawgmooth summoned the Halcyte commander. The man approached, gleaming in silver power armor. Yawgmooth's eyes remained trained on the sphere.

"Once the artificers are secured, usher them—alive—to the control core. Keep them hostage there until I come."

"Yes, my lord!" the Halcyte commander barked.

"I myself will lead the implosion-device team. Prepare your squad." At last, Yawgmooth looked away from the sphere. He turned his lightless eyes on the crew. "Battle stations, everyone."

The Halcyte and Phyrexian commanders each gave a final bow before departing to their troops. Yawgmooth meanwhile strode across the deck to the rappelling gear. His team awaited. Some were gray-fleshed Phyrexians, some silver-garbed Halcytes. All were powerful climbers, intent and deadly. Atop their climbing harnesses, they had strapped belts from which dangled large powerstones and implosion devices.

Yawgmooth fastened harness and belt in place. From a hatch by the gunwale, he retrieved a bundled mechanism. It was a stone-charger, an experimental and powerful explosive device. Cradling it with maternal gentility, he gazed over the rail.

The Null Sphere was enormous now. It filled the world below.

The war caravel executed a long arc, curving downward. The ship's shadow seemed small on that endless grid-work. The ship banked. Its dive deepened. The ground soared up.

Yawgmooth gripped the rail and watched avidly.

Steel grids slid away. The long horizon of the sphere fell to stern. Crossing the crater's ragged lip, the ship soared out along the garrison road, narrow between stone outcrops. Beyond lay a staging ground and a cliff wall. The garrison crouched there. Carved from living rock and fortified by rubble walls, the outpost was imposing.

Thran soldiers along the garrison wall sounded an alert. They withdrew behind thick ramparts of stone. To either side of the staging ground, a pair of antiquated bombards pivoted in their embrasures.



"Target those bombards!" Yawgmoth shouted. "Fire!"

Twin beams of red radiation surged out from the ray cannons of the war caravel. They roared across the staging ground. Air boiled in their wake.

One bolt smashed into the right-hand bombard. Gunners' flesh melted from their bones. Rock sloughed. The bombard liquefied like a candle. The stones it had been firing shot outward in a hail of lava. Fires woke on anything that would burn.

The other ray cannon bolt went wide. It crashed like a battering ram against the wall of the garrison. The rampart shuddered and caved. A brittle sound came—cracking glass—and the smell of lightning. Stone shattered into white-hot sand and sloughed away. The cave-space beyond was dark. Eyes glared out in terror.

A cheer rose from the war caravel—though Yawgmoth did not join it.

One bombard remained. It gave a whistling sound—a thousand rocks shrieking up its barrel—and barked. A storm of stone belched outward, followed by white smoke. Antiquated, yes, but deadly all the same.

The ship wheeled. It was no good. Ray cannons fired at the vaulting stone. It was no good.

Rock smashed the hull of the war caravel. The ship bounded and listed as if staved by a whale. Gunwales a foot thick blasted open. Stone raked across the engine. Steam hissed. A violent whine came from countless cracks in its fuselage. The caravel lurched, plummeting. It struggled to stay aloft. The scream of the engine told what was to come. There were only moments.

"Gunners, blast that bombard!" Yawgmoth shouted. "Rappelling crews, to the lifeboats. The rest of you, abandon ship!"

The Phyrexian commander and her guards leaped as if they were spiders over the sagging rail. The ship's keel smacked ground as they sprinted for cover. Swiftly, they scuttled across the staging ground, heading toward the breached wall and the Thran soldiers holed up within.

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The Halcyte commander and his troops dropped from the listing hull. They turned their backs on the garrison, rushing instead for the Null Sphere.

Yawgmoth meanwhile loaded his team into a pair of aerial lifeboats on the high side of the keeling ship. In moments, the craft were full—ten crew in each. Yawgmoth stood at the prow of the first boat. He had gingerly placed the stone-charger within the hold. Once it was secure, he was anything but ginger. He hacked through the bowline. The lifeboat's engine purred to life. It nosed away from the caravel. Its companion ship followed.

A swarm of stone tore the air over their heads.

Yawgmoth hissed, glaring at the bombard as though his ire could destroy it.

A final blast jagged from the caravel's sideways ray cannon. It surged across the staging ground and smashed into the bombard. The gun erupted in fire and lava. It shattered. Gunners burned to nothing. The embrasure evaporated. The blast continued on, ripping a second hole in the garrison wall.

Yawgmoth's voice joined the cheer of his troops. He glanced toward the ray cannon and smiled at the gunner. She began to wave back. The caravel's core went critical. The woman disappeared in a sun-bright explosion that engulfed the whole ship. Coronas of flame leaped up from the inferno. They looped the rising lifeboats, fiery arms reaching to snatch them from the sky.

"Full aloft!" Yawgmoth commanded, standing in the prow.

With the shriek of over-hot engines, the vessels launched out of the fireball. They dragged long fingers of flame and smoke as they vaulted above the garrison and stabbed out toward the sphere.

"Beautiful," Yawgmoth murmured appreciatively.

Most of the caravel had been consumed in the initial blast. Its fiery skeleton settled. Beyond it, the garrison boiled. Smoke poured out above. Bodies poured out below.

"Beautiful."

\* \* \* \* \*



The initial attack shattered the main lamps. The garrison was plunged into darkness. As if to compensate, new windows and doors were blown through the wall. Daylight and firelight flooded in. Eight Thran soldiers were pulverized by shrapnel. The rest staggered into the weird glow and beheld a horrific sight—

A war caravel? A Halcyte war caravel? How could Yawgmooth spare a caravel to make war on a remote artificer outpost?

More fire surged from the caravel's guns. It pounded the garrison wall like hammers on a war drum. Soldiers stared a moment longer in loose-kneed disbelief. Rock shards whipped about them. Sand sifted down from the cracking ceiling. Even these assaults did not penetrate the soldiers' malaise.

A Thran bombard barked. It vomited smoke. The white stuff formed a momentary curtain in the air before being torn away by an angry wind. A crippled caravel appeared beyond. A vast hole had been punched in the ship's side. Feverish light came from its engine. The caravel listed sloppily.

Thran soldiers roared in hope. Yes, hope. Yawgmooth could be brought down. His ship already was doomed!

The malaise was broken. Soldiers rushed to crossbow racks and snatched up the deadly things. Powerstones imbedded in the handles assisted with loading, aiming, and firing. One of those quarrels could pierce a tree. Scrambling to the breach in the wall, soldiers knelt, trained bows, and fired. Shafts vaulted across the staging ground. They would have hailed down upon the deck of the war caravel had it not slipped that moment from the air and crashed to ground.

Quarrels were needless. These Phyrexians would fold up like paper. One bombard blast had destroyed them all. They were fleeing their ship.

Thran soldiers laughed angrily.

Not fleeing, these Phyrexians—they were advancing! Twenty-some dark shapes. They seemed like giant spiders, so quick, so craven.

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More quarrels bounded free. They soared past dodging Phyrexians. Damn, they were agile! What was that on their shoulders? Armor? Spikes? Horns? What kind of helmets were those? They seemed almost made of bone and skin. . . .

Not helmets—heads. What were these monsters?

“Fire!” the garrison commander shouted. His words broke through a new hesitation. “Fire!”

Bolts tore across the staging ground.

One struck a Phyrexian in the gut. The metal tore straight through him. The gray-muscle warrior did not fall, did not even slow. He came on.

They looked even more like giant spiders as they approached. Inhuman skulls, sagittal crests, horns, fangs, cords of gray muscle—yes, these were monsters not men.

The Phyrexians breached the garrison’s outpost. They did not fight with swords. They needed no weapons. They *were* the weapons. Claws, teeth, horns, stingers, poison sacs—

Thran died like meat in a grinder. The bunker was slick with their dismembered bodies. There was no knowing what part belonged to whom.

Phyrexians turned them all into bits of flesh on the killing floor. They exulted in their work. It was clear in their ebullient laughter, in their fangy grins.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spiderlike, Phyrexians slid on silken cords down around the Null Sphere.

Yawgmoth and his rappelling corps had landed atop the vast orb. They had spread from the pole outward, their positions separated exactly by eighteen degrees of arc. Once the slope required it, they had attached lines and rappelled down. In mere minutes, each had reached the equator of the sphere. Here they would complete their first task.

Bracing his feet against a girder, Yawgmoth reached to his belt where implosion devices and large powerstones dangled.



## *The Thran*

Cupping one of the gleaming crystals, he lifted it from its sheath and held it up before his face.

The stone glowed with inner might. Its myriad facets were windows into perfect power.

"When Glacian looks at these stones, he sees machines," Yawgmoth mused to himself. "When Rebbec looks at them, she sees temples in the sky. When I look at them, I see a world made mine."

With slow reverence, he pressed the stone against the massive girder where he stood. Enchanted crystal touched rusting steel and affixed itself. No mortal could have pulled it free—not even Yawgmoth, not even a god. Moving in either direction along the sphere's equator, he set eight more stones.

It was a simple thing to drop downward into the crater. He and his team would place their implosion devices on the support pylons there before joining the others in the control core.

As he slid downward on a weblike cord, Yawgmoth smiled appreciatively. From a distance, the Null Sphere seemed a pearl. Up close, it was more like his beloved Phyrexia.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We demand to know what is happening!" the lead artificer said. Young and blonde, she was the only one with the courage to speak. The rest cowered in the control core, half hiding themselves among crystal arrays, consoles, and speaking tubes. The Halcyte warriors who had brought them here had hurt none of them—yet. Neither had the artificers answered any of the questions put to them. Gradually, their leader had gone from compliance to defiance. She said, "Yawgmoth has no right—"

"Yawgmoth has every right," interrupted a new voice. A towering man strode in past cascades of wire. His approach on the mile-long causeway had been utterly silent, as though he were a stalking wolf. He brought a chill presence to the chamber. Even those who did not know this man knew of him—

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knew who he must be. Yawgmoth smiled humorlessly at them all. "I have taken the Null Sphere. It is mine."

Though she had winced away from the infamous Phyrexian lord, the lead artificer quickly rallied.

"Perhaps you have taken it, but you cannot hold it. The empire will march an army here within the week."

"The sphere will not be here within the week," Yawgmoth said.

A question formed on her lips but never emerged.

A profound rumble came from below—multiple explosions. The sound was amplified by the crater. Destructive force rattled through every beam and spar of the sphere.

The woman's eyes stood wide beneath blonde brows. "You're destroying it? You're destroying the sphere?"

"No," Yawgmoth said with a smile. "No, I am taking it."

His words were followed by the unmistakable rush of upward motion.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Null Sphere lifted with slow magnificence from its crater. It was borne heavenward in the grip of a powerstone equator. The orb was beautiful, caught in the evening light.

It was a shame no one—neither Thran nor Phyrexian—had survived the garrison battle. Someone should have witnessed that moment. Someone should have seen the Null Sphere rise, a new moon over Dominaria.





## Chapter 9

### *Six Years Before the Thran-Phyrexian War . . .*

A week after the riots, the city that had been shattered now gathered.

Citizens climbed to the eighth terrace and overran Council Boulevard. They filled the stairs on every side of the Council Hall and swarmed the rooftop, the dome, and the half-completed temple. Everyone knew who had stopped the riots. Everyone wanted to be as close as possible to the city's savior.

This was his day of ascension. Today, the council seat vacated by the ailing Glacian would be filled by the city's new genius—the healer Yawgmoth.

The Parade of Elders strode down Council Boulevard. Polite applause ushered them forward. Then Yawgmoth appeared. This man was greeted with invocations, supplications, adorations. He was greeted as a god. The ravaged corps of the Halcyte guard could barely hold the people back. Guards made a fence of their leveled polearms and shoved against the pressing multitude. The mob disdained those weapons—the useless things that had been unable to stop the rioting Untouchables. What kept the crowd back was not polearms

but swords—the five blades that hung from Yawgmoth's belt as he strode up the street. Those weapons—in the hands of Yawgmoth and his brave healer-soldiers—had saved the city. Swords and Yawgmoth's new type of healing.

Rebbec waited within the Council Hall. She had marched among the other leaders and had taken her seat within. Though outwardly composed, inwardly she was besieged. Every base impulse, every lower desire welled up in her at the simple sight of him. Her heart beat with impenetrable want. Her lungs struggled to taste a breath of him. Her arms ached to enfold him, her fingers to twine through his hair. Where could this rebel ache come from? Why had it risen just when there was a treatment for her husband's illness? Rebbec had told herself it was all merely overwrought gratitude for that saving cure, but she knew these wants were less pure.

The cure . . . While Glacian had wasted away, Rebbec could not have abandoned him. If he became whole again . . . But what was all this absurdity? No, Rebbec would never leave her husband, ill or well. She had made a vow, and a vow was not to be broken, even for the right reasons. This . . . this carnal liberation could not be right. Yawgmoth roused the lower impulses of the whole city. She had to resist him—they all had to.

Yawgmoth entered the Council Hall. He progressed among standing and cheering elders.

Rebbec stood, weak-kneed. Yawgmoth seemed to emit an enervating aura.

He strode with stately decorum down the aisle and rose up the steps of the main podium. The swords at his belt clacked against polished wood and left little scars. His ceremonial robes draped across each step. Around his neck, he wore a powerstone stole that would send his voice out to the whole throng.

He spoke. His voice rolled out, silencing the throng.

"One week ago, our city was inundated. It was flooded by its past. The folk who overran our streets and burned our homes and killed our brothers and daughters—these were not creatures



from some far-off world. They were Thran. They were who we all were a thousand years ago. We, like they, lived in brutal darkness. We were ravaged by hunger and want, by mortal terror and disease, by violence and warfare. In a thousand years, we have slowly won free of these things. We have ascended.

"A week ago, the folk below ascended too. They climbed up from dark want, hunger, and depravity to enter our city. They came most of all because of the disease that ravages them. The very phthisis that has laid low our Glacian runs rampant through the caves. They crawled up their ratways into our midst. They had nothing—not even health, not even hope. They came, hating us for all we have, for ascending. They would have killed us all.

"What of the Halcyte guard, that atrophied appendage that once was the proud arm of Halcyon? What of the fighting force that wrested this land from the dwarves and elves and goblins that infested it? Centuries of peace in our city have softened them so that they could not even stand against the sickly and starved rabble beneath our feet. Were the matter left to them, the damned would have damned us all.

"But one weapon saved us. . . ." Yawgmoth paused and reached into his cloak.

The elders leaned just perceptibly forward, straining to glimpse the now-famous sword Yawgmoth had wielded in battle, but he did not hold up a blade. Instead, he lifted a vial of liquid.

"Hope. This is our greatest weapon against the terrors of the past. Hope is what brought us out of darkness and hunger, violence and war. Hope now brings us out of disease. This vial holds the serum that reverses the powerstone phthisis. It will save Glacian and any other citizen infected. It will save our Thran Temple and our glorious city. It will save even the damned, give them the hope that will keep them from crawling up their ratways and slaying us."

A great ovation answered these words, and cheers of "Yawgmoth! Yawgmoth!" punctuated the applause.

"And this vial." Yawgmoth pointed to his own skull. "This vial contains the hope of a final cure. I will find it. I will find a cure not only to powerstone phthisis but to every ailment that plagues us. I will find a cure not only for illness but also for weakness, for madness, for old age, for depravity, for every failing of mortal flesh. All of these diseases and dysfunctions are mere remnants of the darkness where once we dwelt. The medicine I bring to you will heal not only your bodies, minds, and souls but even your mortality. I promise you no less than that."

His voice echoed away in shocked silence. No one had ever heard such promises, yet the light that gleamed down through that vial made it seem a miniature Thran Temple. Every hope of the people, every dream, was manifest in that vial and the man who held it aloft. He could cure the incurable. He could single-handedly end a riot, a war. It seemed he could do anything he strove to do.

The people cheered. The sound of it swelled out to fill the hall, deafeningly, to fill the streets, the city, and even the deserts all around. Only Yawgmoth himself could quiet them. He reached out a hand, preparing to speak again.

"In the meantime, I will, by vial and sword, assure the safety of our city, our empire. As well as overseeing the creation of hope, I shall aid in the bolstering of fear, fear that will keep the phthitics below—fear of the Thran army and imperial guard. They too shall return. I have been assigned by this council to serve on a committee to restructure the guard and army. I will remove those generals who have never fought in true battle, elevate those young soldiers who have, and train all troops in the modern arts of war. Put simply, I will return our fighting forces to their previous splendor. If hope is not enough to keep the damned below, fear will keep them there."

The ovation shook the foundations of the ancient hall.

"Now, good folk of Halcyon—I have made my promises to you, and I want each of you to hold me to them. As the newest member of the council, I will marshal forces both political and medical to realize our destiny.



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"Just now, I must go. I have made another promise to another people in dire need of hope. I have promised to bring to the Caves of the Damned enough hope for every last one infected. I go now to do so. I descend among them that they will not ascend among you."

The roar that followed was volcanic. Yawgmoth had awakened forces like those that had first thrust Halcyon heavenward.

\* \* \* \* \*

The scene was little different in the Caves of the Damned. Everyone knew Yawgmoth was coming. After decades and centuries beneath the earth, the Untouchables had learned to reckon time in the pulses of their blood and the tides of underground seas. Every last occupant of the caves knew a week had passed and their salvation was due. Even those who lay in tangled rags, unable to move for the phthisis that threatened to drag them under—even they knew. They most of all.

When a star shone in the heights of the main shaft, a cry of hope went up from the hundred souls packed in the gateway. The sound rolled down through the slanting passage beyond and into side caverns as it descended. At the base of the decline, the susurrations slipped into the quarantine cave. Until that moment, it had been words—"He is coming! He is coming!" Words failed. In the quarantine cave, the news became a wail, part laugh and part shriek. If Yawgmoth came at all, he would bring the cure.

Soon in the main entry, the star swelled. It ringed the shaft in a golden crown, descending from unimaginable heights to a people dwelling in deep darkness.

Children climbed the walls, eager to see fabled Yawgmoth. Health was said to flow from his very hands. Some rioters claimed to have touched his garment and been healed. Others told of his eight-foot-long sword, and his eyes that flashed lightning, and the way he would slay as soon as heal any who opposed him. He had an army, it was said—privately trained

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and equipped—hundreds of warriors fanatically loyal, who made the Halcyte guard seem washerwomen.

Why not? Most of the citizens had cowered and fled before the rioters. Yawgmoth had not. He was unlike any other. *How* unlike was a matter that grew in words and minds with every telling.

Gix did his best to calm the people. He insisted Yawgmoth was only a man and a heartless man at that. Why would a heartless man bring a cure to the caves, they asked. Why would a heartless man willingly touch an Untouchable?

He was near now. The corona grew in literal leaps and bounds as the man at its center rappelled down the shaft. He seemed a giant—tall, garbed in voluminous robes, bearing an immense backpack.

"He's brought it! He's brought the serum!"

"Make way! Give him room!" Gix shouted, pushing folk back.

The rope whined. With a final few bounds, Yawgmoth landed in their midst. He heaved a sigh.

Untouchables drew in their breath with a collective gasp. They studied this man—tall, yes, but not ten feet tall, powerful but taxed beneath the heavy pack he carried, commanding but not tyrannical. None of that mattered—only the contents of that pack . . .

Gix approached Yawgmoth and stared up into his eyes. "So you came."

The silence around was deafening. Folk strained to hear what the man would say.

"I came," huffed Yawgmoth. "We'll be putting a lift in that shaft soon enough. Using the rope, I could bring serum for only a thousand of you."

"A thousand?" Gix growled. "That's less than half."

"We concentrated the formula as it was, and twice I nearly fell bringing it down."

"There isn't enough!" Gix declared. His voice filled the passage with desperate echoes.



## *The Thran*

"I will return with more, as soon as this batch is administered." Yawgmooth assured. "There will be enough. Everyone will be treated today."

That too swept down the passage, a sigh instead of a hiss.

"To return yet today, I must get right to work. Take me to the quarantine cavern."

Gix nodded. Others imitated the motion, turning acknowledgment into obeisance.

"Follow me," Gix said, grinding his teeth.

Despite the hot press of people, the way opened before Gix and Yawgmooth. They strode down a narrow aisle of watchful souls. Most were content merely to gaze on him. Others reached out tentatively to touch him. Every once in a while, someone clung on. Those around violently pulled the offender back among the throng.

As they went, Yawgmooth spoke to Gix and all the folk around. "I know why you attacked the city."

"Yes," Gix replied levelly. "We attacked for vengeance. We attacked because the city is poisoning us, and we wanted revenge."

Yawgmooth smiled paternally. "It's more than that, isn't it? You attacked Glacian before you knew the mana rig poisoned you. That wasn't revenge. What was it you said to Glacian when you stabbed him?"

"I said, 'Welcome to the company of the damned.'"

"Yes," Yawgmooth said. "It is not that you hate the Halcytes for their wealth and beauty, for the sunlight and glory of their city. You hate them because they have cut you away. They treat you like a gangrenous limb, sawing you from the healthy body and casting you down."

There was nothing to say to that. Yawgmooth was right.

"Once these caves were part of Halcyon. Once they were a prison colony. The people here did not remain forever. They fell for a time from the skies and spent a while laboring in the darkness, only to rise again. That is why you attacked the mana rig and the city—to rise again."

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"Yes," Gix muttered, mesmerized. All around, Untouchables nodded in agreement. "Yes, that's right."

"Well, I have come not only to heal you," Yawgmoth said. "I have come to bring you up, one by one, into the light of day. I have come to bridge our two worlds. This place should not be a hell. It should be no less than a moral infirmary, meant to heal those who enter it and bring them out changed."

The words had hypnotized the Untouchables. Only Gix kept his head. Memories of this man's merciless knife were too vivid.

"You think you can come here and offer us life and hope and heaven? You think you are a god," Gix said in sudden realization. Those around him winced, as though stabbed by that accusation. Gix saw in their eyes that they began to awaken.

"I think we all are gods. I think every last one of us has a divine spark, a spark that should not be denied the light of the sun."

Those waking multitudes fell again into blissful sleep.

They arrived at the quarantine cave. Yawgmoth strode imperiously in, gazed around, and spotted a narrow and empty alcove.

"There. I will work there." Without pause, he marched into the niche and shrugged off his pack. He set his powerstone lamp on a ledge and began unpacking the bladders, needles, and containers of serum.

Gix lingered at the entry to the alcove. "You have found a treatment. You come down here to provide it to us. Yes, we are grateful. We owe you thanks—but not homage, not adoration. I know what you are trying to do. I know you are trying to steal the hearts of these people."

Yawgmoth did not even look up from the parcels he unpacked. "What god of theirs has offered them so much? If I can heal them, bring them up into the city—if I grant them life in heaven, they better damned well think me a god."

Nostrils flaring, Gix said, "You are the greatest devil in a city of devils."

Yawgmoth looked up and pinned Gix with his gaze. "When a devil is the only one who will deal with you, you must make



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a devil's deal. And you, Gix, you will make the greatest devil's deal of all. You will keep your mouth shut about me. You will say nothing but good about me. You will serve me faithfully, or you will receive no serum."

"I'd rather die speaking the truth than live a lie."

"We both know that is untrue. But there is no time for testing you again. If you do not serve me faithfully, I will deny serum to you *and* your people."

"We will rebel again."

"They will not follow you. You have no cure, only anger."

"You cannot do this."

A voice came from behind Gix, the raspy voice of a young boy. "May I have the cure now? May I, Master Gix?"

Gix turned to see a child whose face was half-eaten away by lesions. A long, solemn line of others stretched away behind the child into the distant cavern.

"May he, Master Gix?" Yawgmooth asked.

Head drooping, Gix said, "Yes, child. Come in here. This is Yawgmooth. He is the man with the cure. Tell him how thankful you are that he has come. . . ."



## Chapter 10

Yawgmoth was healing the city. That thought filled everyone's mind. No one had known just how ill the city was—how languishing in need of Yawgmoth's cures—until now.

The early symptoms of the phthisis had been posted for months, and even children who could not read could recite the list by heart:

Citizens of Halcyon, an invader is among us—a deadly contagion caused by chronic exposure to powerstone matrices. This disease can be spread person to person. Early detection remains our best defense. A case identified and treated early can prevent a hundred more cases. Anyone noting any of the following symptoms in him- or herself, family members, friends, or neighbors is asked to report the findings to Health Councilor Yawgmoth: fatigue, irritability, excitability, lassitude, forgetfulness, confusion, paranoia, itchiness, blotches, rash, pallor, swelling, numbness, lesions, stiff joints, dizziness, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, changes in eating or sleeping habits, headaches, neck aches, or backaches. The council is declaring war on this disease and calls all Halcytes to aid in fighting that war. Health Councilor Yawgmoth will personally visit every reported person, providing a diagnosis, giving instructions to prevent the spread of disease, and where



needed, administering treatments. It is the duty of all Halcytes to cooperate and aid in any way possible.

One elder had quipped that Yawgmoth had listed "the symptoms of being human." Another added, "Yawgmoth claimed he'd cure all mortal illnesses, and that's what he's listed." The posting was approved anyway. Yawgmoth was granted the right to post this and whatever other public announcements he deemed appropriate. His response to his critics was merely to strengthen the language used, changing "are asked to report" to "must report." To the end of the document, he added another few sentences:

Citizens are advised to watch for loved ones or neighbors who withdraw from contact, wear concealing clothing, act secretively, or oppose early detection efforts. Such action bespeaks a person with much to hide and may be the clearest symptom of infection. Such individuals must be reported.

Opposition to Yawgmoth's programs fell to whispers. Not only did dissenters find themselves the object of unwanted scrutiny, but they also discovered their views were unwelcome among most listeners. The masses loved Yawgmoth. As long as the masses did, the elected elders of the council did. Glacian and his artificer cronies—long the darlings of the elite—suddenly found themselves without political support. Talk of banishment ceased. Who would exile the new genius of Halcyon? The artificers could only bide their time and wait for fickle public opinion to tire of Yawgmoth.

Meanwhile, reports flooded in to the health councilor. In the first week alone, there had been a hundred fifty cases. Yawgmoth personally called at the home of every patient. He brought with him Xod and a few other healers. They had ceased to be mere observers. Now each was skilled in the creation and administration of the serum. Yawgmoth was reshaping them into healers after his own image, whose hands were

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skillful with both scalpel and sword. It was fortunate. Some patients were less than willing.

Most of those checked were cleared of contamination. A number of others were diagnosed in the early stages of phthisis. Provided treatment, they were charged to avoid physical contact with others, to bathe in salts to avoid infecting the baths, and to report every two weeks for further treatments. A final few displayed obvious lesions and tissue degeneration. These Yawgmoth strictly quarantined in their homes or occasionally in a special infirmary in the caves below the city. The program left most patients thankful for Yawgmoth's attention and grateful for his findings. It cast others in Yawgmoth's debt—relying on him not only for injections but also for permission to stay in the world above. As to those sent to the cave infirmaries, only they and their families were unhappy. The rest of the neighborhood, the city—the empire—breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Reports flooded in. Yawgmoth and his army of healers flooded out. The work kept him busy day and night. He spent eight hours a day ministering to citizens, three more to the damned, and three more to research for a final cure. Yawgmoth allowed his thirty-four followers to treat patients he had already interviewed, but he himself wanted to conduct each initial assessment and diagnosis.

"I want to talk to every one, shake hands, see homes, learn who they are and what they do, not just whether they are living or dying."

It was an ambiguous statement. Yawgmoth's supporters said it showed his deep compassion. His opponents whispered that it showed Yawgmoth had different diagnoses for friends than foes. They hinted he was sifting the populace, casting away anyone who might resist his rise to power and keeping only those he could mesmerize into supporting it. They hinted and whispered but dared do no more lest they find themselves interviewed by the iron-eyed man.

It was on the way to one such interview that Rebbec caught up to the health councilor.



Matching Yawgmoth stride for stride, she said, "Have you a moment?"

"Not for months," Yawgmoth replied grimly.

"My husband isn't improving. Everyone else is responding to the serum, but Glacian still languishes."

"It's a definite conundrum," Yawgmoth answered easily. He checked the number carved into a doorpost, consulted a list, and nodded to the healers. "This is the spot." Yawgmoth knocked on the door, a ragged wooden thing.

Rebbec pressed. "Why does everyone but my husband respond to the treatment?"

Yawgmoth lifted an eyebrow. "Already he receives thrice the dose of any other patient. Four times the dose might be lethal. He does show signs of improvement during the first hour after each injection but then quickly lapses. Perhaps his long, intense exposure completely destroyed his resistance."

"There have been plenty of Untouchables with worse degeneration. They all are responding. Why is my husband different?"

"He has always been different," Yawgmoth replied. "Even before the phthisis, even before he was your husband."

"What is that supposed to—"

The door swung inward. A man stood beyond, old and nervous. Thin, gray hair prickled out across his balding head. He blinked suspiciously out into the bright street and drew a ragged robe up around himself.

"What is it?"

Yawgmoth smiled. It was a look that emanated confidence. "I am Health Councilor Yawgmoth." He glanced down at the list, letting his name sink in. "I have received a report about a certain Dezra, said to be infected."

The man pulled the door up behind him and made a quieting gesture. "Look, I'm her husband. I'm the one who made that report. She was feeling tired and dizzy—those were on the list. But she's feeling better now and—"

## J. Robert King

"We've come," Yawgmoth interrupted, gesturing at the group about him. "I have come. The examination will take only a few moments."

Narrow fingers quivered fearfully. "She doesn't even know—she has no idea that there even is—she doesn't know you are coming."

"No one does," Yawgmoth said. He stepped forward. Without touching the man, he impelled him back through the door and up the stairs beyond.

"Please. Please. This isn't what I wanted," he said as he stumbled backward up the stairs.

Yawgmoth climbed.

Rebbec followed. She looked about. The wooden stairs must have been a century old, the plaster falling from above. Water stains marked the walls. She hadn't realized such shabby spaces existed in Halcyon—too much time spent in the crystal temple.

Xod came behind her, and four other healers brought up the rear.

Yawgmoth pressed. "How many powerstone devices do you possess?"

"None. None at all. We don't even h-have a sedan chair," the man yammered. "Y-you think we would live here if we could afford powerstone devices? Ha ha."

"Does she have any powerstone jewelry?" Yawgmoth pursued.

"W-well, yes, actually, a few things. Just a few—rings, torcs, bracelets. She loves all those things. But she's fine. She's one of those immune ones. I heard about that. Some people don't get sick. That's Dezra—" The narrow old man had reached the top of the stairs. He staggered into the upper apartments.

Yawgmoth, Rebbec, and the others followed.

Beyond lay a tiny room, poorly appointed. Against one wall, a rag mat lay, soiled linens bunched across it. More linens hung across the windows, shadows of broken glass cast across them. Though there were no implements for preparing food, crumbs of bread and dried hunks of meat lay here and there across the floor. There was not a stick of furniture in the room.



## *The Thran*

The stench of mildew and rot filled the air. The only extravagance was a large round mirror leaning against one stained wall. Beneath it lay a cloth of red velvet. It, in turn, held an assortment of gleaming jewelry.

There was one other extravagance: Dezra.

She could have been no more than twenty. She leaned beside her glittering jewels, as though part of the collection. They cast stars of light across her young, perfect skin. The torc about her neck gleamed with four powerstones the same indigo color of her eyes. As healers poured into the room, Dezra pulled a silken robe up across her naked figure in feigned modesty. She stared into their eyes, challenge and invitation, both. Her attentions settled at last on Yawgmoth and there lingered with obvious interest.

"Excuse my appearance," Dezra said. "My husband said he'd get rid of whoever was at the door."

"He tried," Yawgmoth said, approaching her and kneeling down. "I'm not very easy to get rid of."

Healers set down packs of implements.

Yawgmoth continued, "We've come because of reports that you have had symptoms of the phthisis."

Dezra smiled daggers at her husband. "And I know who reported me. Caron's always trying to get rid of me. Thinks I'm too expensive. But then, he can't bring himself to do it and buys me something else to make up for it. This episode will cost him dearly."

Yawgmoth nodded impassively. "He said you were feeling tired and dizzy recently. Is this true?"

With a hissing sigh, Dezra idly slipped rings onto her fingers. "You would feel tired and dizzy if you spent all day cooped up in this room, waiting for Caron to come home. He doesn't let me go out alone, only when I can adorn his arm. I'm just another piece of jewelry to him, you see. He's afraid if I go out on my own, a man like you might snatch me up."

"Have you had any other symptoms—swelling, lesions, redness?"

## J. Robert King

Something flitted within her sultry gaze, something like fear. "See for yourself." Dezra drew the robe back from her figure and lay there as all eyes in the room passed over her silken skin. She rolled to one side, allowing a full view.

"I-I-I see no sign of tissue c-corruption," Xod stuttered, pretending to mark a checklist he held in his hands.

"All right, cover up," Rebbec said. "We've seen enough."

"You've seen what I don't have and what I do," she answered, slowly pulling up the robe again.

Caron strode through the group and covered his wife with a ragged sheet. "All right. You've seen. Now go."

"Wait," Yawgmoth said. "A few more questions. Have you ever been in contact with anyone who has the phthisis? Perhaps during the riots?"

"No. That was one time I was glad to be cooped up," she said. "Monsters. They attack us, and we heal them? I've seen some of those albino skeletons walking about in the city now. I can't believe you are allowing those monsters among the rest of us!"

"One of my aids today is from the caves," Yawgmoth said, gesturing toward a pale-faced woman who had carried the serum pack into the room. "And none of those I have allowed into the city have even a trace of the phthisis."

Dezra fixed the pallid woman with a vicious smile. "Sorry, but I think the damned should stay damned. Halcyon's got enough ugly people in it already."

Grinning ruefully, Caron said, "See, she's got lots wrong with her but not this disease you're looking for."

"That torc around your neck looks familiar," Rebbec said, eyes narrowing. "May I see it?"

"Are you healers or jewel thieves?" the husband asked. He laughed nervously.

"Lean in, girlie," Dezra said, puffing out her chest. "If you want another eyeful."

"Give it to me," Rebbec responded flatly, extending her hand.



Yawgmoth intercepted her hand and drew it back. "This interview is over."

"No," she said firmly. "I recognize that torc because it's derived from a design by my husband. He created powerstone matrices that cast dynamic illusions—field effects that respond to changing environmental stimuli."

"Which means?"

"She's not what she appears."

Rebbec pulled free of Yawgmoth's grip. She lunged past Caron, grabbed the torc, and pulled it from the woman's neck. Dezra clawed her arm and shrieked. The sheet fell back. Without her torc, Dezra looked very different.

She was at least seventy years old and morbidly obese. Folds of fat hung above joints nearly fused with arthritis. Worst of all, though, were the lesions. They ran together in great black sores, oozing and tattered. Skin hung in shreds from a thousand spots. Even as she struggled to rise, to recapture the torc, more wounds opened. From that infected figure came a stench that had been almost completely covered by the torc's illusions.

Yawgmoth dragged Rebbec back from the horrid figure. He knocked the torc from her hands. The woman's clawing fingers had shredded Rebbec's forearms.

"Spirits, now!" Yawgmoth yelled.

Xod snatched up a bottle, pulled the cork, and ladled it across the wounds. Rebbec nearly collapsed from the searing pain. She slumped against Yawgmoth, burying her screaming face in his side.

"Neutralize!" Yawgmoth ordered.

The young Untouchable flung a sedative dart across the room. It struck the woman, who groped among her jewels for more illusion magic. The dart injected a powerful sedative into her. She slumped across her powerstone collection, rolled against the mirror, shattered it, and was pelted by descending shards of glass.

"Dezra! Oh, Dezra," Caron wept, falling to his knees and plucking the bits of mirror from her. "What have you done? What have you done to her?"

## J. Robert King

"Pull him off. Administer three doses of the serum. Clear away the glass. Stabilize her, but take every precaution." Yawgmoth ordered.

"Dezra! Dezra!"

Yanking a clean sheet from his pack, Xod threw it over the man's head and hauled him back from his wife. He held the man's arms at his sides and withdrew toward the wall. The other healers converged on the trembling woman.

"What have you done to her?" Caron cried.

"You did it to her," Yawgmoth growled. "You who wanted a showpiece instead of a wife. You who bought her the gems that ravaged her. Administer the test."

The young Untouchable had just finished injecting Dezra and strode purposefully toward Caron. She produced a knife from her belt and cut the sheet over the man's head. She pulled it back far enough to expose the right half of his face. Then, drawing up a needle-bladder, she stuck the needle into his temple and squeezed slowly. When Caron began to scream, she stuffed a bunch of the sheet into his mouth.

"It's only a test serum," Yawgmoth explained. "If you carry the phthisis, your temple will turn black. If it remains its normal shade, you are healthy."

"No sign of change," the Untouchable said, pulling the needle away and rubbing the man's temple. "Test is negative."

"Congratulations," Yawgmoth said raggedly. "You must be immune, but we will have to take your wife to the cave quarantine. She is a hazard to the health of the whole city."

Caron's eyes were mad in his head. "I'll go with her. I don't care. I'll go with her."

"She won't have her jewels. She won't have her beauty," Yawgmoth said.

"I don't care. If they infected her—if I infected her—I'll not abandon her."

"Let him go," Yawgmoth ordered. "Let him gather whatever he will carry down into the caves. Xod, go fetch a team of bearers. She won't be able to walk. That's why she's stayed cooped up in here."



## The Thran

Xod released the man, who dropped to his knees, still wrapped in the sheet.

Caron crumpled over. "If I can't take the jewels, what will happen to them? Will they be here when we come back?"

"No. The dwelling must be sterilized. Nothing will remain. The state will hold any items of value, such as these stones, for your eventual return. In your absence, this room will be provided to folk elevated from the caves—a starting point for their new lives."

"What? You can't simply take away one man's home and grant it to another!"

"I can, and I do. You have no need of it, and you owe the city recompense for placing so many lives in jeopardy," Yawgmooth said. "Now be quick. The bearers will be here soon. You descend to the caves within the hour."

Still clinging to him, Rebbec looked up into Yawgmooth's stern features. She held out her ragged arm.

"I hope—I hope I'm immune, like you think."

Yawgmooth wrapped her in a powerful arm. "You'll get the best treatment possible, second only to Glacian's own."

Blinking, Rebbec drew a ragged breath. "Thank you, Yawgmooth, for all you've done. And thank you for not sending Glacian to the caves. I know he is too sick to remain in the city, but if you sent him to the caves, I'd have to go with him."

The steely look in Yawgmooth's eyes was indecipherable. "I know. I know."



## Chapter 11

Yawgmoth's lift system was installed into the Caves of the Damned. Mining automatons worked ceaselessly for months, boring a new shaft straight down. A series of cables and pulleys conveyed a huge platform through the shaft. No graceful invention of Glacian's, this ugly rig had been designed by Dungas, the same artificer who had invented the powerstone commode called by the same name. Elevator and dungas served the same function, hurling the refuse of Halcyon below.

The first batch of quarantine patients to ride the lift arrived atop a load of lumber. Six men, three women, and a boy huddled among the straining cables that lowered the elevator. It was a precarious perch. Once when the contraption lurched, a man fell between the elevator and the shaft. He was minced by the oblivious machine. His remains tumbled away into darkness. At the bottom, he was only a warm pulp on the floor.

Gix and his crew stood just beyond that pulp.

The elevator squealed and shuddered. Splinters fluttered down amid a fine rain of wood dust and stone grit. With a final few jolts, the lift struck ground. Lumber slumped sideways. Its bindings broke. Boards and refugees spilled from the elevator into the muck.

"Clear away this lumber! Get them out!" Gix shouted.

He yanked up planks and threw them aside, clawing his way to hands and faces. Two of the men were unconscious, and



## *The Thran*

their heels dragged tracks behind them as they were pulled free. One woman had a broken ankle. Two others walked away unscathed. The boy survived, and the three other men, who limped from the wreck.

Gix found one other item among the blood-soaked planks—a note:

From Health Councilor Yawgmoth  
To His Trusted Associate Gix,

Greetings.

Make these ten folk as comfortable as possible among the other patients in the quarantine cave. They present a serious hazard to the public health. The load of lumber is to be used to build beds. Nails and tools will arrive in a subsequent shipment. The city will also provide shipments of mattresses, sheets, pillows, food, and clothing, to care for the infirm. Use these supplies to reward those who assist you and assure compliance from the rest.

In compensation to the cave community for this added burden, I request that you liberate the following ten persons from the caves. I have selected each personally for the contribution he or she can make to the city. Let them know housing is ready for them, and they will be put to use in my own personal health corps. Congratulate them for me.

Expect another set of refugees tomorrow and a similar list of folk to liberate. The supplies that accompany the new arrivals should enrich their lives and eventually the lives of all those in the caves, and in Halcyon.

## J. Robert King

Thank you for your continued faithful service. I will provide more serum at the end of the week.

Yawgmoth.

Gix lowered the note and stared, disbelieving, at the blood-stained pile of splinters before him.

Beneath his breath, he said, "Yawgmoth has provided us lovely beds. Lovely beds."

\* \* \* \* \*

Six months ago, it had been only idle speculation. Now it was a fully developed mathematical proof that would transform Halcyon—again. He had proved it—powerstones contained not only vast energies but also vast spaces. A powerful enough stone could even contain a whole world.

"I am the genius of Halcyon."

Glacian paused, looking feverishly at hundreds of sheets of calculations. They lay in piles across the lap board he had fitted to his wheeled chair. Columns of numbers marched up each page, laced together with logical proofs and sketched diagrams. He had worked these theories out in lucid moments between spasms of pain and the unconsciousness that frequently followed. Some lines of reasoning continued boldly onward though the hand that scribed them grew steadily enervated. Some sketches were only half formed when Glacian slumped across them. Poring over his work, he often encountered brilliant turns of logic and rigorous argumentation that he couldn't remember developing. It was as though another Glacian collaborated with him. Despite amnesia and physical degeneration, Glacian had developed his most brilliant theory yet.



In this model, the physical and temporal dimensions of reality are warped by energetic bombardment. When reality becomes deeply convoluted, it traps energy so that it travels in circles instead of straight lines. Thus, the warping of reality by energy slows and solidifies that same energy. Eventually, energy and dimensional reality are compacted enough to form matter. Conversely, to change matter back into energy—as happens in the charging of powerstones—is to unfold the dimensions of reality, to create space. The charging of powerstones unleashes vast stores of energy by unfolding vast tracts of space. Originally, Glacian believed the introduction of any matter into that space would only cause it to collapse again. Now he knew that any new matter introduced would bring its own compacted space with it. Therefore, a large powerstone contains a huge empty space into which items and persons could be introduced. Whole new worlds could be created inside powerstones.

"I know an architect for those new worlds."

Glacian had even mapped the organizational principles of spaces within various stones. If a stone is spherical, the space within would be organized in concentric spheres—nested stacks of matter with the locus of energy at the precise center. Elaborate sketches showed the sort of nested spheres that could be built within even a small powerstone. They would be floating neighborhoods in which hundreds of people could live in bright beauty and safety. Rebbec could build another whole city within the powerstones of her temple. At last, those who ascended need never descend again.

Only one task remained—to discover a pathway into those vast spaces. Glacian had been working that insoluble problem for the last month. Thrice he had almost taken his discovery to Rebbec, but he wanted the revelation to be complete.

"—energy warps space and time, so drawing it off would flatten it, provide a momentary pathway past crystalline matter . . . no, the resultant explosion would destroy crystal and traveler and world, all—" Glacian muttered, wrinkling the much-marked sheet before him. He held it up in a shaking fist. "—How to get

into that crumple of space and mass? How to open the gateway? How to win back the city from Yawgmoth? How to win back Rebbec . . . ?”

He awoke some time later, leaning back in his wheeled chair. Beyond the window, the sky was inky with night. Someone had neatly stacked his sheaves of proofs on a nearby table. Someone had removed his lap board, emptied the tubes that drained his urine, placed pillows behind his head, and set a blanket over his shoulders.

“Who the hell did this?” Glacian growled.

The young healer Xod strode out from behind a shelf laden with serum jars. “You said you were done working tonight.”

“I said no such thing!” Glacian hissed. “I was near to a breakthrough. I just nodded off a moment.”

Xod’s brow knitted, and he set down the scalpel he held. “No. You asked me to take you to see your wife, and then you said you were done working and wanted to sleep.”

“What are you talking about?” Glacian growled. “Where’s my wife?”

“Don’t you remember? I just took—”

“I don’t care what you just did. Take me to see her. Where’s my wife?”

Xod snorted, “She’s in the next room, eating her supper.”

“Take me to her!”

“Let me wash my hands. I’ve been dissecting a cat—”

“Take me!”

A tight smile crossed Xod’s face. “Of course, I will take you.” He circled around behind Glacian, arrayed the various tubes and bags on the back of the chair, and wheeled him toward the door.

En route, Glacian snatched up the piled manuscript and set it on his lap. As they continued down the hall, he talked with conspiratorial excitement.

“I have something to show her.”

“Yes, I know,” Xod replied flatly. “You did last time too.”

“Last time?”



## The Thran

"I should warn you, she's not dining alone."

The smooth sweep of the infirmary walls tucked the diners out of sight, but their shadows showed in glowing motion, and their conversation sifted to Glacian.

A man's voice "—that woman we found those months ago, the one with the torc. Some would say you and Glacian have done the same thing to the city—taken an old, fat lady and dressed her up in the illusions of youth and health, while everything turns to plague beneath."

"Who says such things?" Rebbec's voice.

"In fact, what is the Thran Temple but a huge torc, casting a glamour over the city?"

"Pardon the intrusion . . . again," Xod said as he wheeled Glacian into the room, "but your husband asked that I bring him down here."

Rebbec sat on one side of a well-spread lab table. Tureens and platters gave up their last steam in the light of half-burned candles. Rolls turned cold in their basket. On the other side of the table sat Yawgmoth. Behind him, a needless fire burned in an incinerator, hearkening back to romantic hearths.

Glacian had caught them in flagrante delicto.

The two broke off mid-conversation and turned toward him, quizzical and impatiently polite. Rebbec raised her eyebrows.

"Hello, Glacian," she said with a voice that sounded weary. "You wanted to see me?"

"What are you doing, having a candlelight dinner with—  
with—?"

"Not this again," she responded, lifting the napkin from her lap, crumpling it, and letting it fall across her plate. "We explained all this no more than twenty minutes ago."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's as if you've split into two people who don't talk to each other."

Yawgmoth nodded. "Not a typical effect of the phthisis, from what I've—"

## J. Robert King

"Shut up," Glacian growled at Yawgmooth. He turned wrathful eyes on his wife. "A candlelight dinner? When I'm sitting in the other room?"

Rebbec bowed her head, seeming to muster patience. "I invited you to this a week ago. You said you wouldn't come if—"

"If I'd be here," Yawgmooth put in.

"Shut up!" Glacian demanded.

"And I had already asked him. It was in appreciation for his intensive work on your case."

"Intensive work?"

"Yawgmooth has been working long into the night on your condition. . . ."

"On worsening it!" Glacian fumed. "I suppose you've worked long into the night with him? Sometimes you even discuss me together in your sleep."

Rebbec blanched, and her eyes grew angry. "What are you trying to imply?"

"Oh, isn't it obvious? Throw off the old genius for the new? Trade in the used up old leper for the man who preys on used up old lepers—"

"Stop, Glacian," Rebbec hissed. "Stop before you say something you regret."

"I've never said anything I regret."

"Yes! And look at you!" Yawgmooth shouted, standing. "Bitter. Angry. Paranoid. Alone except for one person in all the world and determined to push her away too. This is how you pay back fidelity?"

"All right, enough, both of you!" Rebbec said. She rubbed her temples in pain. "We've had this argument already—just twenty minutes ago. Now dinner is done. Show us what you wanted us to see."

Glacian shook his head, a petulant child. "Take me back, Xod."

With a sigh, the young man said, "Just like last time." He pulled on the wheeled chair.

"Wait, Xod," Yawgmooth said, striding toward them. "I don't want another dinner interrupted."



## *The Thran*

"You'll not have another dinner with my wife! Go, Xod."

"Stay, Xod," Yawgmoth commanded. He stooped and snatched up the pile of papers. "Ah, this." He nodded, casually flipping through the pages and holding out drawings for Rebbec to look at. "Ingenious, really. He's discovered that every charged powerstone contains a large plane. See—here's the logic string that proves it, and a set of calculations—"

"Give that back!" Glacian shouted. His hands clawed impotently at the air. "Xod, get it back!"

Xod strode out around the wheeled chair.

Yawgmoth held a staying hand before him. "Here—these are sketches of buildings you could build in those spaces. One foundation stone in your temple could hold ten thousand such buildings, a million people—the whole of Halcyon and the caves and the people for two hundred miles."

Looking up from the page, Rebbec said, "Glacian, this is magnificent!"

"Give it back! How do you know all this?"

Yawgmoth shrugged, flipping pages. "You said you'd been working on your own cure. I was understandably curious. You sleep a lot—I didn't even have to lift pages. They were all laid out in front of me."

"You're a thief. You steal other men's ideas. You claim them for your own," Glacian roared.

"Look at this—cities within cities!" Rebbec marveled.

"There's just one catch," Yawgmoth said with a gentle laugh. "There's no way to get into or out of one of these planes—infinite spaces that can never be reached."

"Give me that!" Glacian said, wrenching the papers from the hands of his tormentor. In a fit of pique, he flung back the incinerator grate and hurled the pages within. Immediately, they burst into flame.

"No!" Rebbec shouted, falling to her knees before the incinerator. With bare hands she raked burning pages from the fire and patted them out on the floor. "Why did you do that?"

## J. Robert King

"You don't deserve my work. The city doesn't deserve my work," Glacian hissed. "Take me out of here, Xod."

"Gladly," the young man responded and pulled him toward the door.

Even as Rebbec hauled charred sketches and equations from the fire, Yawgmoth circled before the man in the wheeled chair and knelt down in his path.

"Here's a little something for you to think about as you look for a door into those crystals. If a plane is created whenever a powerstone is charged, perhaps a powerstone could be charged by absorbing an existing plane. If you find a doorway in, you may also find a means of absorbing large tracts of land, even whole worlds—a doomsday weapon. As with all your discoveries, the brilliance of this new theory casts a killing shadow."

"Let go! Let go!" Glacian shrieked, pounding on Yawgmoth's hand. "Get me out of here, Xod. Get me out of here!"

Yawgmoth released the chair and stood, letting the invalid pass. He crossed arms over his chest, shook his head, and laughed.

"Get over here," Rebbec called, struggling to put out the burning pages. "Help me save what I can."

With a casual shrug, Yawgmoth approached. "We'll save what we can. Don't worry about the rest. I've memorized much of it. I'm not the genius of Halcyon for nothing, you know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Glacian awoke that night in his bed. Morning crouched below the horizon. He didn't remember going to bed. He didn't remember being strapped in. The last thing he remembered was sitting in the lab, waiting angrily for Yawgmoth and Rebbec to finish their meal and come see his work.

His work!

By the light of early morning, he could see the papers did not rest on the stand beside the bed. Whoever had put him here must have left it lying on his desk like a half-finished meal. Glacian slipped one arm from beneath the straps, grasped a



## *The Thran*

cane, and rapped loudly on the bed frame. He had to keep up the racket for whole minutes—he, an invalid with barely the strength to breathe—before the sleepy healer on duty came from the next room.

It was Xod, muzzy and ruffled. "What? What is it?"

"Go get the manuscript."

Xod gave a weary sigh. "What manuscript?"

"The one I've been working on for six months, you idiot. What other manuscript?"

A look of dread filled the young man's eyes. "Oh, no. Not this—"

"Not what? Bring me the manuscript."

"You burned the manuscript."

"What?"

"I was there. You threw it into the incinerator."

"You liar! You lying monster! Where is it? Where are you hiding it?"

"I'm not hiding it. Ask Yawgmoth. Ask your wife!"

"You're all in this together."

"They've got whatever's left of it—burned up bits."

"I can't believe it! You're trying to destroy me. Yawgmoth is stealing my ideas."

"It's not like that at all—"

"Monsters! Damned monsters!"



## Chapter 12

This was no sedan chair. Rebbec had helped design the interior spaces of this flying ship, had pored over her husband's plans for canvas and spar, propeller and strut. Now she rode in it, in the seat beside Yawgmoth.

"I had no idea you were a flyer," she said, her eyes tracing out the fertile lowlands of the Losanon Basin. The broad valley led to the great city of the same name and beyond to the sea.

"I learned when I was a healer in Jamuraa. It was the only way one man could cover two hundred thousand square miles of sparsely populated tribal lands." He adjusted a lever—the cockpit bristled with them, each labeled as to function and each bearing a distinctive grip so they could be manipulated without looking. "Of course, those craft weren't anything like this—held together with vines and spit, driven by powerstone chips the size of your thumb nail. Not like this."

Even among airships, there were few like this. Most were cargo dirigibles with great masses of inflated canvas above, providing lift to the slow and ponderous craft. They often had slim propellers at the end of pivoting arms. Sleeker craft were fewer—war vessels stationed along the borders of the empire, poised for air strikes against barbarian incursions. These fast bombers and fighters rarely approached Halcyon.



## The Thran

The ship they rode in now was the elite of the elite—one of eight cutters built by the Thran capital. They were designed for the express purpose of quickly fetching elders and eldests from far-flung city-states to attend emergency councils. Each cutter could carry up to thirty persons with little room for other provisions. The vessel held itself aloft by means of a rigid set of curved wings that arced up from the central hull of the craft. These were aided by a pair of buoyant vacuum spheres, one in the nose and the other in the tail. The wings and silver-painted canvas of the cutter made it seem a giant shark with mouth agape. Its tremendous speed and agility only strengthened the impression. Regional uprisings had been averted by the fearsome sight of eight shark-skinned cutters arriving over a city.

The cutters flew once or twice a year, revolts were quelled, and peace was restored. This time, the uprising was not an oppressed underclass. It was a disease. This time, Halcyon flew its own delegates out to the cities at large.

"We'll be able to see Losanon soon," Yawgmoth said, easing a lever that was linked to ten separate struts. "It is a beautiful place—tropical with palms and lush forests. It's also booming. They've been converting swamp where they can and building stilt houses on it where they cannot. This will be an interesting stop for you. You said you wanted to study the architecture of the empire—"

"The architecture of the empire . . . Yes. That's why I came," Rebbec said, nodding as if to convince herself. In truth, she had come for a whole host of ill-defined reasons, the least of which was the architecture of the empire.

Rebbec had come because Glacian had been comatose for nearly two months. The shock of his burned manuscript had been too much. Her bedside vigil had grown heartbreaking. Every night—in penance for some offense she still could not identify—she sat by his bedside and reconstructed the burned fragments of his notes. She read aloud from the theories until she herself had them nearly memorized. She grilled Yawgmoth

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to provide what he remembered of the missing pages. None was enough. None of it brought her husband back. He did not so much as open an eye, mutter a word.

Yawgmoth spoke a word, spoke three: "Come with me." That was the main reason Rebbec had come. Yawgmoth had asked her to. She could use a couple months away from the sickbed, a couple months in the company of this visionary genius, tirelessly saving Halcyon and the whole empire.

That was why Yawgmoth made this trip—to save the empire.

He had found advanced cases of phthisis among elders and eldests of the council. This was no longer a plague of the poor. Many of those suffering from the phthisis had once opposed the efforts they now benefited from. That sent a scare through the whole empire. The council voted that Yawgmoth should establish healing corps in the other seven city-states.

Each would be run by healers trained by Yawgmoth himself. Fourteen such healers rode now in the cutter amidships. Another group of thirty or so would meet them in the cities—one time exiles with Yawgmoth. This core of eugenicists would train locals in the treatment of phthisis, the principles of physical medicine—surgical technique, drug application, experimentation, vivisection—and techniques for handling hostile interviews and plague revolts. They would be healers and fighters. After these two months, each city of the empire would have the seed of a healing army planted in its heart.

To make one trip count for two, Yawgmoth would also assess the military reforms in each city-state. He was empowered to suggest—and sometimes require—further action to reform the weak and corruption-riddled imperial guard and Thran army.

That is why Yawgmoth made this trip: Healers and soldiers.

"Look, there. Is that the delta?" Rebbec asked. She pointed beyond the shell of the fore-wing.

There the wide brown river that had snaked lazily through the basin emptied onto an alluvial plain. Among hulking willows and tall tangles of cypress, a city spread. Its lights glimmered low above ever-present water. Every fire cast a shimmering twin in



the black flood beneath. The outlying homes seemed natural outgrowths of the muddy embankments. Some had a globular logic, like bubbles mounding above a submerged pocket of decay. Others were bulbous and half-sunken like the cypress roots that surrounded them. Thatched lodges shouldered their round roofs among palms. Stilt houses waded in furtive herds in the gentler eddies and backwaters of the almighty river.

Rebbec laughed. She could not remember the last time she had laughed.

Yawgmoth smiled, turning toward her. "What is it?"

"The architecture of the empire—" she giggled happily. "—beautiful forms, perfectly adapted to the landscape, perfectly evolved for this watery basin. But can you imagine any of these shaggy ungulates lining the streets of Halcyon?"

He was laughing now too. "A bit too earthy, yes."

"A bit too marshy," Rebbec added, wiping a tear from her eye. "Behind buildings like these, you expect to find gnat swarms and piles of droppings."

Yawgmoth slapped the arm of his seat. "Now don't make me crash."

Deeper into the delta, the traditional materials—thatch, bamboo, mud, and wood—were replaced by stone, mortar, plaster, and glass. The natural duns and reds gave way to shades of white and gray. The small-scale forms were amplified and reinvented in a civic architecture of domes and curves.

Rebbec shook her head and sighed contentedly as the cutter passed alongside the white tumble of the central city.

"I shouldn't laugh. There is much I can learn here. Many beautiful forms."

Yawgmoth released one lever he had been drawing back, and his hand dropped, warm and muscular, to her knee.

"If laughter is all Losanon can offer you, just now, it offers plenty."

\* \* \* \* \*

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The quarantine in the Caves of the Damned was filling. Gix laughed ruefully. "Lovely beds."

The loads of lumber had kept coming, and the refugees atop them. According to plans Yawgmoth had sent, Gix and his crew had constructed deep shelves along the walls of the great cavern. The sick would lie there, side by side, heads outward. Each shelf was tilted toward the wall, with the lower half of the patients left bare. Liquid and solid waste were channeled down to fall between the scaffold and the wall. Once a week, a brigade of buckets doused the patients, and the overflow rinsed their bunks. Yawgmoth considered it an innovation.

Gix considered it an atrocity. Lesions grew rampantly. Bedsores and splinters ravaged skin. Rancid meat gruel was ladled into cracked lips. In wet darkness, the sick lay. They died. Patients were encouraged to report deaths immediately. It meant more elbow-room and more gruel. Health corps workers stripped the fresher bodies, pierced them with meat hooks, and hoisted them to a conveyor that crossed the ceiling. They were disposed of in an adjacent cavern, redolent with steam. The dead who had begun to rot were left longer, some so rat-eaten that only bone and hair remained for the barrows. Once a week, serum arrived. Once a day, there was more rancid meat gruel. Atrocity.

Were Gix to rebel, Yawgmoth would simply cut off the supply of serum. Every last one would die—corpses ensconced in a wall crypt. If Gix obeyed, these poor wretches lived on, and another batch of prisoners got to ascend.

"Better to live in atrocity than to die in glory."

It had become the commanding principle of Gix's life. It was why he had not died in that first attack on the mana rig four years ago. It was why he had not killed Glacian, had not killed Rebbec, had called off the riots and become the servant of the oppressor. All Gix's ideals melted away before the simmering gaze of Death. Self-preservation kept Gix alive but transformed him into the image of his cruel master.

A runner came up the foot path. He was a young boy—the one who had arrived on that first elevator ride. He had survived



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an ordeal that had killed a man. The message was not lost on the lad. He made himself Gix's assistant, was ever present and damnably helpful. Gix didn't even know his name.

"There's another shipment arriving. . . . Lumber and lepers." The boy had overheard Gix's disparaging comment one day and had made it standard terminology. "Word has it . . . there are twenty-three this time."

"Damn that Yawgmoth," Gix cursed. "We've no more room!"

"No point cursing Yawgmoth," the boy pointed out unhelpfully.

"He's the one who put you here, boy. He's the one who damned you."

An ingenuous smile crossed his face. "He's the one who'll save me, like he's saved all those others. The upper caves are emptying. He calls people to the light." It was religious rhetoric from the Faith of the Damned. The cult had arisen in the last year, and it made a savior of Yawgmoth.

Gix hissed, "Everyone who climbs out of here climbs a pile of corpses."

"You know, with the upper caves emptying, we could take over one of them. Make it a quarantine. There'd be room for hundreds more."

Blinking wearily, Gix sighed. "Yes. Of course. It is a good idea."

\* \* \* \* \*

Health corps were operational now in the seven Thran city-states. Fourteen pairs of founders were in place, thirty-some eugenicists had returned from exile, and locals were lining up to learn to heal and fight. Among the citizens, many cases were already diagnosed. A *great* many artificers, forever surrounded by powerstone matrices, were succumbing to the disease. The oldest and best artificers were the most sorely afflicted. They who once had banished the eugenicists were now at their mercy. Hastily built quarantine camps were filling with artificers.

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The camps were built and maintained by a new soldiery. The imperial guard and Thran army had undergone purges at the highest levels. Young officers had been promoted and indoctrinated in the new military philosophy. They were accountable to the council, of course, and the council was Yawgmoth. These fighting forces would work hand-in-glove with the healing corps to protect the people from foes internal and external.

Folk who had lived in complacent ignorance only a year before now saw threats at every hand. Each danger made them love Yawgmoth the more. He was as much a savior in Losanon and Chignon, Wington and Nyoron as in Halcyon. Between healers and soldiers and civilians, Yawgmoth's every spare moment was taken up. His time had passed in a flurry of activity.

For Rebbec, the two months had been a long respite. She had wandered the greatest boulevards in the empire, had toured the vast temples and palaces and state-houses of the ancient land. To be immersed in its stone colonnades, to see how light strolled through it, to taste the air that breathed from ancient masonry—all of it had been a communion with bygone minds.

Rebbec had tried to convey this to Yawgmoth, but only in the cutter did they have any time to talk. Usually he dominated those moments. He spoke of his health program and his hopes for the future of the nation that once had banished him. Now, at last, she had the chance.

They were flying home over a high and beautiful land. Snow-capped mountains lorded over wide valleys, green with summer. Pines climbed the chiseled heights. Crystalline rivers chanted in rocky beds below. Black earth filled the glades. Aspens shimmered with cool wind.

"Look at this sweet place," Yawgmoth said with a contented sigh. "Look at it. This is what I want for our people—for all of our people. A life of splendor and plenty, yes, but not in overcrowded cities rank with disease. A life in wide, natural spaces. A life in paradise beneath the skies."



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"Do you know what I want, what I've been looking at?" Rebbec blurted in a rush. "I've been looking at the past, but I've been seeing the future. In old crypts I've seen castles in the clouds—and they're perfectly possible. The Thran Temple could be a floating universe. I've been looking at art, but this is what I've been seeing." She opened her sketch pad. From the page, unmistakably, a drawing of Yawgmoth peered forth. His piercing eyes and chiseled jaw and broad shoulders had been rendered in quick and expert lines, in the style of an elder's bust. "And this—" She flipped the page, which showed Yawgmoth again, this time in the style of the old emperors. "And this—" The next page showed him in a frieze that depicted the eight patriarchs of the Thran as they entered the virgin continent. "And this—" He was no less than a god in that final depiction, mortals rising as formless clay figures in his shaping palm.

Each of these images, Yawgmoth took in with a single, intense stare. Each time, face impassive, he turned his eyes back on the grand panorama before him.

"Do you see?" Rebbec asked. "Do you see what I have seen?"

His lips were a grim line on his face. "You've seen a lot of sculpture."

"No, I've seen *through* a lot of sculpture. I've seen the future. The future is you."

He blinked. He took a deep breath. "I'm not sure what to say to that."

Rebbec saved him the trouble, leaning across the helm of that great cutter and kissing him full on the lips. She cradled the back of his head in her hand, felt the warmth of his lips, breathed in the scent of him.

Yawgmoth pushed her gently back. "What are you doing?"

Her eyes searched his. "What do you mean, 'What am I doing?' "

He seemed almost to blush. The great granite Yawgmoth blushed. "It's just that with these icy peaks—they can come up suddenly. I don't want to risk a crash." He paused, seeming to

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sense how awkward he was being, and laughed lightly. "I don't want to risk the future. . . ."

Rebbec sat back in the seat. She felt as though he had sliced her open and dragged all her insides out on the floor—

"It will be good to see the city again," Yawgmoth said. "I have some new ideas for treating your husband."

—and then, had spitted and roasted her heart on a slow flame.





## Chapter 13

Rebbec's heart was in her throat as she strode down the infirmary hall. Upon landing, she'd planned to go to bed and sleep for a week, but the healers said her husband was awake. He'd emerged from his coma just after Rebbec and Yawgmoth had embarked on their trip. In their conspicuous absence, Glacian had been busy, very busy.

She entered Yawgmoth's laboratory. Glacian was nowhere to be seen. His wheeled chair, bed, desk, sketches—all were gone. Crossing the hall, she looked into two more chambers before she found him.

Glacian looked thin and only vaguely human. His face was at once blissful and intent. He sat in a much-modified wheeled chair. Mechanisms of artifice surrounded him. A body sling compressed his chest, helping him exhale. A bellows drove air through a tube that pierced his throat. Another tube induced a continual flow of serum into his blood. A metal halo lifted his chin away from his neck. The small powerstones that ran all these devices winked in an array to one side, votive candles for a martyred god.

A crew of goblins circulated about the man, checking the various devices that sustained his life. Servitor automatons worked quietly among them. The goblins glanced up disinterestedly as Rebbec entered.

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Glacian's eyes were piercing. "Ah, Rebbec . . ." he said quietly. His voice rasped away as he waited for the bellows to inflate his lungs again. "You're back from your little . . . fling."

Rebbec blushed, coming to kneel before her husband's chair. She drew the edge of her cloak over her mouth.

"I'm sorry, love. I tended you for two months in coma. It was killing me as surely as it was killing you."

"It wasn't killing . . . me, as you can see. I knew you were with me . . . when you were. I also knew when you'd . . . gone. And where. And with whom."

"It was a mission for the council," Rebbec said. "Yawgmoth was establishing—"

"I know what he was establishing . . ." interrupted Glacian, "his own private army throughout the empire. He's positioning himself to . . . seize control."

"Seize control? Of what? Of the empire? One healer?"

"Of the empire, of the world, of everything, of . . . you."

Rebbec's face hardened. "Yawgmoth hasn't made the slightest attempt to seize control of me."

"Don't you think it strange I awakened just after . . . he left? Once he wasn't around to dilute the serum or put soporifics in it . . . when it was just his toadies left caring for me, I awakened . . ."

"You're paranoid—"

". . . and I have toadies of my own. Apprentices, here in Halcyon but also in the other capitals. . . . Some are even elders, now. And these goblins here, and in the rig—I'm still their master. . . . And as long as I have this—" he lifted his hand, fingertips smudged with the stylus he clutched—"I have my own army. . . . First, these machines. My toadies built them. They are doing more . . . for me than any serum. They breathe for me, hold me up. I'm designing one to pump . . . my heart."

"But they can't stop the lesions. They can't keep your body from breaking apart, your mind from breaking in two."

"Does it matter? I wake to find new plans I've designed. . . . I'm shaking them out of my sleeve. Look at this . . . a mantis



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warrior. It's based on my old design but with improved armaments. . . . Razor mandibles, scythe claws, flex-steel abdomen and stinger, and these . . . incendiary antennae. The council's already ordered fifty. I've sent . . . an apprentice to the capital guilds. The other city-states will be building them . . . soon. I'll have my own army. The artificer unions know Yawgmoth is . . . a charlatan. They'll build my warriors. They're based on a new . . . powerstone configuration—"

"Powerstone configurations? Insect warriors? Look at you!" Rebbec said, shaking her head in astonishment. "You're turning yourself into a powerstone configuration, an insect warrior."

"What else am I supposed to be?" Glacian shouted. "Nothing at all. . . ? Am I supposed to just placidly fall to . . . pieces? I'm still the genius of Halcyon. I'm still your husband. You can't just . . . fling me on the refuse heap, like you do all the others with this . . . disease."

"Fling on the refuse heap—?"

"I'm going to fight him, Rebbec. I'm going to fight him for you. . . . I'm going to fight Yawgmoth, and I'm going to fight death . . . and they are one and the same."

"Oh, Glacian—you're not yourself. You're not seeing things as they are."

"I am! I've never been so sure of a thing." He reached out to stroke her hair, but she drew away from his scabrous touch. Angered, he said, "I'm the only one who sees. . . . I'm the only one who has ever seen. . . .!"

She stood and turned toward the door. "Yes, my love. You are the only one."

\* \* \* \* \*

"He's diluting it," Gix insisted, looking around the candlelit table in a deep chamber of the caves.

In the month since Yawgmoth's return, Gix had considerably deteriorated. Beneath the white scarf that wrapped his head and mouth, lesions split his skin open. He felt his face

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might simply slough off. His hands were no better. As his skin deteriorated, his will grew stronger. He spent twelve hours a day caring for patients in the quarantine and three more lobbying the Untouchables in the upper caves. They allowed him in their midst only wrapped like this, with promises he would touch no one. Even so, they were beginning to listen.

"Yawgmoth is diluting the serum. It no longer halts the disease. The healthier ones grow worse. The rest die."

Eyes around that candle flame were sullen and withdrawn.

"He's exterminating us. Don't you see?"

A pillow-faced woman spoke for the others. "He is liberating us, not exterminating us."

"It's been months since he's allowed any more folk out of the caves. Still, every day, another ten or fifteen exiles reach the quarantine. It's been one thousand twenty-three patients since the last Untouchable was allowed to ascend."

"Untouchable is no longer an acceptable word," the woman corrected primly, pulling her ragged clothes up around her. "Yawgmoth himself has outlawed it. None of us are Untouchable anymore."

"All of us are. Don't you see? He's taken from the caves everyone he can use—everyone he can command and hold in thrall. The rest of you, he'll leave to rot with us."

A nervous chill circulated among the folk huddled there around the table.

The woman spoke again. "It is dangerous to talk like this."

"It is dangerous not to," Gix insisted. "He will kill all of us."

At last, another voice spoke up—this belonging to a young man in a shadowed hood. "What do you want us to do?"

"Rebel. I want us to rebel."

"What about the guards?" the young man asked.

"I know a thousand ways around the guards. I could lead you up into the city."

"You could lead us up?" the woman echoed, suddenly interested. "You could smuggle us into Halcyon?"



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"Yes, and once there, we'll raid the infirmary, take Yawgmooth and Glacian hostage. We'll demand serum. We'll demand the release of every healthy person in the caves."

"You could lead us into the city!" the woman said. "Could you find us shelter? Could you find us a place to hide until we can get jobs, get a place to live—?"

"No!" Gix interrupted. "I'm talking about a revolution."

The young man said, "And we're talking about living. We're talking about escaping from the caves. If Yawgmooth won't lead us to freedom, why won't you? We don't want to kill and die. We want to live."

*Better to live in atrocity than to die in glory.*

"Won't you save us?"

Heaving a sigh within his bandages, Gix said, "Yes . . . Yes, I will."

\* \* \* \* \*

"They've been pouring out of the gutters like rats," declared Eldest Jameth of Halcyon. A stately woman in red silk, she wore her office like a diadem. From her raised podium, she addressed the council. "How do we know which are legitimate? It used to be albinism was sufficient cause for arrest. Now we have Untouch—excuse me . . . what is the preferred term? Now we have *the damned* in our midst. Your liberation program is running aground, Yawgmooth."

"As you know, Madam," replied Yawgmooth. "The liberation program has been suspended for four months. Those who were elevated carry papers, have homes, and work to better the city. The others can be rounded up. Provide me the personnel and funding, and I will."

A discontented growl moved through the gathering.

"These incursions are the result of diluted serum," Yawgmooth continued. "My budget does not allow full-strength serum for every patient in the caves. The precious metal components are expensive. If refugees can climb to the city, so can rioters. They will climb, unless I get the funding for full-strength serum."

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The growl became an uneasy moan.

"Even then, the riots may come. We all remember what happened last time. It will be much worse. The plague will run the streets. Last time, I turned them back with an ill-equipped band of thirty healers. This time, I'll need the newly trained Halcyte guard in combat. I make a motion that, in the event of a riot, I be given command of the guard."

"Let me understand this," the Eldest of Halcyon said. "You want more personnel and more money to avert another riot and control of the Halcyte guard should there be another riot?"

"Or, if you like, I can relocate my efforts to Losanon, where the plague also worsens every day. These are the conditions under which I will fight this plague for you. If you are unwilling to provide me these few provisions, you had better find someone else."

Eldest Jameth's countenance had paled so much, she seemed one of the damned. "It is right that this vote be taken among Halcyon's elders only, lest our friends from the other city-states vote down the measure in order to lure Yawgmoth away. As leader of the Halcyon elders, I claim the right to cast the city's vote. I approve these allocations of personnel and money. Any Halcyte who opposes, speak."

The Council Hall was utterly silent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty-six times in the last months, Gix had led healthy refugees up from the cave. Over a hundred and twenty folk had escaped because of him.

The route was proven—a natural, star-shaped chimney that never intersected the mana rig. It first emerged in an unused dry well on the edge of the Halcyte sewer system. From there, Gix conducted each party past flushing dungases to various storm grates. At the darkest corner of night, he led them to whatever stable or shed would give them a night's rest.



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This time was different. It was Gix's twenty-seventh trip—thrice the evil number nine. His gut told him death waited above.

Gix peered through a grate in a shadowed alley. Wooden pickets leaned like crooked teeth toward the lane. The way was narrow enough not to admit vehicles. It was dark enough to forbid casual traffic. A rainwater cistern along one edge of the road provided ample water for drinking and bathing. A granary nearby had plenty of abandoned mills and machine sheds where refugees could hide. This had been his fallback site, the best location in the worst situation.

"I don't think you should go," Gix whispered to the five souls huddled in darkness behind him. "Something's not right."

"What is it?" asked one of them. "Is someone there?"

"Something's not right. I don't know what it is."

"Then take us to another place."

"No, this is the best place. It's not the place. It's the night. Something's different. It's too still."

There came an incredulous silence. "So—you want us to sit here until tomorrow?"

"Or come back down with me."

"Down? We didn't climb for five hours up a volcanic vent just to go back."

Gix shook his head. "I just have the sense that if you go through that grate—any grate tonight—you will die."

"I'd rather die trying to escape than go back down." The young speaker pushed past Gix, clambered up the rubble-strewn edge of the culvert, and shoved open the grate. He clambered out from beneath it. Hissing in fierce laughter, he said, "Come on, the rest of you. Come out! Breathe the air of freedom!"

Another followed, then the third, fourth, and fifth. Gix held open the grate. They were a mob of black shadows cast against the leaning pickets. They crouched beneath the night sky as though they still lurked in sewers, but there was a manic joy in their hunched shoulders. Their feet were quick on the cobbles.

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Gix stared out at them. "Good luck to you." He lowered the grate over the culvert.

All five suddenly were dead. It was as quick as that. There were five quick flashes of dagger-light and the unmistakable smell of blood spraying. The manic shadows fell in wet mounds on alley stones.

Behind those daggers came men and women. They were not Halcyte guards but a different brand of warrior. Sleek, silent, lethal. There was nothing of pomp and bluster in the work they did—only efficiency.

"This one isn't him," one of the killers reported, dropping the head of a dead woman.

"This one either," another said.

"None of these have phthisis," came the voice of a third. "Are you sure their leader does?"

"Yes," responded a shadowy figure in their midst: Yawgmoth. "Just as sure as I am that he is lurking still in the sewer."

"Should we go down after him?"

"No. You'll not catch him. Besides, he is useful to me. Predictable. He'll lead more refugees up here. We'll capture each batch. The council will grant us more soldiers, more funding. . . ." Yawgmoth said grimly. "No. He is useful to me alive. . . . These five are useful dead—the first fruits of the new campaign. The council will be pleased."

Gix heard it all, fetched up breathless beneath the grate. He feared to move, lest the patter of water betray him. He remained as the assassins hauled away the dead. Only after they were gone did he realize that the trickle that fell on his back was not rain but blood.





## Chapter 14

Yawmoth and Rebbec walked through the half-completed temple. Rebbec pointed overhead to her newest innovation—a network of powerstones that hovered throughout the structure. During the day, they were dark, absorbing the light of the sun. At night, they beamed brightly, chasing away ghosts.

“We have no need of moonlight or starlight anymore. The temple will be our light. It will cast a gentle glow over all the streets, even the dark alleys.” Rebbec paused. Her lovely figure lingered sadly in gemstone reflection all around. “With more light, perhaps your engagements will not so often turn deadly.”

In the powerstones, Yawmoth’s image was a shadow that loomed over Rebbec. “We kill only in self-defense, when an Untouchable tries to kill us.”

“I know,” Rebbec said. “You’re fighting an undeclared war, and every war has its casualties. I just want to be sure you aren’t one of the casualties.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “If you’re worried about your husband’s health, he’s mostly in the hands of his goblins and machines now. Were I to die—”

“No, it’s not Glacian. . . . Well, of course I’m worried about him—his paranoid delusions, his army of goblin helpers, his split brain. He’s deteriorated so much since our return, only a few goblins and I can understand him anymore.

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Of course I'm worried. . . ." She walked again, wrenching her hands in uncertainty. Reaching the western facade, she gazed beyond canyons of crystal. The world dropped away fifteen hundred feet to the vast desert. Only the occasional flock of an air-caravel shone in the huge expanse. "But I'm just as worried about you."

Yawgmoth strode up beside her. "About me?"

Rebbec shook her head, abstracted. "With Glacian lost in delusion, you're the only one who shares my beliefs about destiny." She took a trembling breath. "Here we are on the threshold to a future without want, without disease, without war. We're poised to step free of the weighty world, but it claws at us. Want and disease and war reach out of the black heart of the world to drag us down."

Yawgmoth shrugged. "Struggle and torment created Halcyon, not art and beauty as you suppose. It is the way creatures change and adapt. Only in the face of death do living things strive to transcend. War, plague, famine—these are the birth pangs of new empires. Of course you are fearful. You are midwifing a new people into being."

Rebbec leaned against him, drawing the warm scent of him into her lungs. "I told you, you are the only one I can talk to anymore."

\* \* \* \* \*

Glacian was miserable. His skin would slough off at a touch. His fingernails split and peeled away. His hair fell out in clumps. Under its own weight, his mind had split in two. Holes filled his memory. What he could remember were bitter arguments and long loneliness among machines and goblins.

Rebbec hadn't visited him all day. Every time he upbraided her for her absences, she claimed she *had* visited, that he had only forgotten. She refused to relay his instructions to the mana rig, refused to monitor the works of the artifice colleges in the other city-states, and even criticized him for making war on "the



man who is trying to save your life!" She was less understanding than a goblin.

"Not enough breath. Adjust the bellows. Adjust the bellows!" It was what Glacian had meant to say, though the feeding shunt in his throat garbled the words—the shunt and his own rebel lips and tongue. Yawgmooth was mixing an opiate with his serum, Glacian was sure. Perhaps Rebbec even knew. Perhaps she thought it was for pain. Glacian could tolerate pain. He couldn't tolerate this muzziness. "Not enough breath."

These goblins understood even grunts and wheezes. It was their native tongue. The vile beasts pattered among powerstone arrays and fitted ratchets to the bellows mechanisms. For a moment, the breath-machine stopped working entirely. One goblin scratched his head. The other delivered a slap to him. An argument ensued.

All the while, Glacian's vision narrowed to a numb cave. He couldn't even slur out instructions now, his lungs empty. One hand weakly pounded the handle of his wheeled chair.

The goblins argued a moment more before they heard the angry click of the man's splitting fingernails. They redoubled their efforts. The little dunces had nearly killed him eight times—that he could remember. Still, it would be less galling to be killed by their ineptitude than by Yawgmooth's malice. . . .

All went black.

When next Glacian awoke, a woman stood in the chamber before him. It seemed at first to be Rebbec—young and strong and slender, with eyes that gleamed like crystals. Limned in light from the corridor, her face was lost in shadow. This wasn't Rebbec. She always wore work coveralls, her lovely features powdered with dust. She would not wear these tight black leggings with snake motifs coiling around them, this embroidered vest with its inlays of ivory, this silken neck scarf, and the gleaming beads braided into her hair. It was hard to tell in the slanting light, but her skin seemed polished ebony.

The woman spoke, her voice deep and utterly self-assured. "Ah, there you are—Glacian, genius of Halcyon."

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Already, she had his attention. When she shoosed the goblins from the room and shut the door behind her, attention became terror.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he gabbled nonsensically.

The woman's eyes were sad. "I knew you were convalescing. I did not realize how convalescent you had become."

"Who are you?"

Approaching the wheeled chair, the woman drew up a stool and sat. "I heard of your theory about powerstones. I heard that you proved the existence of artificial planes within each charged powerstone. I wanted to meet the mortal man brilliant enough to prove the existence of the Multiverse by demonstrating its mathematical necessity." The woman idly sorted among the charred sketches and proofs lying on the table. "Exactly. Yes, you've glimpsed in mortal symbology immortal truths."

"Who are you?" he slurred.

As though at last understanding, she looked him squarely in the eye and said, "I am Dyfed. I was once like you—very like you, except for this disease. I was once human and brilliant and misunderstood by all those around me. Now I am human no longer. Now I am a planeswalker."

The word meant nothing to Glacian.

Dyfed went on. "Dominaria is one of millions of worlds. You've demonstrated the existence of artificial planes, but there are many genuine planes too. They are closed to mortals. To such as I—to planeswalkers—the Multiverse is wide open."

A breath from the bellows shuddered into Glacian.

Blinking solemnly, Dyfed said, "I'd hoped to take you on a tour of the planes. I once was Thran. I've been waiting for the first of my people to discover these things. But the journey is perilous for even a healthy mortal. I couldn't take you in this shape. Any other disease I could heal. You've seen what arcane energies do to powerstone phthisis. . . ."

Glacian's eyes darkened, and his lips compressed in a grim line.



## *The Thran*

"You don't believe me. You think I am trying to fool you. It is understandable," the woman said gently. "Perhaps this will convince you." Dyfed disappeared from beside him and reappeared across the room. In her hand, she held an exotic bloom, its pink petals as vast as a man's hand and edged in brown. She approached, laying the flower gently on his chest. "This is a Pyrulean Orchid, a species found nowhere on Dominaria. I stepped from this world into another, plucked the flower, and stepped back." She studied his eyes and smiled sadly. "You are still not convinced."

Dyfed rolled up the sleeves of her jacket. She clenched her hands together and jabbed them forward into the air. Dragging her hands apart, she tore a hole in reality.

A vision greeted Glacian's eyes—a world of darting angels and floating clouds. Amid continents of mist hovered impossible cities of gold. They gleamed in otherworldly splendor in the space between her hands.

"Such places as these lie beyond the bounds of Dominaria," Dyfed said. "Such places as these, I will show you when you are whole enough to travel."

For a moment, only that swimming image shone in the dark room. Then light spilled from the opening door. Dyfed startled back. The tear in reality closed again.

In the gold light of the hall stood another figure—tall, muscular, commanding.

"The goblins told me you had a visitor, Glacian," said Yawgmoth ominously. "But what sort of creature is this?"

Dyfed stiffened. There seemed almost a blush in her dark skin. "My name is Dyfed—"

"I know," Yawgmoth said. "I heard everything. I heard your claims."

Glacian gave a garbled growl. "You bastard!"

"You listened at the door?" Dyfed asked, incredulous.

Yawgmoth shook his head levelly. "No. We have monitoring devices here. We listen to make sure the machines function. We guard Glacian with all manner of provisions."

## J. Robert King

"They listen to keep me captive!" Glacian slurred unintelligibly. "Beware him!"

"I heard all of your claims," Yawgmooth challenged.

"They aren't claims," Dyfed said. "They are the truth."

Yawgmooth stepped into the room and rolled his own sleeve back. The fabric came away from a long, brutal gash in his forearm, oozing blood.

"I hadn't time yet to see one of the healers about this—a wound from the street war. If you are who you say, heal this."

Dyfed stared down at the suppurating sore. An Untouchable had doubtless intended to slice open the man's neck, this forearm received the stroke instead. At the edges, skin was flayed back to reveal muscle under a thin speckling of pus. In one spot, severed tissues showed a pink sliver of bone.

"You've been prodding at this," Dyfed said, taking the man's arm into her hands. Her fingers were gentle and graceful around the terrible wound. "You've been probing to see your own bones and blood vessels. I wouldn't be surprised if you had a stack of sketches back in your laboratory."

Yawgmooth only blinked. "Not simply an injury, but also an opportunity to learn."

Dyfed's eyes met his. "I have heard of you, as well—the man who believes the root of all illness is physical, not spiritual, that the body is a great machine that can be charted and manipulated, repaired and improved. You are right, of course." She placed her hand directly atop the wound, and it was whole.

Yawgmooth looked with amazement at his healed arm.

"Don't trust him!" Glacian hissed hopelessly.

Yawgmooth reached down and plucked the exotic orchid from his chest. "Is this truly from another world?"

"Yes."

He drew a deep breath from the flower. "I seem to remember encountering just this sort of flower on the coastal islands of Jamuraa."

Her hands released his healed arm. "It comes from the plane of Pyrulea."



## *The Thran*

"Pulling a flower from your sleeve—mere sleight of hand?"

"What about the wound I just healed?" Dyfed asked indignantly.

"There are twenty-some healers at the infirmary who could have done as well." Yawgmoth took in another lungful of the flower's fragrance. "It means only that you are a healer, not a planes—what is the word? Planeswalker?"

"Don't you see?" Glacian protested hopelessly. "He's manipulating you."

A fiery light filled Dyfed's eyes. "What if we were to step back into Pyrulea and pluck another?" She lunged toward Yawgmoth and snatched up his hand. The two disappeared.

No sooner had they vanished than the door barked open. Rebbec emerged. Dust sifted down from hair and coveralls as she looked about the room.

"The goblins said a witch woman was here. Where is she?"

"I'm all right."

"Yawgmoth came to confront her, they said." She stalked among the breathing apparatuses. "Where are they? Where did she take him?"

"Somewhere else."

Rebbec staggered to a halt and fixed Glacian with a desperate look. "Damn it, where did she take him?"

"Pyrulea."

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a moment as they slid between worlds—an excruciating moment. Dyfed had laid hold of the very arm she had cured. Arm and body were dragged right out of reality. The space between was a killing place, filled with ravening energies and empty frost. Yawgmoth sensed a thin envelope of protection about him, as gossamer and fragile as a film of water. Without that protection, his flesh would have been ripped from his skeleton. Even with it, the passage was agony.

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Suddenly, they were on the other side. Raving blackness gave way to omnipresent green.

"This is Pyrulea," Dyfed said, a smile playing about her lips. She gestured outward.

Yawgmoth looked out from the ridge where they stood. In every direction, a vast rain forest spread. Millennial trees trailed nets of vine and moss hundreds of feet downward to wet undergrowth. Bright birds darted among broad leaves. Strange orchids spread in sunny patches on the forest floor.

"It is a different world," Yawgmoth breathed in wonder.

It was not exotic flora or fauna that convinced him. It was the spread of the forest itself—literally in every direction. North, south, east, and west, the landscape curved up and away into walls. They, in turn, joined to form a ceiling of sky. This was not merely a bowl of land but the inside of an enormous sphere. Despite vast blue distances, the sky still showed the outline of trees, a living tapestry hanging overhead. The sun beamed, bright and eternal, in the center of the spherical world.

"This is Pyrulea," Dyfed said. "One of countless habitable worlds of the Multiverse."

Yawgmoth was shaking his head. "How can—how does the sun—? What keeps the plants from pulling loose of—?" He staggered, kneeling to keep from falling over.

Dyfed seemed pleased. "The physical laws governing every plane are different. What seems odd to a Dominarian would be natural to a Pyrulean and vice versa."

Looking up dizzily, Yawgmoth said, "There are Pyruleans? There are intelligent creatures from this world?"

"Yes," Dyfed said. "Yes, of course."

At last, Yawgmoth slumped onto his stomach, groaning.

"It's all right," Dyfed assured, setting a hand on his back. "This is a normal human response to planeswalking."

Clutching his stomach and curling into a ball, Yawgmoth said, "I am not . . . a normal human."





## Chapter 15

"There is no freedom for us in Yawgmoth!" shouted Gix into the cavern. It was the largest chamber in all the caves, once home to nearly ten thousand Untouchables. Five thousand remained, pressed in a tight mob beneath the ridge where the young rebel harangued. "Yes, Yawgmoth elevated some of us, but the rest he leaves to rot and die. Every day, more phthitic outcasts arrive in the quarantine cave, but for more than a year, no healthy folk have been called above. We will never be called. Yawgmoth has gleaned the grain and left the chaff to be burned!"

The throng's anger roared in the throat of rock where they gathered.

"I have striven to fulfill Yawgmoth's promises. I have conducted to the surface anyone with enough courage and hope to rise. For a time, those folk found promise in the light, but that time was all too brief.

"Yawgmoth does not usher us into the light but into the furnace. He burns us to fuel the engine of his ascension. I personally have heard him speak of our dead as useful tools. He piles our bodies on the steps of the Council Hall like a rat catcher seeking bounty, and he gets his reward. The Halcytes are willing to pay more to kill us than to heal us, more to bury us than to raise us from this living tomb!"

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Rage united the crowd in one voice.

"And do we fight back? Do we dare hate the hater? No, we cower in our tombs and thank Yawgmoth for each shovelful of dirt he pitches on our heads. Well, I say, no more! No more!"

They raised their fists with his. "No more! No more!"

"We rise! We do not wait to be elevated. We rise, lava up the mountain's throat. We rise!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmoth worked serenely at a desk beside the infirmary window.

Outside, ragged rioters poured from every sewer grate and storm drain.

Watching them, he placidly stirred an antiserum. The concoction leached all metallic substances from blood and tissues, thereby accelerating the phthisis. Anyone already infected would be dramatically worsened. Anyone healthy would contract the disease in mere days. There had previously been no public use for the antiserum, but these rioters suggested an excellent one.

"Gix will be leading them," Yawgmoth said to himself as he watched a brutish Untouchable bash back a doorway, drag forth the man of the house, and beat him into an inert pulp. "So there will be plenty of infected individuals among them." Yawgmoth lifted the antiserum and peered through the ruby liquid. In round distortion, he saw the brute get his head lopped off by a Halcyte guard. The poleaxes had been Yawgmoth's suggestion. "This lovely wine will prove very useful now, indeed."

Yawgmoth set down the antiserum and watched the battle unfold.

A mob of Untouchables gathered down the street, ready to charge the infirmary. He had expected as much. Gix would have identified the infirmary as the principle objective and Yawgmoth as the foe to be captured. It was merely a game of draughts. Yawgmoth had planned every detail of the city's



defense. Gix would play the game just as Yawgmoth had laid it out—Gix and the Elder Council, Rebbec and Glacian, even the planeswalker Dyfed. All were opponents, whether they knew it or not, and this was Yawgmoth's game.

He drew open a drawer of the desk and removed a shallow box. Within lay a miniature floor plan of the infirmary. Small powerstones glinted in key locations along the plan.

Outside, a group of rabble—perhaps two hundred strong—surged down the street toward the infirmary. Above their heads, they brandished whatever weapons, true or improvised, that they had gathered. An animal roar united them into a single, mangy beast. The mob stretched out in the charge.

The front of the group rushed up the main stairs. White marble murals funneled them beneath a lofted statue of crystal—a gigantic angel spreading wings of welcome before this place of healing. Without slowing, the rioters crashed thunderously against the infirmary's steel doors.

"Rebbec had protested about those doors," Yawgmoth muttered. He had replaced cut glass with stout steel. She would not protest when she learned the new doors might well have saved her husband's life.

The rest of the mob arrived. Rioters crushed up against steel. The momentum of their charge was spent in the impact of body on body.

"She will certainly protest about this," Yawgmoth said, sliding a powerstone from the miniature of the infirmary.

Outside, the crystalline angel gave no sound as she tipped on her foundation. The massive figure tilted above the shoving mob. The angel fell. Only at the last did eyes rise to see her, rushing down, silent and grim, upon them.

Perhaps fifty died beneath the initial impact. The statue gleamed crimson for a moment, settling on corpses. Then thousands of cracks raced across her gory figure. She shattered. Razor jags of angel lashed out to cut down another fifty. It seemed a red fountain, blood jetting up and crystal crashing down. Untouchables fell and flailed and flopped.

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"A devastating play," Yawgmooth said. "A hundred rebels defeated by a single work of art." That left a hundred more, of course. Let them live, horrified. Let them panic and spread the contagion among the others. "A devastating play."

The mob fell back. There was no longer a chance of breaking in that way, slick with blood and crystal shards. In their midst, Yawgmooth glimpsed Gix himself. Within his wrappings, Gix's eyes were wide with horror. As all others stared in dumb-founded terror at the shattered angel and the slaughtered bodies, Gix glared toward the upper window where Yawgmooth stood.

"He realizes. He knows this is a game," Yawgmooth told himself. "But he doesn't yet realize he cannot win."

In the next moment, Gix seemed to. Shouting above the heads of the stunned throng, he called for them to scatter.

"It's a trap. Split up! Everyone, split up!"

They did not listen. Perhaps they could not hear him above the screams of the dying. He tried to show them, shoving them toward the side passages away from the infirmary. They staggered, moving only as far as he could shove them. At last, Gix grabbed the sleeves of two other rioters and dragged them bodily from the street.

They were the only three who would escape. No sooner had they fled than five of Yawgmooth's sword-wielding healers closed off the street. Five more appeared in each byway and twelve in each direction of the major thoroughfares. Behind them were phalanxes of the new Halcyte guard, forces now accountable directly to Yawgmooth. He had instructed them and the healers that, in case of riot, they must report to the infirmary, secure it against attack, and enter to receive orders. Now they converged, sixty-some trained, armed, and armored fighters against an unarmed mob of one hundred.

As the slaughter began, Yawgmooth blissfully withdrew from the window. He took with him the box-schematic of the infirmary. The powerstones there indicated that the doors and shutters of the lower floor were holding. Another stone that



## *The Thran*

monitored the roof glowed deeply red. A flotilla of sedan chairs was settling into position. Yawgmooth had expected this arrival—not Untouchables but another band of equally desperate opponents. Striding from his laboratory, Yawgmooth climbed a set of stairs leading to the roof platforms. He hauled the bar from the door and flung it back, stepping into full view on the crowded rooftop.

Before him, councilors climbed unsteadily from their sedan chairs. In their midst was the ever-regal Eldest Jameth of Halcyon. Her robes were battered by the hasty flight, and her coiffure had suffered similarly. Still, she managed to compose her dignity and approach Yawgmooth.

"Greetings, Healer Yawgmooth. You know why we are here."

"It is the only secure spot in the city?" he teased gently.

She was not amused. "We have come to confer on you, as per our agreement, complete command of the Halcyte guard. You will maintain control until the threat of invasion is eliminated. The city is yours to command. We throw ourselves on your mercy."

An enigmatic smile touched Yawgmooth's lips. "I had expected as much." He gestured out beyond the roof, to the streets where rebels died. The healing corps and Halcyte guard marched inward over fallen bodies. "As you can see, my forces arrive even now. They converge here because I knew this would be the main objective of the revolt. Also, the troops converge to receive special weaponry for their fight against phthitics—a bit of sweet deadliness."

"We had hoped as much," Eldest Jameth responded grimly, her eyes sweeping the street, a river of blood. Elders clustered up beside her, wearing haunted looks. They were anxious to get below, so was the eldest. "May we review the troops?"

Yawgmooth bowed gently and gestured toward the stairway. "They will be filling the hall below just now. Come see."

Without pause, he led them down the winding stair. His boots sent martial echoes through the passage. The others followed. Their soft-soled shoes whispered apologetically. All the

## J. Robert King

while Yawgmooth descended, he manipulated his box-schematic, unlocking the doors to the great hall. From below came the sound of soldiers flooding in.

By the time Yawgmooth and the councilors reached the great room, its white-marble floor was stained with red footprints. Soldiers fell in line, guards on one side of the long chamber and healers on the other. At Yawgmooth's insistence, slim plates of metal had been sewn into the shoulders, bellies, backs, and thighs of their jumpsuits.

Yawgmooth strode out between the gathering lines. The elders followed. "Welcome to the war, soldiers, healers, elders," Yawgmooth said wryly. He snapped his fingers, gesturing to a pair of soldiers at the end of the line. "Fetch the battle armor and swords. Haul them here, beside me."

The two soldiers hurried to a wall of cabinets and threw back the tall white doors. Within were great racks, twenty filled with gleaming armor, and ten bins with swords, their hilts jutting upward. Hastily, the soldiers hauled racks and bins out into the center of the floor.

From the first rack, Yawgmooth lifted a gleaming suit of silver armor—shoulder plates, cuirass, chain-mail skirt, and cuisses. With one swift motion he donned the armor. It rang bell-like. A red powerstone gleamed at his throat.

"This armor will more than protect your body from any attacks the damned can make against you. The powerstone in each suit will make it mold perfectly to your frame. Your movements will be amplified by the armor, your strength doubled, your arms steadied. There is a helm for each of you as well. A stone set in each of those will allow me to track your positions and provide special instruction, should circumstances require it."

"Impressive designs, Yawgmooth," Eldest Jameth interrupted.

"They are Glacian's," he said offhandedly to her. Speaking again to the soldiers, he said. "As to specific orders, you must march to and defend the sector of the city you are assigned in your routine duties. Slay any rioters you encounter. Use these



## *The Thrän*

swords." He leaned over one of the bins of swords. Producing the jar of antiserum from his pocket, he poured some into each bin. Then he drew forth a sword—a massive double-edged weapon, its tip smeared with the red stuff. "They have the same heft and length as the swords you practiced with, but the inset stones here make the blade powerful enough to cut through rock. They are poisoned now, too, so be sure not to cut yourselves or any citizen. The poison will destroy our foes."

"Again, very impressive," the eldest said approvingly.

Yawgmoth did not deign to answer this time. Instead, he gestured toward the racks and bins.

"Armor and arm yourselves."

With the clamor of hundreds of boots, the soldiers and healers converged.

A strange alliance of fear and hope filled the faces of the elders as Yawgmoth's forces converged. One by one, the troops were transformed into gleaming warriors with magic-enhanced great swords.

"How long have I been in charge of the Halcyte guard?" Yawgmoth asked the elders. "Only a few moments. And look at them now."

"Yes," Eldest Jameth said. "Look at them now."

Yawgmoth gathered the councilors. "Come with me. You will see more."

As the armies of Halcyon accoutered themselves and marched out into the bloody streets, Yawgmoth led the councilors upstairs. Their shoes stained each tread. Excited whispers filled the air. They were like children heading toward a roomful of presents.

The elders entered a corridor above. Yawgmoth strode imperiously down the aisle, stopped at a door, and flung it back. The councilors crowded up to see what lay beyond.

It was a comical sight. In the murk, a company of ten goblins stood at the ready. They stared fearfully outward, bulbous heads and buggy eyes shimmering in the dark. Each held whatever medical implement had seemed most menacing—scalpel, clamp, strap, tube. . . . In their midst was the most pathetic

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figure, Glacian in all his wretched decay. His skin was more rumpled and pocked than the goblins', his arms more puny, his eyes more terrified. He clutched a stylus as though it were a sword. The single imposing figure in the room was Rebbec in her dirty work suit. She brandished a bed rail overhead, ready to bring it down.

Yawgmoth spoke with gentle mockery. "You are quite safe here, Rebbec. No one will harm your husband. The infirmary is well fortified."

Eldest Jameth spoke up. "It is a veritable castle."

"Come with us, Rebbec. Come see. Today the riots will end." He extended his hand to her.

Blushing, Rebbec set down the bed rail. She surrendered her fingers to his grip.

Glacian growled a garbled objection.

No one but Rebbec could have known what he said, and even she paid him no heed. Yawgmoth led her out of the darkness.

As they walked toward the laboratory, he lifted the box-schematic. "Do you see these powerstones here, here, and here? They are linked to the main doors. And these are linked to the shutters. And these to other defenses. Another innovation of your husband's."

Rebbec's eyes were wide with amazement. "This device . . . from his sketches?"

Yawgmoth smiled. "His split mind has proved useful. Whenever I need a device, I begin the design myself and leave it in his room. He cannot remember having started the work, but he will finish it, design it for me. Together, we have created some marvelous devices for the defense of the empire." He opened his laboratory door and entered, striding to a tall cabinet on one wall. "This, though, is the greatest of them all."

Yawgmoth opened the doors, revealing a simple panel of wood standing within.

"This?" asked Rebbec as the councilors came up behind her. "This wide, flat piece of wood is your greatest innovation?"



## The Thran

Without a word, Yawgmoth reached up to the top of the panel and pulled it down. The vast board pivoted on hidden hinges and springs until it settled into a broad table in their midst. The tabletop gleamed with a tight array of small powerstones. To most eyes, the organization of those stones would have seemed random, but not to the eyes of Rebbec. She had designed so many buildings and avenues, had daily stared down on Halcyon from the heights of her temple. . . .

"It's the city," she whispered. "You've mapped the whole city in powerstones."

"They are linked to doors and shutters and lights in every building. They are linked to the stones in the helms and swords of the soldiers and healers. By merely touching a stone, I can control sites and warriors throughout Halcyon."

Eldest Jameth's former awe had now deepened to dread. "Yes, you can. You can control the whole city."



## Chapter 16

They were figures from a nightmare—warriors with silver bodies and lightning swords. Wherever those blades fell, bodies split in half. There would be a clean moment when every severed organ and bone showed in the afternoon glare. Then vitality spewed into the sudden space. All went red and grotesque. Only the sword remained clean, darting down to notch cobblestone before rising to slay again.

Gix reeled, clutching a fence post shorn by such a brilliant blade. After centuries of peace in Halcyon, there had been no need to apply new powerstone technologies to warfare. It took a man like Yawgmooth to gaze into a crystal and see the potential for murder. An angry smile formed under Gix's bandages. He himself had used a powerstone in attempted murder. He was the original innovator, and he could innovate again.

Beyond the shorn fence, a sedan chair waited in a small statue garden. Catching an anxious breath, Gix vaulted up over the fence.

A sword shaved through wood behind him as though it were mere paper.

Leaping into the sedan chair, Gix slid a trembling hand beneath the control crystal. He pulled upward. The craft jittered into the sky. There came a crash below. Gix glanced over the rising edge of the vessel.



## *The Thran*

The silver-garbed warrior who had pursued him into the garden had taken a swing at the sedan chair, missed, overbalanced, and spilled among statues. Marble figures toppled around and atop the guard, pinging against his armor. His sword had bit deeply into the ground, and he struggled to yank it free.

Gix moved his hand to the top of the control stone. The craft plummeted. It spun slowly as it descended and veered toward the struggling warrior.

Sword arm pinned under pernicious statues, the man was oblivious.

The sedan chair fell like a hammer on the man. Even enchanted armor could not dull that blow. There came a screech and a groan. The warrior collapsed beneath crushing weight. The chair cracked and fell to one side. A hiss of steam went up.

Gix clambered from the wreck and surveyed his work. The garden was ruined. Shattered statuary littered the ground, and the warrior lay among the other figures. He was little more than pulp within his powerstone armor. It had pulled away from dead muscle.

Aching and dizzy, Gix flung back fallen statues, peeled the man's fingers from the sword hilt, and dragged the thing loose. The sword had quite a heft, and it tingled in his grasp. Gix kicked the helm off the bloodied head and set it in place on his own head. It, too, bristled with power. Feverishly, he knelt and tugged at the bloody armor.

"I can use this sword to seem one of them . . . to kill ten of them," he panted as he worked. "I can strip them too and . . . and dress ten Untouchables. Each of them can kill ten, until we've taken over the whole city."

The armor sucked free of the pulverized man. Gix wriggled into the slick suit and felt it tighten around him.

"Until we've taken over the whole city . . ."

The sword cleft the fence one last time, and Gix strode forth. He had not gone three paces before he ran his blade into the eye of another guardsman and dragged him into the garden of statues.

## J. Robert King

\* \* \* \* \*

Xod paused, hauling his sword out of a man's chest. It was horrible work for a healer, to split open this machine-work masterpiece. That's not why he paused. He paused because Yawgmooth spoke into his mind.

*There are impostors among you.* It was not so much the sensation of a voice but the tactile sense of one mind pressing upon another. *Turn around. Look for lesions. Do not trust everyone in armor. Some are Untouchables. Some are the damned.*

He staggered, scanning the street. His company of twenty had been pursuing a group of Untouchables through a granary. They had met little resistance until they had discovered a family holed up in one of the silos. The parents had fought like a pair of lions to give their children a chance to escape. The plan worked, and the young ones ran off while Xod clove their father in two.

It was horrible work for a healer, but it was the will of Yawgmooth.

Another healer staggered back from the fallen mother. He tapped his helm. The message must have been going out to all of them, all of the Halcyte warriors. Yes, there were two others, staring about themselves in shock—and a third who ran purposefully up behind his comrades.

"No!" Xod shouted.

He was too late. The two guards had begun to turn when the Untouchable's sword flashed. Their heads leapt from the shoulders on a pair of crimson fountains. Their armor sucked away from their bodies even as those bodies fell, lifeless, to the ground. The Untouchable crouched over them and plucked up the two swords.

Xod arrived in the next moment. His own blade descended. It sliced through the Untouchable's neck. There were three heads now on the ground, and three helms, and three oozing bodies. Xod lifted his eyes, unwilling to see their faces, unwilling to be caught by another Untouchable in silver armor.

*Destroy the armor, Xod. Destroy the helms.* Yawgmooth's thoughts pressed on his mind. *Do not let another Untouchable claim them.*



## The Thran

As though it moved with a will of its own, Xod's sword lashed down, splitting three helms and three heads. It smashed down thrice more, cutting wide three breastplates and the hearts within.

*What about the swords? Xod found himself asking.*

*Give them to citizens. Let them fight. Let them help you drive the damned back into their sewers. Now go, Xod. Kill any who remain and pursue the rest below.*

Nodding numbly, Xod gathered the three swords. He strode out of the empty granary. The street beyond thronged with Untouchables, tearing down fences, bashing in doors, dragging daggers over the throats of citizens, looting and burning. Xod waded into their midst, slaying savagely, without remorse.

*You should not have let those children go, Xod.*

*I know, Yawgmoth, I know.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmoth pulled his fingers away from a large gray crystal in the schematic of the lower city. His eyes remained closed. The mental contact persisted for a moment even after the physical connection was broken.

"The granaries are secure. I have a good man down there. I had had five good men . . . word is out now that Untouchables have been disguising themselves in Halcyte armor. That trick will work no longer."

He opened his eyes and noted the expressions on all the faces there. Rebbec watched the crystal map table intently. Eldest Jameth looked green gilled. She had not spoken a word for hours. The elders had varying expressions—amazement, admiration, concern, doubt, hope. Even a few of Glacian's goblin friends had entered the room. They watched like delighted children.

In rapid succession, Yawgmoth laid his fingers on various other powerstones. "The Temple remains secure. . . . The Council Hall is regained. . . . Crews are scouring the amphitheater and

arena. There are only a scant hundred rioters in them, and soon there will be none at all. The eighth terrace will be secure once they are slain. . . .”

Rebbec glanced up from the stones. She shivered, as if chilled by his easy tone. The elders about her nudged each other in quiet congratulation. Their homes and places of work would soon be safe.

“I would estimate a thousand Halcyte deaths and four thousand rebels. They are on the run now. They know they cannot win or even survive. Their leader will always choose to survive. . . .”

His fingertips clutched the gray powerstone linked to the granary. A smile crept across his features.

“Ah, Gix. Even now he flees back home, down the channel we have been unable to discover. He flees wearing a helmet linked to me.”

Hands flying now across the array, Yawgmoth closed his eyes. The smile deepened.

“What are you doing?” asked Eldest Jameth.

Yawgmoth did not pause to answer. His hands moved in violent bursts across the matrix. When at last the task was done, he leaned wearily back from the table and blinked his eyes open.

“I sent a message to each of my soldiers in the Lower Ward. They all have an exact visual image of the route of Gix’s retreat. I commanded the Halcyte guard to pursue the rebels down into the caves.”

“For what purpose?” Rebbec blurted.

“For what purpose?” Yawgmoth asked.

“They are already prisoners down there. Unless you plan a mass execution—”

Yawgmoth hauled the crystal table up. It swooped past their noses, swiveled, and stood in the cabinet. It seemed no more now than a panel of wood. Yawgmoth placidly closed the doors before it.

“The war is won, the demonstration concluded.”



## *The Thran*

"You can't just kill them," Rebbec protested. "There are many citizens in the quarantine cave."

"The quarantine cave will not be entered," Yawgmoth pledged. "Those orders were clearly given. We are not attacking invalids. We are exacting punishment on rebel murderers. They have slain a thousand citizens today. Shall we leave them down there to rise again and slay another thousand? And again? And again?"

"The sooner the threat to the city is ended," Eldest Jameth said quietly, "the better."

Yawgmoth dismissively brushed his hands. "What happens down there is the decision of the Halcyte guard and their captains. I meanwhile have a more important—and more pleasant—task to perform." He reached into one of the pockets of his armor and drew forth a pendant with a glowing blue stone in it. He opened the chain outward and solemnly drew the amulet around his neck. "This is a gift from a friend—an amulet that allows me to call on her in grievous times."

Rebbec blinked, "Call on . . . her?"

In answer, Yawgmoth clasped the stone between his hands. A woman suddenly appeared in their midst. Thin and muscular, the black-garbed woman had short-shorn hair and ebony skin. Her eyes were piercing, and her smile a little mocking.

The elders leapt slightly back at her sudden arrival.

Rebbec stood her ground, eyes narrowing. "Dyfed."

"In the flesh," the woman responded with a gentle bow.

Eldest Jameth stared suspiciously at her. "Who are you? A wizard?"

Yawgmoth laughed. "No, she's grander by far than a wizard. Dyfed is a new breed of human—a rare and wonderful breed. She is the living manifestation of human destiny. Though she was born human, she is now as different from us as we are from animals."

"I didn't know I was to be put on display," Dyfed said.

"She is a planeswalker," Yawgmoth concluded.

"A planeswalker? What is a planeswalker?"

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"It will be easier to show you," Yawgmoth said. "I have asked her to conduct us on a tour of some of the planes, to give us an idea of what she is and what we might become. She has agreed. She will take us to walk the planes."

Dyfed swung her arm out, sweeping the company. Her fingertips trailed a palpable magic, as though her arm were a sorcerous wing. Pinions of energy brushed their heads and bodies and clothes, enveloping them in a gossamer veil. The laboratory faded from view, as flat as an old memory.

A crazy geometry ruled the blankness around them. Circles curved outward instead of inward. Pentagons had square corners. Every line bled itself into every other possible line. It was a chaos of potentiality, in which all things simultaneously did and did not exist.

*The Corridors of Time*, Dyfed said into their minds. *The Blind Eternities*. *The Bastard Plane*. *Whatever name you would call it, this is the nonsense in which all planes float. Everything that is derives from this place of things that are not.*

There came no response to her words. The mortals couldn't move. As rigid as statues, they hung there alongside each other, just as they had stood in the laboratory. Yawgmoth, Eldest Jameth, elders, Rebbec, and even the goblins—none moved. Only their eyes held life, the spark of intelligence.

Suddenly, they were in an utterly different space. It was a sere world of orange rock and windswept sand. In the distance stood fingers of stone too tall and narrow to stand on Dominaria. The sky was red, and through its pale veil, stars winked even at midday. The group stood on that world, their feet imprinting the dust, but the magic pinions of Dyfed still enfolded them.

*I will not release you entirely here. You could not breathe, and you would freeze, and your eyes would be drawn from their sockets. If not for these things, you would enjoy this place. Here you could leap thrice your height. I brought you here only to convince you it was nowhere on Dominaria. And now for a more habitable realm.*



## *The Thran*

Again into the Blind Eternities they spun. Again the solid world flattened and folded and inverted itself. This journey seemed more brief, more tolerable. They emerged into another world.

They stood on a drifting cloud in an illimitable sky of purple. There was no land below, no sunny emptiness above, only this all-enveloping purple and the stacks on stacks of cloud. A fine mist about their knees condensed to solid ground beneath their feet. The final tracers of Dyfed's magic released them, and they could move, breathe, slump down in weak-kneed awe on the slowly transforming cloud.

Rebbec strode gently forward. Her feet made a wet sound on the cloud. It clutched enviously at her. A few paces led her to a cloudy cliff. She walked with ease over the knob of stone and stood there, perpendicular to the rest of the group.

"In a plane that is only cloud and sky, it is better if one cannot fall," Dyfed said gladly. She swept her hand out again. The gesture enveloped the company in silken bands of power.

Rebbec seemed to be lying on her side as they jagged through the Halls of Time. When the company emerged again, she was in fact on her side.

There would have been no better place to be on the lofty meadow. Those who were not lying down or at least kneeling collapsed. As high as the clouds had seemed, this sunny overlook was ten times as terrifying. Below the cliff's edge, wide rivers formed slender threads on a wide plain. Ancient forests seemed but clinging lichens. The endless ocean at the edge of it all visibly curved.

Only Dyfed remained standing, and beside her, Yawgmoth, because he leaned on her. His voice was giddy in that soaring place.

"This is our destiny. It begins today. I have asked Dyfed to find me a paradise, a perfect plane, and make a permanent portal to it from Halcyon. The Caves of the Damned will become a doorway to our paradise. The first who will dwell therein are our own infirm. Folk made ill by powerstone

## J. Robert King

phthisis will move into a virgin world, safe from ravaging magic. They will be cured. Once they are, they will open the world to the rest of us for colonization.

"Yes, elders. I promised to end the riots and have done so. I promised to eradicate the phthisis, and I am doing so. I promised to elevate our race into divinity, to bring us to a perfect world in which even death will hold no sway. This day is a first step toward that glorious new world."

\* \* \* \* \*

The only Untouchables who survived in the Caves of the Damned were those in the quarantine cavern, those with phthisis. It was among them that the soldiers found Gix.

Ravaged by disease and war, Gix lay in a dark alcove and panted like a dog with storm terrors. He still wore powerstone armor and helmet. In one hand, Gix clutched a sword, with which he had slain eighteen guards. The mood for killing was gone from him, though. He did not lift the sword when health corps workers surrounded him. He did not cling to the hilt when they snatched the sword away. It was lucky for him that he didn't. The workers were ordered to slay anyone who resisted. Had Gix resisted, he would not have survived to see Yawgmoth.

Of course, surviving was what Gix did best.

Yawgmoth stood above him now. The tip of his sword hovered just above Gix's throat. There would be no escape this time.

"Why don't you get it over with?" Gix asked, trying to sound brave.

"Get what over with?" Yawgmoth replied.

"Why don't you go ahead and kill me?"

Yawgmoth sighed impatiently. "Whether or not you realize it, Gix, you are my puppet. You have been my puppet for years. I knew you would rise to lead your people. Your idealism runs deep but not as deep as your fear of death. It makes you utterly predictable. Honesty, discipline, charisma, fear—these are your



## The Thran

marionette strings. I have been pleased to pull them, but I have no more need of a puppet."

"Then why don't you go ahead and *kill* me?" Gix shouted.

"A puppet, no, but a servant, yes. Like all of us, Gix, you must ascend to survive. You must climb out of your former skin—it is too small for you now. Take command of your strings. Vow your loyalty to me and live."

"If I am only a puppet," Gix growled, "then why don't you just make me vow?"

Yawgmoth's eyes were as sharp as his sword. "That is what I am doing." He stared a moment more and then snorted. "This is tiresome." Yawgmoth raised his sword for the killing blow.

"Wait! I will swear it! I will serve you. Loyally. Forever."

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmoth strode through the Caves of the Damned among the dead. Health corps workers tended them with wheelbarrows and meat hooks. They no doubt considered this a mass grave. Yawgmoth would change their opinion.

He walked to a particular tunnel—long and smooth in the bedrock. Dyfed had said such a site would be needed, surrounded in solid basalt. He walked through the tunnel, running his hands affectionately along the black stone. At its end lay a small chamber, what once had been the private residence of a lord among the damned. Here, just across this threshold, she would make a portal to paradise.

Where others saw a mass grave, Yawgmoth saw the future.

## PART III

# THE WORLD







### ***Thran-Phyrexian War Day Three: Battle of Megheddon Defile***

Megheddon Defile had become a meat grinder. Dwarves, minotaurs, Thran, Phyrexians, Halcytes—they fought among the dead.

When the third day of battle dawned, the Thran and their barbarian allies were entrenched behind walls of bodies. They could not retreat into the defile. Halcyte airships commanded the skies over it. Neither could they break through. Halcyte monsters and machines commanded the desert. The Thran allies could only hunker down in the middle ground and fire what missiles remained to them.

Meanwhile, Phyrexian catapults made missiles out of dead Thran. Putrid meat rained sporadically from the skies.

Dwarven Commander Curtisworthy shielded his red beard from the latest hail of gobbets.

"Monsters!" he hissed as the hunks pattered his mailed back.

He had seen Phyrexians up close now and knew them to be monsters. Yawgmooth had changed them. Horns, sagittal crests, spiked brows, saucer eyes, snake fangs, distended jaws, bifurcated tongues, barbed shoulders, scimitar claws, carapace and scale, stinger and tail, slashing, bashing, eviscerating—they

## J. Robert King

were monsters. There was nothing of fear or regret in them. There was only killing.

So, the Thran allies crouched behind corpse revetments. Even dwarves, even minotaurs, even true-hearted warriors hunkered there. This was not war. This was slaughter.

"Trapped, with death all around," growled Curtisworthy. Were it not for the tourniquet that bound the stump of his sword arm, he would have led a suicide charge, hoping to break through. Not now. "Trapped."

Curtisworthy peered over the wall of dead, gazing through a cloud of flies.

Only the alliance's clockwork warriors held the front. Morning sunlight shone across metallic arms. Axes rose and fell. Lances streamed gore. Artifact creatures chewed monstrous flesh. Only Glacian's metal warriors were a match for the implacable Phyrexians.

Mantis warriors dragged flex-steel abdomens ceaselessly and tirelessly among the dead, seeking foes to slay. With lithe claws, they gripped Phyrexian heads. With masticating mandibles they bit away Phyrexian arms. With six legs, they tore the monsters apart.

Silver lancers ambled over ground too treacherous for cavalry charges. They moved with the leggy motion of spiders, but the speed of horses. Their lances pierced even powerstone armor. One by one, Halcyte guards fell.

Glacian's greatest triumph were his shredders—ten-foot-tall metal globes fashioned of blades. Gyroscopes whirled in inner circles of steel, providing momentum and mincing meat as they went. In the center of each globe floated a powerstone that directed the motion of the ball. It mowed down anyone it caught.

"Machines and monsters," Commander Curtisworthy growled.

Perhaps the allies could not press forward, but neither would they retreat. Yawgmoth would exhaust his defenses . . . and be caught unaware by Thran reserves.

"We will prevail. With our artifact army, we will prevail."



## The Thran

\* \* \* \* \*

"I won't do it," the chief artificer protested. The young, blonde-haired woman sat within the command core of the Null Sphere. She occupied one of the powerstone-studded command chairs. "You're asking me to kill my own people, by the tens of thousands! By the hundreds of thousands!"

Yawgmoth glared down at the woman in the slim metal chair. He lifted a booted foot to rest on the sinewy conduits that linked the chair to every distal point upon the Sphere.

"I am asking you to surrender to me the Thran artifact army." His sword whispered from its sheath and slid gently against her neck. "As I see it, you have no choice."

The chief artificer did not look up. Instead, her eyes were trained on her comrades, seven more artificers, strapped to similar seats. They controlled the sphere—where it drew its power, where it channeled its power, what machines it monitored, what machines it compelled.

"Oh, I have a choice, Yawgmoth. We all have choices. We can refuse, and die, and save hundreds of thousands of others."

Yawgmoth simply shrugged. The motion was enough. His powerstone armor accentuated the movement, propelling his sword along the chief artificer's neck.

Steel sliced through skin, through muscle, through wind-pipe. In the sudden spray, sparks leapt from myriad conduits. Rank smoke rolled whitely around the chair. Within its glimmering arms, the woman convulsed. She was gone—the sword had nearly taken her head off, but the surges of power through the chair jiggled her dead figure.

With a sigh of mild dismay, Yawgmoth withdrew his sword. It dripped across the grid-work floor of the control core. He strode calmly across the metal mesh, approaching the next chair. There a young artificer sat, shivering. To have attained such a post at his age, this man must have been a prodigy. It was good. Prodigies are bright but malleable.

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Yawgmoth casually wiped the shimmering blade on the man's shoulder. It was an act meant to scare him. It worked too well.

No blood came, but another liquid—lower down—filled the chair and electrified it. The prodigy convulsed and slowly died.

Shaking his head, Yawgmoth strolled onward. Smoke rolled up behind him. The prodigy cried out fitfully in agony.

There were six more seats, six more artificers, each strapped in place and guarded by Yawgmoth's Phyrexians. Even if all of them died, Yawgmoth could still take command of the Null Sphere. He knew Glacian's mind, and in knowing it, knew all about this station. Even so, it would be more convenient to delegate the duties. He wished to be personally engaged elsewhere.

The next artificer was an old man, white-haired and resigned. He had endured a half-century of politics in the artificer's union, had survived a shifting empire, and hoped to live beyond a few more moments.

Yawgmoth stood over the man. He stared down. "This is only a technicality, you realize. I myself can sit these seats, command this sphere. You save no one by denying me. You save yourself by indulging me." His sword slid into position on the old man's neck. "It is your decision."

Nodding quietly, the artificer said, "What is your bidding, Lord Yawgmoth?"

A satisfied smile spread across Yawgmoth's face. His sword did not move from the old man's throat. "I want you to signal the Thran artifice creatures in Megheddon Defile."

Closing his eyes in concentration, the old man moved his hands dexterously across the powerstone matrices in his command chair.

"You want me to shut them down?"

"No," Yawgmoth said happily. "I want you to turn them on the Thran. I want you to command them to destroy their own people."

\* \* \* \* \*



## *The Thran*

At midday, the battle shifted.

Groans rose from ten thousand mouths. Thran and dwarf, elf and Viashino, minotaur and barbarian, they peered from behind corpse bulwarks to see.

The Thran artifact armies were falling back. Mantises whirled about and loped toward the entrenchments. Lancers hauled their silvery shafts from dead Halcytes, turned the bloody things around, and charged. Shredders ceased chewing through Phyrexians and rolled toward Thran.

"This is no retreat," Dwarven Commander Curtisworthy gabbled. With his remaining hand, he grabbed his battle-axe. "This is betrayal."

In moments, the killing wave of metal and flesh crashed over the commander.

A mantis warrior surged up before the wall of bodies and clawed the top corpse from the pile. Razor mandibles scissored in the thing's face. An unholy glow came from its blood-crazed eyes.

Commander Curtisworthy swung his axe into clockwork jaws. Edge met edge. The axe clove into the machine's face. It bit deep, splitting shiny panels. The mantis's head gapped open. Gears and wires were laid bare.

The mantis did not stop. Axe wedged in its face, it clambered over the remains of the wall. The six-legged machine towered above the one-armed dwarf. Its foreclaws were lightning-fast. It grappled Curtisworthy's head to crush it.

The commander hadn't released his axe. Roaring, he wrenched the blade yet imbedded in the mantis's face. The silvery skull split like a walnut. Beneath it lurked knobby gearwork. Glassy eyes drooped from ruined housings. The mantis's frame shuddered, suddenly rigid.

The axe swung free. Curtisworthy did not. The mantis still clutched him. Hanging above the bloody ground, he brought his blade up for a final stroke. The edge split the mantis's skull. Yellow steam jetted from its sundered head. Curtisworthy bounded back, yanking his head from the raking grip of the war machine. The mantis collapsed.

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Curtisworthy surveyed the battle. The front had swept past him. Rogue artifact creatures, Halcyte guards, and Phyrexians scoured the field. There was not a living ally in a hundred yards.

Worse—a Phyrexian loped wolflike toward Curtisworthy. It was a horrible thing, with pink skin bursting atop impossibly large shoulders. The same unholy forces that had stretched the clavicles of that beast had extended its jaw bones into a pair of wicked tusks. Teeth crowded the mouth above, and fire filled compound eyes. The Phyrexian vaulted forward, shrieking.

Curtisworthy hurled his axe into the thing's path. His aim was true. The blade struck the Phyrexian just as it had the mantis warrior—in the head. It chopped through toothy face and sinus cavities and brow ridge. It cut through the cerebral sac and into the brain.

Two swings and two kills, both with his left hand.

Except that this wasn't a kill. What unmade the metal warrior could not stop this Phyrexian. The brain that oozed from that cleft was no vital organ. Only the lizard mind was needed to fight like this—

With filed tusks and bloodied teeth, the Phyrexian bit through Curtisworthy's good arm. Skin and muscle split. Bone crunched. Teeth met teeth. There was blood, lots of blood.

Curtisworthy fell on his back, staring up at the thing. It had once been a man, but now what was it? Hackled and horrid, the monster hunched against the blazing sky.

Was this the future for the Thran? Was this the future for all Dominaria?

Dwarven Commander Curtisworthy turned his head away. If this was the future of Dominaria, he did not wish to see it.

His final vision was stranger still. As his lifeblood gushed out of him, he saw a vast gray orb—a moon hanging so low in the sky there was no sky. He could not imagine what this thing could be. It gleamed brilliantly. It cast a blinding light on Halcyon but threw the defile in deep darkness. Into that valley of death, the army of the Thran Alliance fled.

"What can it be? What can it mean?"



## The Thran

He saw something small drop from the belly of that great sphere. It fell into the center of the defile, into the midst of the fleeing army. The blackness suddenly vanished in an other-worldly radiance.

Dwarven Commander Curtisworthy smiled one last time and was gone.

## Chapter 17

Two Years Before the Thran-Dwarven War...

After the Unthinkable Uprising, it took months to heal and rebuild the city. That was days of black smoke. Columns rose from pyres into the sky. Mocking winds whistled at and shoved the ascending sun. Paved and dazed down on the living black of gray mud to red earth and only women, children and their sought out during night, the two remained on the bellies of their backs when eyes closed, sooty clouds spilted rainwater above the city. The pocket bridges that had splashed foot fires now washed grey streets. A sickly smell filled the air. Blood clung to boots and tracked onto every floor. It dripped beneath fingertips and in the folds of hands. They would not get that blood out, our eyes. It seeped into the spaces between cobbles and washed down in great secret rivers beneath the city. It spun in dark clouds and slid into haircuts with each breath they took. No sooner had the dead been buried and their blood washed from the surface of things than the procession of mourning began. In each district, on each terrace, they swung up simultaneously.



## Chapter 17

### *Two Years Before the Thran-Phyrexian War . . .*

After the Untouchables' Uprising, it took months to heal and rebuild Halcyon.

First were days of black smoke. Columns rose from pyres into the sky. Mocking winds plucked at and shoved the ascending soot. Funereal ash drifted down on the living. Flecks of gray stuck to red roads amid bug swarms. Immolated flesh sought out drying blood, the two reanimated in the bellies of flies.

Even when pyres ceased, sooty clouds spiraled tauntingly above the city. The bucket brigades that had squelched roof fires now washed gory streets. A sickly smell filled the air. Blood clung to boots and tracked onto every floor. It lingered beneath fingernails and in the folds of hands. They would not get that blood out, not ever. It seeped into the spaces between cobbles and washed down in great septic rivers beneath the city. It spun in dust clouds and slid into Halcytes with each breath they took.

No sooner had the dead been burned and their blood washed from the surface of things, than the processions of mourning began. In each district, on each terrace, they sprang up simultaneously.



## *The Thran*

The public rites were ancient but nearly forgotten after centuries of peace. The folk wore black and sack. Effigies of death were chased down the streets. Swine were flogged until they bled. Trumpets wailed in ghost songs at all hours. For a time, Halcyon immersed itself in the witchery of human grief.

These parades even braved streets where health corps workers and Halcyte guards tore down gutted buildings, rebuilt rooftops, mortared walls, and labored in every other way to rebuild. The same young warriors who had defended the city now raised it from the ashes. The people loved them. The people loved Yawgmoth.

It is love more than any other force that overcomes grief. Months passed. The dead lingered only in memory and in the hue of the cobble cracks. The city was rebuilt. Even the temple—the greatest symbol of hope the Thran had ever known—was rushed to completion. Yawgmoth knew the mood of the people. They were ready to climb out of despair and celebrate victory. Yawgmoth would give them a city more beautiful than ever.

Today was the day—the dedication of the temple and the first day of the Feast of Victories. There were many victories: the end of incursions from below, the imminent demise of phthisis, the completion of the temple, and the beaming hope of Yawgmoth's paradise. Many in the Elder Council believed today would also be the perfect ceremonial moment for Yawgmoth to relinquish the reins of the military.

On the eve of all this joy, though, a shadow had fallen over the city. A caravel had arrived a week ago, bearing on it a grim-faced set of ambassadors.

The first was a dwarf from far-off Oryn Deeps, a subterranean mountain empire on Jamuraa. Yawgmoth and his eugenicists had once sojourned among the diminutive folk, healing the black-cough that slew them. The dwarf ambassador was Prince Delsuum, son of a duo-centennial king. Delsuum was merely eighty, sinewy and clear eyed, and dressed in jewel-tone silks that most dwarves would have disdained as foppery. He was a suspicious and grasping prince, if Yawgmoth remembered.

## J. Robert King

An elf priestess debarked just after Prince Delsuum. She was Elyssendril Lademmdrith of the Daelic elves. She represented the vast confederation of woodland nations in the Domains. Yawgmooth and his fellow exiles had wandered among those peoples as well, though he had never met this priestess. She had the angular severity of her kind—graceful and slim as a poniard and just as cold. Her clothes consisted of a cloth not so much woven as grown, in places as smooth as a palm frond and in others nappy like wool. The living staff she bore twined with ivy tendrils that proclaimed the domain of her deity, and she glared at the grand city as though it were a leprous carbuncle.

There were others too—a pair of barbarians garbed in buckskin, with hats formed out of taxidermied game hens. A triumvirate of minotaurs followed next. The beast-men would make an even greater sensation on the city streets than the dwarf: jokes about thick-headed and lascivious bull-men were standard fare in the market squares of Halcyon. Even the other delegates gave them a wide berth. The next arrival—an elderly cat woman—fastidiously waited until a breeze had freshened the gangplank before she debarked. Once a warrior among her exotic breed, this woman was clearly now a matriarch, the self-proclaimed Queen of a Thousand Tribes. Last of all was a grizzled old lizard man from volcanic Shiv.

Each new arrival was a rung lower on the chain of being, farther from Thran humanity. These beasts were throwbacks, burrowing among rocks and hugging trees, dressing in dead pelts. They were half animal. Their bodies were crude—built for violence. Their minds and societies were just the same. All had welcomed Yawgmooth when he and his comrades had arrived, human healers in their midst. All had repaid his labors with distrust and hatred. They had made the eugenicists most unwelcome, human freaks among their people. Now it was they who were the freaks.

No sooner had the contingent debarked than they affronted the elders who greeted them. Spurning offers of friendship, the



delegation demanded an immediate audience with the full assembled council. It was explained that council members were spread across the continent, and a council could not be convened in less than a week. Prince Delsuum indicated that a full council must be convened in no more than a week or the ambassadorial corps would leave, their message undelivered, "to the great peril of Halcyon."

That was that. Without indication as to why they had come, the ambassadors retired to state quarters to wait.

The week passed. The temple's dedication had come. The Feast of Victories was about to begin. The council convened to hear the news of the barbarian ambassadors.

There was a festival air beneath the Council Hall dome. Halcyon's elders wore bright robes of celebration. They brought with them loud conversation and laughter. For weeks, their eyes had been trained on this day and the Feast of Victories. Whatever niggling business had summoned them here, they would not be diverted long from civic celebration.

Yawgmoth and Rebbec were among those garbed for festival. Rebbec wore a yellow robe streaming with embroidery and ribbons. Yawgmoth's own robes were moon-gray. The shoulder piece of his robe was silver inset with a gleaming powerstone, meant to remind the city of the silver-garbed warriors he commanded.

"What is this all about?" Rebbec asked him.

Yawgmoth gave a carefree shrug. "Isn't dwarf diplomacy an oxymoron?"

Rebbec covered her mouth as she laughed. She paused, wringing her hands together.

"Well, if stories are true, dwarves are at least straightforward. Perhaps he'll get to the point and allow us to get to the dedication ceremony."

Yawgmoth clutched her hands, enfolding them in his own. "Don't be nervous. Nothing can steal this day away from you."

"It isn't my day."

"Well, then, nothing can steal this day away from your temple."

## J. Robert King

"It isn't my temple."

"Look, here they come."

The stir on the Council Hall floor stilled as the barbarian delegates entered. They came through the main doors to the chamber. The minotaurs marched with a military snap to their hooves, as glossy as obsidian. Behind them strode Prince Delsuum, panoplied in the heraldry of Oryn Deeps. He glared beneath reddish brows and might have seemed majestic if not for his stature. He rose only to the rumps of his minotaur escort. Elyssendril Lademmdrith came afterward, regaled in silks of foliage motif. Barbarian humans and lizard men followed.

The elders watched this odd procession with patient indulgence. Only the elders of Losanon and Wington stood at solemn attention as the ambassadors marched toward the podium at the center of the chamber.

The voice of the moderator rose, "Come to order, Elder Council. Today we receive emissaries from abroad. Welcome them to our midst."

Applause rose like a gentle rain. The parade of delegates made their grim way to the podium. The minotaurs positioned themselves on three sides, and the lizard men on the forth. Meanwhile, Prince Delsuum climbed to the lectern. The steps were a bit much for him, and he waddled as he went.

"I hope he can see over the lectern," Yawgmoth said quietly to Rebbec.

Prince Delsuum ascended and glared down at Yawgmoth, as though he had heard the comment. From a document tube hanging at his side, he produced and unrolled a sheet of parchment. His hands shook ever so slightly as he flattened it on the lectern.

"The council may be seated," the moderator said. With a rumble of benches and whisper of paper, the group sat.

Prince Delsuum cleared his throat. The sound was channeled through the powerstones positioned around him, and it reverberated nervously beneath the dome.



## *The Thran*

He read: "I, Prince Delsuum of the ruling house of Oryn Deeps, have been selected to speak for a coalition of the five great non-human races of the world—dwarf, elf, Viashino, minotaur, and cat person. We represent twenty-five nations and have found alliance also among the non-Thran humans of Jamuraa and the Thran humans of the Losanon and Wington city-states—"

That announcement brought a stir of speculation to the Council Hall floor. Prince Delsuum looked up from the page, taking a moment to mop his brow.

The moderator signaled for silence, and her enforcers tensed along the perimeter. The hush was immediate.

Taking a deep breath, the dwarf prince resumed. "We come to you with a familiar story, a story of plague and civil war and massacre. Of course, there will always be plagues, but when before have plagues led to uprisings and wholesale slaughter? When except these last decades? And when before have plagues propelled a man to the height of a nation? Only when the man is a healer. Only when the man promises a cure. Only when he pretends control of a plague so that he can take control of a nation.

"Such a man has come among us. Such a man used the black-cough of Oryn Deeps to spark a workers' rebellion. He, his fellow exiles, and his rebels nearly slew my father, nearly destroyed a millennium of dwarf rule beneath the mountain, nearly made this singularly monstrous man a king among dwarves. Such a man turned the creeping mold of the Argoth Forests into a virulent plague that ate away the elves there. His agents abducted Priestess Elyssendril Lademmdrith and her healers, and he held the whole population ransom for the cure. Once the ransom was paid, he delivered only sweetened water and twelve slain healers. Such a man loosed the white death among Talruaan minotaurs, merely to study its effects. Such a man spread rabies among the ruling cat warriors of Jamuraa until they tore each other apart in a mad frenzy. Such a man poisoned the human tribes of Gulatto Meisha.

## J. Robert King

Such a man captured and pithed and vivisected the bey of the Shivan Viashino.

"We believed him and have paid dearly for our mistakes. Now we call for the immediate extradition of this monster from Halcyon. In the name of the five great non-human species of Dominaria, and the non-Thran humans of Gulatto Meisha, and the Thran humans of Losanon and Wington, I demand the immediate extradition of the healer known as Yawgmoth."

The prickly silence that had accompanied the dwarf prince's presentation now cracked like thunder. The whole of the assembly rose. Some shouted. Some shook their fists. Others only stood and gaped, mouths wide and breathless. The roar of protest—and agreement—shook the vast building.

Rebbec's eyebrows drew down in a stern line. "How dare they come here and make these accusations!"

The moderator signaled for silence. "The prince retains the floor!"

Enforcers wrestled the most obstreperous representatives from the hall. The rest hushed, though no one sat again.

"He fooled us," the dwarf prince said, no longer reading. "He is fooling you. This phthisis that plagues you—he has used it to ascend to the heights of your city. In just over six years, he has gone from being an exile to being a near king. He has taken over your army and created an army of his own. They are posted throughout the city-states of this empire. Only in Losanon and Wington has their power been checked. Elsewhere, Yawgmoth rules as he does here. He sends his critics down among the infirm. He liberates those who would serve him and eliminates the rest. He regulates distribution of the serum and infects any who oppose him. He has reshaped your city in his own image. We plead with you—look around. See the fruits of this man's deeds. He is evil masked in good, disease masked in healing, domination masked in servitude. Stop him before he becomes ruler of all Halcyon, ruler of the whole Thran Empire. If he ascends that far, we will consider it a declaration of war—world war. If he is not given over to us, Halcyon will have to fight the rest of Dominaria."



## *The Thran*

There was no longer any hope of holding back the shouts. The moderator signaled impotently for silence. Elders surged from their seats into the aisles. Minotaurs stomped furiously, threatening to gore any who approached.

"Don't worry, Yawgmoth," Rebbec said, gripping his sleeve. "None of us believe these lies."

Without responding, he pulled free of her. He approached one of the minotaurs and stared him straight in the eye.

"Let me pass," Yawgmoth said. "I would speak to these charges."

Taking the man's measure—and noting the furious throng behind him, the minotaur dipped his head ever so slightly and motioned Yawgmoth onward. He ascended to the podium, his figure gigantic behind the diminutive prince. Only his appearance calmed the mob. With a single raised hand, he silenced them.

"Halcytes, Thran, ambassadors, all, you know my deeds. You know that I have defended every last one of you and helped you rebuild a city ravaged by the damned. You know that I have devised a treatment for the phthisis and am near to discovering a cure. You know that I, with Rebbec, seek to lead our people into a future free of war and disease and even death. Judge me by my works."

A broad ovation filled the chamber, and shouts of "Aye! Aye!"

"Now let us conclude this unhappy business and adjourn to the celebration long awaited, long needed. I call for a vote. Does anyone second?"

"I second," Rebbec shouted.

"Then, let the vote be taken on this proposal—shall Healer Yawgmoth remain in his position, unaffected by the call for extradition? All in favor, vote aye."

The council hall roared with the response. "Aye."

"All opposed, vote nay."

The reply was just as loud. "Nay."

Yawgmoth stared out at the room, astonishment and fury in his eyes.

## J. Robert King

"I call for a count of elders," the moderator said. "Eldests, tally, record, and report the votes of your cities."

While the eldests struggled to reassemble their contingents, Yawgmoth continued only to stare in blind incredulity at the masses.

The voice of the dwarf prince came from below. "They know you, Yawgmoth. Even after you purged your enemies from among them, the rest of them know you. Even after you flooded the city with your loyal servants, they know you, as do I."

Without looking down, Yawgmoth replied coldly. "You do not know me, or you would not have come here to do this."

"We have a count," announced the moderator. "Eldests, report your vote. Indicate extradition or non-extradition."

The eldest of the first city-state called out, "Chignon votes for extradition."

The next eldest shouted, "Losanon votes for extradition."

"Wington votes for extradition."

"Nyoron votes for non-extradition."

"Seaton votes for non-extradition."

"Phoenon votes for non-extradition."

"Orleason votes for non-extradition."

Yawgmoth breathed, clutching the edge of the lectern. Three for extradition and four opposed, with only Eldest Jameth of Halcyon left to cast her vote.

It seemed an effort for the regal woman to speak. "Halcyon votes . . . for extradition."

A jubilant sound came from the dwarf beside Yawgmoth. The yip was strange against the groan that moved through the chamber.

The moderator called for silence. "Four cities for and four against. The motion passes to the leader's council. As I call your name, give your response. Those in favor of extradition, vote aye. Those opposed vote nay. . . ."

Yawgmoth hawkishly watched each leader there—priests and healers, heroes and nobles—as the call came for their votes. For



## *The Thran*

every nay, there came an aye, so that the vote was equal at thirteen when it came to him. He was so startled to hear his own name, it took him a moment to realize what was asked of him.

"Having doubts, yourself?" taunted the dwarf prince.

"Nay," Yawgmoth said. "I vote nay."

"And, last, Rebbec of Halcyon," the moderator called. "What is your vote?"

Rebbec stared up at Yawgmoth, a strange look in her eyes. She seemed to be seeing him for the first time, though whether that look brought joy or terror, he could not have told.

"I vote," she began, her voice a mere whisper. Clearing her throat, she said, "I vote nay."

"Fifteen opposed, thirteen in favor. Extradition is denied."

The answering shout was half cheer, half shriek.

Yawgmoth's gaze pinned those who had opposed him, one by one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebbec had been too shaken by the council meeting to deliver her address at the dedication of the temple. Yawgmoth volunteered to go first. Amid the cheers of a vast throng, he stepped to the center of the temple. His image was cast in myriad miniature across the city below. It shone within all the uplifted eyes there. It gleamed, massive and godlike on the clouds. Through a stole of powerstones, his voice boomed like thunder.

"I am sorry to cloud this joyous day with evil tidings, but I must. Just this morning, a task force of foreign nations appeared in the Council Hall and declared war on the Thran Empire. Dwarf, elf, lizard man, minotaur, cat person—they have pledged to attack us. They have brought barbarian humans among them and have even turned Losanon, Wington, and Chignon against us."

He did not wait for the furor in the crowd below to die down. His voice could over-top all the shouts.

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"In this time of crisis, when the world has declared war on us, and three of our own city-states have initiated civil war, I have no choice but to dissolve the council and assume control of the nation."

He utterly ignored the screams.

"I have ordered the healing corps and Halcyte guard to escort you to your homes, to keep the city free of panic and riot. The same order is being carried out even now in Orleason, Seaton, Nyoron, and Phoenon. Meanwhile, the Halcyte guard and health corps in the rebel city-states have been ordered to retreat before being captured and slaughtered by this evil coalition."

A hushed terror answered those words.

His voice changed from military ruler to gentle father. "Do not fear, people of Halcyon, people of the empire. I have saved you before. I will save you again. It was out of barbarism and war that we ascended to this lofty place. Out of them, we will ascend again. Do not abandon your dreams for the glorious future, people of Halcyon. These are but the birth pangs of the heaven I have promised."





## Chapter 18

"Tell her he is a monster," Glacian sputtered miserably amid the glowing apparatus that supported his life.

"She knows your opinion already," Rebbec whispered through an edge of her robe. She glanced over her shoulder, where Dyfed waited impatiently.

The planeswalker did not deign to cover her lovely features, sour with irritation. She stood, hips cocked, arms crossed, and lips dubious. To be summoned by the blue-gemstone amulet when there was no immediate crisis was galling enough. To be summoned by two folk who had snatched the amulet from its rightful owner—from Yawgmoth—that was almost beyond her ability to bear. The constant scuttling of goblins about her, poking and picking, only frayed her already tattered patience.

"Tell her he has killed the delegates," gabbled Glacian.

"He hasn't," Rebbec hissed. "He's keeping them hostage somewhere—you're not helping!" She turned stiffly toward the planeswalker and dropped the robe away. "Forgive our whispers. Glacian wants to thank you for answering our summons."

Dyfed nodded shallowly.

"Tell her he has imprisoned the elders," he slurred.

"It is a time of crisis for our city-state and our empire. We are under threat of attack. Yawgmoth has used his control of the armies to take command of the empire. He has dissolved

## J. Robert King

the council, has imprisoned the elders of the rebel city-states. If the rebel states attack, he might be forced to execute them."

"What does this have to do with me?"

Glacian mumbled, "Tell her she must do away with Yawgmoth—"

Rebbec shook her head violently. "We want you to take the elders to safety. There are nearly a hundred of them."

Dyfed's brow creased, and she tilted her head. "You want me to do what?"

Turning entirely away from her husband, Rebbec pleaded, "I know your power. I've stepped through the Blind Eternities with you. I know you can simply appear in the internment cave and sweep those hundred elders up in your power and carry them somewhere where they will be safe."

Incredulous, the planeswalker said, "I thought you were Yawgmoth's friends. You want me to deliver the captured leaders of the rebellion back to their armies?"

Rebbec frowned in consternation. "No. Take them to another world. Take them to one of your paradise planes, a place where they can live safely until the danger is past."

"They would be miserable. Not a one of them could build a lean-to, could start a fire. It would be placing babies in a wolf den."

"Goblins," interposed Glacian. "Tell her to take some of my goblins from the mana rig. They could be servants. They could build shelters and snare coneys. Yawgmoth will only kill them eventually anyway."

Rebbec blinked amazedly at her husband. "Glacian asks that you also take goblins to this paradise world, his goblins, who could serve the elders."

Dyfed hung her head and laughed. "You want me to carry a hundred elders and a hundred goblins to a paradise somewhere?"

Eyes pleading, Rebbec said, "You could do it with a mere thought. It is a small boon to grant the genius of Halcyon, the very man who first drew you here." Her eyes grew hard, and her



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voice dropped to a whisper. "Yawgmoth is my ruler, my friend—perhaps more. This is no betrayal, only an act of mercy—only the simple request of an infirm genius, who may himself be dying but wants others to live."

The irate edge was gone from Dyfed's gaze. Pushing past Rebbec, she approached the wheeled chair where Glacian sat. One slender hand descended to touch him, to spread flat across his phthisis-ravaged chest.

"Yes. I will do this for you, Glacian. I had forgotten who you were—who you are. It is a small favor, and I will do it for you."

Then, without moving a muscle, she was gone from the room. Goblins recoiled from the space where she had been.

Rebbec moved toward the wheeled chair, reflexively drawing up the robe to cover her mouth and nose.

"You've done a good thing today, husband. You've saved many lives."

He turned his face away from her, as though her words had been a slap.

"What is it?"

"That damned cloak over your mouth. Dyfed did not cover her mouth. She touched me."

"She's a planeswalker," Rebbec said.

"And you're immune." He still did not look at her.

"What if I'm not?"

"Daily you touch the temple powerstones. You could catch the disease from them as easily as from me."

Slowly lowering the edge of the cloak, Rebbec approached the chair.

"You think I am repulsive."

A look of dread flashed across her face. "No. I find the disease repulsive—"

"I am the disease. That's all I am anymore."

Rebbec reached her bare hand out just as Dyfed had. She set it, trembling, on the scabrous skin of Glacian's chest. Closing her eyes and swallowing, she left her hand there. Only then would he turn to look at her.

## J. Robert King

"You're in love with him. He's fooled even you. You're only waiting for me to die so that you can be with him."

"No," Rebbec said, withdrawing her hand. She stared, revulsion and love warring in her. With a swift motion, she bent and wrapped him in a strong embrace. "No, husband. We are soul mates. It's just the illness, and the war, and the upheaval. No. He hasn't fooled me. He will cure you. That's why I believe in him. Because he will cure you. He will cure all of us. And you and I will dance together in the Thran Temple when this bloody business is done."

"What's this!" came an imperious shout at the door. Yawgmoth strode across the floor toward Glacian and Rebbec.

She did not let go of her husband. She clung to him as though knowing this would be their final embrace.

Yawgmoth wrapped a powerful arm around her and yanked back. He couldn't budge her. He growled and pulled harder. His free hand peeled her fingers away from Glacian's back. Torn skin bled through the gown he wore.

"Let go! You're infecting yourself. You're killing yourself!" Yawgmoth shouted.

"No! Leave me alone!"

He tore her other hand loose, and black pus oozed beneath her fingernails.

"Look what you've done to yourself!"

Glacian riled, groaning in despair and agony.

"Look what you've done to your husband!"

"Let go of me!" Rebbec shouted, thrashing against his grip.

Yawgmoth ignored her struggles. He dragged her from Glacian's room even as her husband shouted slurred epithets behind them.

Though his arms were steel bands, Yawgmoth's voice was silken. "It's all been too much. I know. You've been brave these many years. You've watched as every method has failed to heal him. You love him still, even ravaged as he is—"

"Let me go—"



## *The Thran*

"—but think of Glacian. He doesn't want to jeopardize you. He doesn't want you to suffer as he is suffering." Yawgmooth violently kicked back the door to his laboratory and dragged Rebbec within. He hauled her past tables and implement racks to a cabinet where the serums were stocked. He flung back the doors of the cabinet, fetched up a bottle of alcohol, and pulled the cork with his teeth. "Glacian doesn't want anything to happen to you, and neither do I." He poured the stinging stuff liberally over her hands, arms, and chest. "This will kill any of the contagion that might have gotten onto you."

"Damn you! Damn you, Yawgmooth!"

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," he urged.

She was drenched, from fingertip to fingertip. Yawgmooth snatched up a jar of serum and a jar of something else. One-handed, he drew the mixtures into a needle bladder, wrestled his unhappy captive around to face him, and injected the solution into her arm. She clawed his chest for a moment before slumping into his arms.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh. That will help your body fight off any infection that might have gotten into you blood. It's all right. You'll be safe now. You won't get sick. I won't let you get sick."

Voice raw from screaming, Rebbec said, "Why don't you cure him? Why doesn't your serum work for my husband?"

In a desolated tone, Yawgmooth said, "I don't know. I honestly do not know. From the beginning, his case has been different."

"You've made it different. You don't want him to recover."

"Oh, I do, Rebbec," Yawgmooth soothed. "I do. I need him to be well. I need him to be able to fight me for your hand. I will not steal the wife of an invalid."

Rebbec pushed away from him and stared bleakly into his eyes. "Don't do this. Don't toy with me. I've been through too much."

"I know. You've been through too much. You've kept a vigil for seven years. I thought I was doing you a kindness to let him remain here, but he is always just out of reach. That is no

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kindness. The health corps will see to him now. They will take him to the quarantine caves. They have new, aggressive treatments—far better than these goblins and contraptions. They will care for him. They will heal him. I promise you that, Rebbec. And I have never broken my promises.”

“You will heal him?” A fragile light lit her eyes. “Tell me you will heal him.”

“I will heal him, Rebbec. I promise.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The elders were none too happy. They had been carried into paradise, but it was not their paradise. Salvation is a relative thing.

One would have thought that anywhere would have been better than where they had been—entombed alive in a dark cavern for three weeks. A trickling spring that ran along its base provided water for drinking, washing, and waste removal—such as it was. Clumps of faintly glowing mushrooms—and the blind cave crickets that sometimes appeared silhouetted on the mushrooms—were the main source of sustenance. Worse than all that was the knowledge that Yawgmoth had sealed them in there. The weight of his disapproval was as vast and inescapable as the mile of rock between them and the air of the upper world.

Compared to that place, this green and verdant land should have been paradise. Tall forests, broad planes, lush rivers—the land was bountiful and virgin. It was a whole world for them to explore, a pleasant place to wait out the war. Paradise, except for one fact: wilderness. The most important figures in the Thran Empire were reduced to squalid pioneers. They huddled together in filthy robes, worn to tatters in the last weeks. They were worse dressed, thinner, and more craven than the mana rig goblins that circulated among them.

“—could have conveyed us to anywhere on Dominaria,” railed Eldest Jameth, “but you choose to bring us here.”

“I could have left you to rot in that cave,” Dyfed pointed out flatly. “And this is only temporary—only until the war is



## The Thran

done and there is no more threat to you—and you are no more threat to the empire.”

“We demand that you return us to our nation,” the eldest said.

“You demand nothing,” snapped Dyfed. “For the time being, this is your nation. You can’t tell from here, but we’re on top of an inverted mountain. Just like your extrusion. It’ll keep you safe from the natives and they from you. These goblins will help you. Treat them well. They will have a much better sense than you of which plants are poisonous and which carnivores are dangerous. They will build shelters for you, gather food, serve as your personal servants, and all of it because Glacian asked them to. Make yourselves at home. I will fetch you when the war is done.” She turned from them, preparing to depart.

“Wait,” Eldest Jameth called out. “At least tell us the name of this place.”

“Call it what you want,” the planeswalker said simply. Just before winking from existence, she added, “The natives of this world call it Mercadia.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been a hellish descent. The rioters had destroyed Dugas’s elevator. Glacian descended the old-fashioned way—borne down the switchback path by a passel of goblins. Before and behind his pallet, health corps workers marched with swords and lanterns. Twice the bellows ceased their work, and the crew lowered Glacian to the path to effect repair. Each time, he fell unconscious before the mechanism could be repaired. Each time he awoke to tepid lantern light on jagged cave stone overhead.

At last, the descent was done. The path leveled and widened. Cold cave air gave over to the warm, stale scent of human breath in confined spaces. Led by the health corps, the goblins proceeded down a winding passage, past a series of side caves, and to the quarantine cave at their base. They shuffled beneath the archway and into a broad cavern.

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Glacian had expected the stench of rotting flesh. What he smelled was somehow worse, the harsh stink of cleansers.

The quarantine cave had been transformed since Yawgmoth's ascendance. Lanterns glowed throughout the vast chamber, its walls and floor scrubbed and polished until all filth was removed. The old shelves had been torn down, replaced by orderly stacks of whitewashed cells. They seemed almost white coffins, in which the ill could reside in complete isolation from powerstone radiation and cross-contamination. Each sarcophagus had a number, each a set of charts. White-garbed and masked health corps workers moved on catwalks among the racks of coffins.

Previously, the patients had been plague victims in quarantine. Now they were test subjects. The cleanness, the privacy, the attentive healers—these changes were not meant to assure comfort or decency or healing. They were meant to assure reliable results.

The goblins carried the pallet to the center of the complex. A white-suited man waited with a new set of charts.

"Hello, Glacian. Welcome to the quarantine caves of Halcyon. I received your write-up this morning. I've prepared an especially large healing capsule to accommodate your . . . apparatuses."

Lolling weakly on the pallet, Glacian barely managed to bring his head around and see the man who spoke to him.

"Not you," he gabbled. "Not Gix."





## Chapter 19

Rebbec descended toward the fifth aerial gate of Halcyon. She had designed it, a great eye-shaped passage with wide ramps rising from either side. A progression of shallow steps led up from the center. Each tread was wide enough to hold fifty dock workers abreast, each deep enough to allow three strides before the next rise.

The gate had been a fine design, but now it was being destroyed. Halcyte guards swarmed it, and in their midst—Yawgmoth.

The Lord of Halcyon stood atop the limestone arch. His robes of state were flung out on the wind. He watched workers haul steel cables through groaning pulleys. They struggled to hoist a brassy ray cannon atop the wall. This vast gun had cost the city a small fortune, and Yawgmoth had installed nine at each of the five gates. The weapons had come from Glacian's old sketchbooks, and Yawgmoth boasted that one of these could sink airships miles away. He had assured the city that these guns would make the city secure in case of invasion, and he had even offset the cost by shipping more such weapons, at a considerable markup, to the other four loyal city-states.

"A necessity . . . a necessity," Rebbec grouched as she strode up the spiral inner stair to the peak of the gateway. "Nothing

## J. Robert King

ugly is a necessity." It was one of her many credos belied by the last few years.

Rebbec reached the top of the arch. Yawgmoth stood close by. He smiled to see her—not her, but the ray cannon that settled onto the limestone wall before her. As the cables eased, Yawgmoth knelt beside the gleaming casing, running his fingers tenderly across it.

"Beautiful," he whispered excitedly. "I can't imagine anything more beautiful."

"How about a gate that isn't bristling with guns?" Rebbec asked, hands on her hips.

Yawgmoth looked up at her, dark amid the halo of her distant temple. "Hello, Rebbec. I can imagine one thing more beautiful than these—"

"What's next? Catapults on the council dome? Flamethrowers on the temple?"

He continued buffing the gun. His face reflected in distorted angles from its casing. "If you had designed these sites for defense as well as beauty, retrofits would not be necessary."

"Nothing ugly is necessary."

Yawgmoth stood, his features grave. He towered over the gun, the architect, over the whole lower city.

"You are wrong about that, Rebbec. Ugliness is necessary. We Thran weren't drawn upward by visions of beauty. We were impelled from below by ugliness. Craven lust, violent depravity—these drove us up into the light. The empire was forged in war, not peace. It rose from struggle, and another struggle is coming—an ugly, violent war that will drive us into divinity."

Rebbec stared into his eyes. That act alone was an exertion of will. His powerful figure was the black incarnation of all those animalistic forces he described. He was brutal and beautiful at once, apostate of all she once believed.

"Civil war, burning ships, fields of dead—is it worth it?"

He blinked, withdrawing for a moment into interior spaces. "I rose from lepers and plague victims to rule the empire. Glacian descended from glories into decay. Peace



## *The Thran*

brings phthisis—progressive degeneration. War brings phyresis—progressive generation. That's how we'll rise, Rebbec—impelled from below."

Rebbec shook her head, turning away.

Yawgmoth wrapped a powerful arm around her. "Your husband progresses well, I understand."

Mention of Glacian sent spiders of guilt creeping across Rebbec's scalp. She pulled away from him.

"It is quite a regimen you have him on. Skin grafts, needles in nerves, alcohol baths, leeches, plasters—"

"Health through struggle. We're approaching a final cure. Most of the patients are responding well. Even your husband, despite himself."

"He is in agony!"

"Of course. Without you . . ."

The air beside them shimmered with a sudden presence. The figure took form out of the clear sky. Dyfed suddenly stood there.

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked, a smile quirking her lips.

Yawgmoth turned toward Dyfed, an avid look in his eyes. "Have you found it?"

The woman's smile only deepened. "Yes. Would you like to come see?"

"Is it perfect?" Yawgmoth asked excitedly.

"Nine separate spheres, each with a unique ecology."

"Is it extensive?"

"The land space is as large as your empire was, before the rebellion—and with work it can be twice that or thrice that."

"Is it . . . beautiful?"

Dyfed's crossed her arms over her chest and canted her hips. "Do you want to come see it or not?"

"What's this about?" interrupted Rebbec.

Yawgmoth's eyes were feverish. "You spoke of ugliness—but let me show you what it all will be for." He extended his hand to her.

## J. Robert King

Rebbec wanted to refuse, but she could not—not anymore. No sooner had her hand settled in his powerful grasp than Yawgmoth turned and grasped Dyfed's hand.

"Take us there. Take us to paradise."

Without so much as a twitch of her eyes, Dyfed whisked them away through the racing distances. Her touch on Yawgmoth sent a glimmering envelope of power around him. It spread from his hand to Rebbec.

Terror filled her. She could not move, could not even gasp a breath. Across her skin, she felt the violent plucking of the space between worlds. It was as though locusts swarmed her, mandibles tearing at the mana membrane.

Then the chaos was gone. Dyfed stepped from the Blind Eternities and into a wide, green, and beautiful world.

The trio stood on a rocky outcrop. Below them lay a primeval forest, with tree trunks twenty feet wide and hundreds of feet tall. The tousled tops of ferns and cypress breathed easily in the blue winds of the place. A single broad channel broke the tree-tops, a massive and meandering river far below. Water moved, smooth and black, beneath the thick canopy, here and there reflecting scraps of sunlight on the fronds. Huge serpents coiled about stout boughs. The shriek of strange birds filled the air. Beyond the forest spread a verdant grassland. It reached a long, low rumple of gray mountains in the distance.

"It's beautiful," Rebbec found herself gasping.

Dyfed watched her, grinning. "More than beautiful. Bountiful and immense. Every Thran citizen—even the rebels and children—could be granted a thousand acres, and still the empire would own half the land. This is an uninhabited world—the smartest creature here has a brain the size of a chestnut. It is wide open for colonization."

"No war, no disease . . ." Rebbec said. "You have doubled the size of the empire without a single death."

Yawgmoth drew in a deep breath of fertile air. "First, I will bring all those with the phthisis here, away from powerstones and their killing auras." He looked fondly at Rebbec and drew



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her toward him. "I want you to design a new infirmary for that hillside there, above the river and just beyond the forest eaves. I want you to design a facility that will allow for our aggressive healing strategies but also provide the patients sunlight, fresh air, beautiful views. . . ."

She stared into his eyes as though into a sunrise. "Oh, Yawgmoth. It would heal them. I know it would. Just to be out of that cave would heal them. To be far away from the powerstones and to be out beneath the sun."

"I want the infirmary to do more than heal them. I want it to perfect them, Rebbec. I want it to strengthen them, cure them of mortality."

Doubt darkened Rebbec's eyes. "You want it to do what?"

A quizzical look filled his face. "You're the one who created the architecture of ascension. You're the one who designed a temple that could be entered only by leaving the world."

"Yes, but all that is about aspiring to divinity, being molded after its beauty and perfection—being shaped by it but not becoming it. Can we truly make ourselves gods?"

Dyfed laughed. "It is easily enough done."

She strode toward the other two, gripped their hands, and then stepped from the rocky ridge where they had stood. The dimensions closed in around them like a flower caught suddenly by nightfall. When it opened again, they stood in a very different place.

Instead of a blue and over-spreading sky, there was a lofty ceiling of graceful metal beams. Gigantic rivets and bolts in the fan vault formed regular constellations. Pillars many miles high connected the ceiling to the floor. At the base of these opened silvery smokestacks, though no soot issued from them. A mirror-bright floor stretched at their feet. It reflected the distant ceiling. This was a world of silver and steel, without hint of tarnish or rust. Without sun or moon or stars, the metallic world was lit only by the infinitely reflected glow of the metal itself.

Rebbec muttered. "What is this place? Where are we?"

## J. Robert King

"This is the same world," Dyfed said, "but a different sphere. The first sphere, where we stood before, lies on the outside. This second sphere is nested in the first. These are what your poets of old called the foundations of the world."

Rebbec pointed toward the ceiling. "The world we just left . . . it is up there?"

Dyfed merely nodded.

"These . . . immense columns . . . the fan vaults above . . . they support the weight of a world?" gabbled Rebbec.

"Yes," Dyfed said.

Rebbec slumped, faint, against Yawgmoth.

He smiled brightly. "She is an architect. She knows the load equations, knows what it would take to construct a world like this."

Rebbec whispered, "The foundations of the world . . ."

"In more ways than one," Dyfed responded. "Not only do these columns uphold that world above, but this sphere of metal is the origin of everything you see above."

Rebbec shook her head. "How can this place have given birth to that place? There is no food, no water, no sunlight. Nothing could live here."

Dyfed pointed outward along the mirror floor.

In the dim light, something moved, many somethings. The creatures themselves were composed of polished metal, and they scuttled in a broad ant swarm. Some had the configuration of ants. Others were centipedal. More still had spidery designs or figures unlike any biological creature. They approached the three invaders with something like hunger.

"What are they?" Rebbec asked.

"Prototypes. Experiments. You might consider them highly advanced machines or nascent creatures. They were devised here. This is a laboratory of sorts, one devoid of the contamination of biological life. These creatures are mechanisms, yes. But later models—better models—became the serpents in the world above."

"They were mechanisms?" Rebbec asked. "They were machines?"



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"Living machines," Dyfed corrected. "They breathe. They eat. They reproduce. They evolve. They die. Just because their origins are in artifice rather than biology does not mean they are not alive. Though metallic, their flesh and the foliage of the plants they eat could nourish you, Rebbec, and you—in turn—could nourish them."

Yawgmoth's smile only deepened. "You've found us not only a primeval empire. You've found us a storehouse of inventions. Won't Glacian be happy, Rebbec?"

"Not if we get eaten," she said nervously as the metal beasts converged on them.

Dyfed reached for her companions. Even as she laid hold of them, the gigantic insects arrived. Antennae sparked with power, claws swept inward, mandibles clamped on necks—necks that had faded from being.

The three tumbled through the spaces between worlds and then arrived in a world even stranger than the last two.

It was a labyrinth of pipes. Some were miles wide. Others were as wide as Rebbec's fingers. They coiled and twisted through the dark distances of that sphere. Many glowed with internal heat, as though they conveyed magma. A few oozed tarry liquids. A coil of purple ceramic pipe gurgled with descending oceans. It was a noisy space—huge and forbidding.

"It is the same world, but a sphere deeper," Rebbec said.

"You're catching on," Dyfed said. "Here all of the elements of the other planes are routed and channeled. It is the vast mechanism that replicates the workings of a natural world."

Rebbec's panting slowed. She stared in dull realization. "If this world is all artifice . . . who is its creator?" She looked up at Dyfed. "You?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Though I thank you for the compliment. No. This place was created by an ancient and powerful planeswalker. It was his life's work."

"Then how can you just give it away?" she asked. "If this isn't yours, if it is the magnum opus of some ancient planeswalker, how can you simply cede it to the empire?"

## J. Robert King

"Shall I show you?" Dyfed asked, grasping Rebbec's hand and reaching for Yawgmoth's.

He withdrew his grip. "First show us the rest. You'd said there were nine spheres here, nested one within the others."

"Yes, one for each city-state and one for Yawgmoth."

"Then let's see the rest."

"They get darker from here on out—the next one is the furnace level, with mile-high incinerators not working right now. There are massive refinery stacks and metal mills. Then there's the fifth sphere, just a sea of oil. There's one down there that is hotter than a sun. Not very welcoming," she said, then snatched up his hand. "But the ninth sphere—"

This time, the ragged blackness between worlds was not as terrifying as the place they stepped into.

It was utterly dark and still. The air stank of rotting flesh. Even in the choking murk, Rebbec could sense that this sphere was very small—only as large as Yawgmoth's laboratory in the infirmary. With the soft ooze beneath her feet, she knew that most of the sphere was filled with the corpse of whatever had dwelt here.

"This is welcoming?" Rebbec gasped out, clutching a hand over her mouth.

"In a way, yes," Dyfed responded. "The master of this place died a month ago. It will slowly die after him. Unless, of course, the world welcomes us to take the master's place." She awakened a light above her outstretched hand. The glow splashed across the great carcass.

"A dragon," Rebbec gasped out. She stood on the creature's decaying hip. Desiccated scales curled like autumn leaves around her feet. Beneath it, putrid meat clung to slumped bones. She looked for clear ground on which to stand, but the dead dragon took up the whole sphere. "A dragon made this all?"

From where she stood, atop the leathery wreck of one wing, Dyfed said, "Yes. A dragon was his favorite form. It is why the first sphere is filled with serpents—made in his own image. But in truth, his original figure was human." She waved her hand.



## The Thran

There, in the putrid air between them, a ghostly face formed—the vision of a man. He seemed an elderly Glacian, his fine features wreathed in a white beard and shocks of hair.

“From here he could control the whole plane?” Yawgmoth asked intently.

“Yes,” Dyfed answered.

“If we cleared his corpse away, I could control it from here?” he persisted.

“Yes. Eight spheres for the city-states and the ninth sphere for Yawgmoth.”

“If you link this plane to a powerstone, you can use it to create a permanent portal from Halcyon?”

“That is the plan,” Dyfed affirmed.

Yawgmoth smiled, his eyes swimming with dreams. “It will be a world of progressive generation—of phyresis. It will be a world called Phyrexia.”



## Chapter 20

The city was prepared for war. Ray cannons surmounted each of the five aerial gates. A great spherical boulder was positioned to close the ground gate. Ballistae along the rest of the wall bore powerstone-tipped bolts that could shatter an enemy ship's engine core. New hyperbolic mirrors hung from each side of the extrusion, with crews trained to focus mirror-array beams on ground armies. Every day, more caravels were requisitioned and retrofitted for air-to-air and air-to-ground combat. The Halcyte guard had doubled in size, each soldier groomed for fanatical loyalty and trained in the use of Glacian's arsenal of new weaponry. The health corps were equally numerous, well equipped, and driven. They moved among the populace administering serum, clearing out the final few cases of phthisis, and stockpiling contagions for use in strafing runs against the invaders. Halcyon's artificers worked day and night on designs Glacian had left for a powerstone charging machine. When activated, such a device would charge an empty powerstone, absorbing the life force of every plant, animal, and soldier in a large radius.

Halcyon was not the only city braced for siege. The four other loyal city-states—Nyoron, Seaton, Phoenon, and Orleason—were similarly accoutered and entrenched. Each could withstand the full fury of the Thran Alliance—as the barbarians



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called their motley force. The Thran Alliance wanted Halcyon and her champion, Yawgmoth. They would send only token forces at the other city-states. Once those forces were overrun, Yawgmoth would call his loyal eugenicist soldiers from the cities to converge on the barbarian army. The war was as good as won already.

Yawgmoth's greatest weapon of all was the single powerstone he held in his hand. The size of two clenched fists, the crystal was perfectly formed. Its facets were flawless and manifold. Its core was as dark as the Blind Eternities. This crystal would capture the essence of his paradise world and carry it into the Caves of the Damned. There the stone would be split, creating a permanent portal from Dominaria to Phyrexia.

Dyfed stood beside him in the core of Phyrexia. The stench of death was gone. The oozy corpse had been cleared away. No trace of the dragon's crumbling bulk remained. Yawgmoth and his healing corps had meticulously catalogued each tissue. Bits of the planeswalking beast filled the old infirmary in the city. The sphere it had ruled had been scoured. Not a fragment of the world's former master remained. Yawgmoth was the master of Phyrexia now.

"You're certain you want to perform the ritual?" Dyfed asked. "A mortal man might not survive the onrush of energies. Only a planeswalker—"

"Planeswalkers, mortals . . ." Yawgmoth dismissed. "I have dissected the planeswalker who ruled here. I've peered into every tissue, parsed every organ. There was not a single mystic part. He was a biologic creature, as am I. It was this chamber that made him a god, and this chamber will make me its god also. I will survive."

"How can you know that?"

"I have felt it," Yawgmoth replied. His voice rang with metallic grandeur as he paced outward along the sphere. He walked until he stood on one curved wall, perpendicular to Dyfed. He crouched, his hand fondly tracing across the inner belly of the sphere. "I felt it. As I tricked each scale free of the

## J. Robert King

dead creature, as I conveyed each sinew outward, I felt the hunger of the chamber grow. Piece by piece, it lost its last master. Piece by piece, it has accepted me as its new master."

Dyfed crossed arms over her chest. "You will be a conduit for every energy in the world. Actuality and potentiality will pass through you to imprint the stone. Once begun, the power surge will continue to completion—even if you are burned away in the process."

"I have already become a conduit for these energies. I can see through the eyes of the serpents on the first sphere. I can sense each ember lying dormant in the fourth-level furnaces. I can course along the crystalline base of the oil sea. I can make the world breathe and cease breathing."

"But you aren't a planeswalker, Yawgmoth," Dyfed reminded.

Yawgmoth's eyes flashed, and he stood. "I will become one."

"You cannot become one," Dyfed said. "It is something a person is born with. It is a seed of greatness. Only one in a billion has it. The seed is not in you."

"How do you know?" Yawgmoth demanded, striding down the wall toward her.

"Because planeswalkers can sense it in others. It is a smell of destiny."

Yawgmoth's lips drew to a straight, white line. His eyelids quivered tautly. "You are wrong about me. I am destiny incarnate. I will change the world for all time. I will change the Multiverse."

Dyfed flashed a cocksure grin. "All right. You want to be a god. Let's see how well you do. I'll be back to pick up the stone—if you survive." She disappeared, leaving Yawgmoth alone in the inner sanctum.

The moment she was gone, the chamber took hold of him. There was no physical change. The sphere remained intact, but muscles of magic converged around him and lifted him high. It was like being caught in the convulsion of a gigantic heart. The intense pressure burst his mind wide open. He spewed out through the arteries and vessels of the world. He moved through



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the labyrinth of pipes on the third sphere. His consciousness flowed through serpent waters and leapt among flea machines. Thoughts tricked along electrical conduits and rolled through cascades of oil. Forests became neural networks. Fault lines became creaking joints. Moraines became muscles.

His former body was but a ruptured skin, and then even less than that—not even a memory. The world was his body. It had always been. It would always be. The cosmologies of human minds were simplistic figures drawn in dirt. Immutable morality became an ooze of chemicals across cell membranes. No single thought held before that moment was large enough or loud enough or true enough to remain in Yawgmoth's transformed mind. Every mote of dust was part of him, every creature was his to command. He could comprehend the whole in a single thought and could sense any single particle by merely willing it.

He breathed. The world breathed. Ten thousand furnaces fired on the fourth level. Soot rolled from a hundred thousand chimneys on the second. The sun intensified above the first. Cyclones spawned and danced across the world, tickling it savagely. A sudden terror welled in every beast and plant across the spheres, a terror that gave way in the next moments to trembling ecstasy.

They knew. The dying world knew it was no longer dying.  
*We are alive. We are alive! WE ARE ALIVE!*

It was recognition and adulation and obeisance all in one.

The world flooded through him and into the crystal he held. All that was real etched its perfect replica there.

Suddenly, the world retreated around Yawgmoth. He shrank. The sensation was like plummeting from a great height. The mind that moments before had comprehended a whole universe now resided in the minuscule brain pan of a normal man. Something had intruded between the god and his cosmos—something or someone.

He realized his hands were empty. The powerstone was gone. Yawgmoth staggered, going dizzily to his knees.

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"You needn't bow before me," Dyfed quipped, suddenly beside him. "A simple thanks would be enough."

Gritting his teeth, Yawgmoth gasped, "I had no intention of bowing before you."

"You survived, Yawgmoth," Dyfed said evenly. "That is good. I've come to fetch you. The permanent portal is open. I cracked the stone atop a mirror pedestal. Nothing could close the portal except an identical charged powerstone placed on the pedestal." She offered him a hand, and he took it.

Before he could rise, Dyfed pulled him away from the world. They sailed through empty spaces—the planeswalker tall and regal, and the erstwhile god crouched and dizzy. In moments, they arrived on the first sphere. The Blind Eternities fell away, leaving Yawgmoth and Dyfed to stand on the grassy plains beside the gorge forest. Just before them yawned a large, round doorway into darkness.

Dyfed gestured through it. "Beyond lie the Caves of the Damned."

Letting go of her hand, Yawgmoth strode through the scintillating curtain of darkness. He stepped out into a night-black cave.

Directly before Yawgmoth stood the pedestal Dyfed had spoken of—a low platform edged by mirrors. The light of Phyrexia shone dazzlingly from it. On the far side of the pedestal sloped a large book made of steel and glass. It was carved with strange glyphs—planeswalker spells that anchored the portal in space and time. The whole assemblage was connected with radiating wires to the ceiling of the cave.

It was an elaborate contraption, but it had a simple purpose—to open a permanent portal between Dominaria and Phyrexia. The mirror pedestal was a giant lock, and in the midst of its wires lay the key—the broken powerstone. Though Yawgmoth had once infused that stone with the essence of a whole world, the crystal now lay black and empty in ragged halves atop the pedestal.

Yawgmoth reached past the wires. He touched the stones and felt their smoldering heat. A few final sparks of power



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jittered along edges of crystal. Taking a deep breath, he lifted the two halves of the sundered crystal. There was no sense allowing someone to duplicate the stone and close the portal. Yawgmooth placed the halves in a pocket of his robe. He would have to hide these husks in a safe place.

"A safe place . . ." A sharp-toothed smile broke across his face.

There came a whispering moan from the cave beyond. Yawgmooth lifted his head and made out the source of the sound.

The next cavern was crowded wall to wall with watchful, fearful faces. They peered out of utter darkness. Their eyes squinted against the glow that enveloped him. Beneath slitted eyes were cheeks ravaged in phthisis. Patients lay in their treatment capsules—a cemetery of open caskets, the dead awaiting resurrection. Among the capsules stood armored and veiled health corps workers. They were accoutered in the same smooth white metal as the capsules. Patients and healers waited in silence. They waited to enter the sun-bright door.

Yawgmooth lifted his hands before them. He shouted in a voice that was half laugh, "Welcome, my children! Welcome to Phyrexia!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmooth was a study in long-suffering sympathy as he sat on the metal catwalk beside Glacian's healing capsule. Above the white scarf that protected mouth and nose, Yawgmooth's eyes were grim slits. His hands hung in resignation between his knees, and he stared at the emptied frameworks all around him. The quarantine cave had been vacated of all its other patients and seclusion caskets. Every last one was en route to the new infirmary. Every last one except Glacian.

"—says he is no longer willing to submit to these . . . unusual . . . procedures," Rebbec delicately translated to Yawgmooth. She, too, wore a mask to protect her from the contagious man. "He says he is done with skin grafts and needles and . . . enzymatic salves."

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"He would be dead were it not for them," Yawgmooth objected, eyes fixed on the healer's bag at his feet.

"You and your eugenicist monsters!" slurred Glacian nonsensically. "You and your mad scientists! I've seen the hack-sawed limbs. I've seen the faces stitched back together. I've seen the abominations you hide away in these living sarcophagi!"

"He says he's finished with the healing corps. He says he doesn't want any more treatments. He says he wants his machines hooked back up," Rebbec said.

"His machines are powerstone-driven," Yawgmooth protested. "They were killing him. Haven't you told him about the new infirmary? Haven't you told him about the new world?"

Exasperation pinched Rebbec's face. "Of course I've told him. He doesn't believe it. He thinks it's just another of your tricks."

Yawgmooth stood suddenly, looming over the figure lying—leprous and pathetic—within the treatment capsule.

"There are oil baths. Glistening oil. It soaks into skin and reconstitutes it. It gets into the blood and helps to draw powerstone radiation away from tissues. There are new procedures. Some patients are stronger than ever before. There is even a promising new therapy—implanting an uncharged powerstone into the thigh muscle to draw excess energies into it. Those with the implants have been virtually healed. Their own immune systems are redoubled. They are growing new skin, new muscle, new tissues. Some are even getting taller—"

"No more!" hissed Glacian. "You've already dragged me down to this crypt. You've already flayed my life away tissue by tissue. You can't take me to another world and make me a monstrosity!"

"He says he doesn't want to go," Rebbec said.

Yawgmooth stared a moment longer at the ruin of scabs and scales within the hermetic folds of the capsule.

"Well, I was going to wait until you were in the infirmary to tell you the good news."

"What good news?" Rebbec asked.



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Yawgmooth glanced at her. "I think I might have discovered why your husband hasn't responded to any of the treatments that have worked for others."

"Don't listen to him," growled Glacian. "He has no cures. Only death!"

"Hush. I want to hear this!" she told him. "What is it, Yawgmooth? What have you found?"

"Nothing! He's found nothing!"

"It goes back to the infection. He was stabbed by Gix with a charged powerstone."

Glacian spluttered, "Yes! Gix! Your henchman!"

"Hush," Rebbec insisted.

"And the powerstone imploded shortly after it was removed from the wound," Yawgmooth continued. "It was damaged in the attack. A sliver of that stone might remain in him, a charged sliver. Perhaps that is why his degeneration has continued. The sliver is contaminating him. If I could just reopen the wound and remove it—"

"There is no sliver!" Glacian roared.

Rebbec looked at Yawgmooth, her eyes searching. "You really think this is true? You really think a hunk of charged stone remains in him? You really think that removing it could make him better?"

Yawgmooth's eyes were utterly serious. "I do."

Drawing a deep breath, Rebbec whispered, "I don't want him to feel any pain."

Yawgmooth nodded. He reached into his bag of implements, slipped gloves onto his hands, and pulled forth a readied needle bladder. With a swift, expert motion, he jabbed the needle into Glacian's hip and squeezed.

"I can't believe you let him—" Glacian slumped, as if dead, his eyes rolling back in lidless sockets.

Rebbec released a small cry and leaned over her husband's face. Her fingers hovered fretfully just above his ravaged features. She wanted to close those rolling eyes—could not stand the look of them—but she knew better than to touch him.

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Meanwhile, Yawgmooth busied himself over the scar on Glacian's abdomen. The wound had closed and reopened numerous times over the years, and it cracked like a milkweed pod splitting open. Yawgmooth pulled, revealing a mounded bolus of pus. It was packed and curdy beneath the infected spot.

"I'll have to widen the cut," Yawgmooth said.

Rebbec turned her eyes away. "Whatever you need to do." She stooped to pull another pair of gloves from the medical bag and donned them. Gently closing her husband's eyes, she caressed his scaling face. Soft tears dropped onto his pillow. "It's going to be all right, my love. He's going to heal you. He's going to heal us all."

Yawgmooth worked busily. He was gingerly removing chunks of white-and-red fibrous material from the wound. The pocket of infection had formed beneath the muscular wall of Glacian's abdomen, packed in beside his internal organs. Yawgmooth scooped the last of the material free, snatched up a fistful of gauze, doused it with alcohol, and swabbed out the interior of the bolus.

Despite the tranquilizer, Glacian bucked in the healing capsule.

Rebbec hugged his jiggling head and whispered soothing words.

Yawgmooth finished with the gauze. Rebbec glimpsed a large powerstone in his hand—perhaps a light source—and then Yawgmooth craned over the suppurating sore, peering in. He gave a small gasp of discovery and seemed to reach one arm in, almost to the elbow. When he drew it out, blood streamed along the hairs of his arm and beneath the insufficient glove. Between two fingers of the glove, he clasped a glowing sliver of powerstone. Its gleam was dimmed beneath a sinewy capsule that had grown around it. Sanguine mucus encased the sliver. Through its sheath, the crystal glowed.

"This is it," he said. "This is what has been killing your husband."



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Rebbec stared at the flesh-encapsulated stone. Hatred and hope warred in her eyes.

"He'll get better now, you watch," Yawgmoth said as he set aside the sliver. Already, he had pulled a needle from his pack, threaded it, and was stitching up the wound. "You watch."



## Chapter 21

Yawgmoth was clutched in the heart of his world, soul and essence transformed. He was not simply in the heart of it, but in every extremity as well. He was the blood of it. His consciousness coursed potently out through his world. It was his love, this place—this beautiful, vast, powerful place. It loved him as well. They were one, he secure within the core of the world, and the world enlivened by the aching ecstasy of him.

He loved the coiling hillsides of the first level, the serpents that wove themselves among the sinews of the land, the snaking rivers, the scaly leaves, the lithe and curving backbones of the hills. . . .

He loved the vast new infirmary, taking shape even that moment as his mind breathed through its winding halls. Rebbec had done well. Her building designs had instinctively captured the heart of the place. Unlike her Halcyon designs, which strained toward the sky in futile longing, these structures melded with the ground. There was no longer need of ascension. Paradise lay all around. The great hall of the infirmary had the tapered form of a lizard's ribcage, with slender arches meeting overhead in a long and sinuous vault. The phthitics eating within were like creatures living in the belly of a great beast—and so they were: the great, benevolent, bountiful beast Yawgmoth. Their healing capsules were no longer caskets for the living dead. Now the



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white chambers lay stacked and decorous beside the infirmary, eggs in a serpent's nest. The folk within, like wurmlings growing fangs and wings, were being healed of their phthisis.

He loved those folk best of all. Newts, he called them playfully. They seemed to him nascent salamanders, smooth skinned and placid. Nine hundred and ninety souls so far, the human inhabitants of the world. He sensed every last one of them and could enter their minds and hearts through the powerstones residing in their thigh muscles. Those stones healed the folk. Through the stones, Yawgmoth healed them, strengthened them, improved them. Their capsules infused them with enzymes and hormones. The health corps workers reshaped them through aggressive therapies and bold surgeries. They were reshaped by the loving will of their creator toward new beings.

Daily, more patients arrived from Halcyon. Daily, more egg capsules mounded atop the nest beside the infirmary. Daily, a select few newt capsules traveled down the pipe-work of the spheres to the fourth level. In new laboratories and aisles of glistening-oil vats, their flesh would there be sampled. They would contribute what was best in their makeup toward the hope of a powerful hybrid of humanity. The elite of Yawgmoth's healing corps oversaw these vats, priests of the new faith of phyresis.

The first fruits of their labors were appearing above. The newts in their capsules were changing. Their skin thickened, their muscles hypertrophied, their hair grew black and barbed, their fingernails curved into near claws, their eye orbits widened and the orbs within enlarged, their jaws extended, and their teeth grew. The vestigial muscles that once turned ears toward distant sounds and closed nostrils to sloshing oceans thickened and reinitiated their ancient work. Yawgmoth had taken the human refuse of Halcyon and made them stronger, taller, abler than the finest warriors in the world above. He loved them, and they loved him. He was within each of them, and his vitality brought them to life. Daily, more arrived.

This day, something else arrived—unwanted news.

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It was distressing to *hear* news, not simply to *know* it. He knew the mind of every resident of Phyrexia—all who bore powerstones within them—but the person who brought the news did not bear such a stone. Yawgmoth had to hear her voice filtered through the health corps worker she addressed.

"I must speak to Yawgmoth himself," she was saying.

The worker stared down at her through the slit-eyed mask he wore. His own voice echoed hollowly in the armor.

"No one speaks to Yawgmoth himself."

"I built these buildings! My husband designed your blasted armor!" she said through gritted teeth. She was always so beautiful, this fiery little woman. "Take me to speak to him."

The healer began another off-putting response, but Yawgmoth's own voice rose through him, took hold of his throat like a fist.

"Speak, Rebbec. I hear you. To speak to this man is to speak to me."

She blinked, anger giving way to suspicion, and then to fear. "Yawgmoth?"

"It is I. Speak."

"Terrible news. A massive attack has landed at Orleason. The city fell in a day. The artificers within betrayed the loyal forces. Now all the city's weapons and ships and artifact warriors are in the hands of the Thran Alliance."

"When did this happen?"

"A month ago, though word has only just reached us. The Orleason messenger corps was slain first, to prevent communications. The allied nations have landed and are marching inland. Even now, they lay siege to Phoenon. It is expected to fall too. If it does, six of the eight city states will be allied to the invaders. Phoenon has an army of mechanize mantis warriors."

Yawgmoth hated when the concerns of the over-world intruded on his paradise. Even grave matters seemed but niggling details to the god-mind he became in Phyrexia. He had allowed lieutenants—as loyal and ruthless as Gix himself—to



handle most threats to his rule, but this required his immediate attention.

"Did you hear what I said?" Rebbec asked.

"Are the stone-chargers perfected?"

"Stone-chargers?"

Yawgmoth sighed, though it was the armored healer who released the breath. "The mechanisms that charge powerstones by drawing the life from the land."

"Oh—" Rebbec said. "No. The mana rig teams have devised implosion devices that crack stones open to suck in whatever is around them. They are ready, some hundred of them."

"I'm not talking of them. A single stone-charger would slay as many soldiers as a thousand implosion devices."

"No," Rebbec said flatly. "The chargers aren't ready."

"Then it will be an air battle—our war caravels against theirs. We'll summon the airships of Nyoron and Seaton to meet us over Phoenon. If we can cripple the invaders' sky forces, we can open up their ground units for bombardment. By then, the stone-chargers will be ready."

"They might not be," Rebbec warned. "There are certain practical limits—"

"They will be," Yawgmoth said with the guard's voice. "I'll have to command the aerial battle personally."

"I want to go too," Rebbec said stolidly.

It was as though he had planted that thought in her head.

"Yes, Rebbec," he said. "You shall go too."

\* \* \* \* \*

"There it is," Yawgmoth said as the command cruiser topped a jagged line of mountains. "Douse lights!"

The cruiser went black. Canvas airfoils rattled quietly in the dark. As the communicator sent the command back among the gunships and war caravels, they winked away as well. Only the orange glimmer of their powerstone engines showed up against the night. A much different glow lit the land ahead.

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"There it is, or, perhaps, there it *was*."

Atop the distant mountains, fires glowed. Columns of flame stood amid ruined buildings and staved walls. Minute figures in savage armor moved among the ruins. Black smoke deepened the darkness above the one-time city. Flashes of fire cast demonic gleams across rolling bellies of soot. Amid the filthy clouds above the city lingered solid forms—an armada of ships docked beside the captured Phoenon. The fact that those ships remained there, moored gunwale to gunwale, was a good sign. The Thran Alliance thought they had nothing to fear.

Yawgmoth smiled. His own strike force—the Phyrexian armada—had been swift and thorough. Not a single Thran sentry had gotten word back of the coming attack. Soon the Thran fleet would be as ravaged as the city.

"Phoenon," Rebbec said beside Yawgmoth. She stared out at the fiery ruins. Once this mountain-fast metropolis had been the most ancient, second richest, and third most populous city-state in the empire. Now it was a smoldering stump. "At least there was a fight here. At least the people resisted. The city did not fall to betrayal, as Orleason did."

"They denied the invaders ships and soldiers, but still, they fell," Yawgmoth muttered in wind over the cruiser's rail. "They fell."

Rebbec cast her glance astern. Nine sleek gunboats trailed the cruiser. They jagged along, as quiet and strange as bats. Beyond them, the massed air armada of Halcyon, Nyoron, and Seaton flew—ram ships, war caravels, and bombers.

"What are you going to do? Send the gunboats in for a surprise attack?"

"We're all going in," Yawgmoth responded. He turned to the communications officer. "Order the captains full ahead. Tell them to lay in a course just beneath the enemy ships."

"Beneath?" the officer asked.

"Beneath. We're going to rip the belly out of the moored armada. Order the gunners to train the ray cannons directly upward."



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The communications officer worked feverishly at a power-stone console.

"Tell the captains to bunch around the command cruiser in tight formation. We don't want to be stretched out in a line when ships start falling. Order the ram ships to bring up the rear and engage once the rest of us are safely past. Send the bombers out over the city and tell them to loose their implosion devices."

Even in the murk, Rebbec's wide eyes and knotted brow were visible. "Over the city?"

"None of our folk are left alive in there. Only invaders and traitors. Their army will be there, looting and raping and murdering."

"If they are raping and murdering, some of our folk still live—"

"Perhaps they would have fought harder if they had known what I would do. Perhaps the folk of Nyoron and Seaton will fight harder knowing what I will do."

There was no more time for discussion. The vast black stretches of mountain had fallen away beneath the swooping craft. War caravels nudged up alongside the command cruiser. Gunboats bobbed in the interstices. Their small engines sent a candle-glow across the polished hulls of the larger ships. Ray cannons stood upright above-decks, poised to crack open the hulls of Thran vessels. Ram ships brought up the rear of the contingent, and bombers peeled away into the darkness, soaring toward the smoking city.

The moored fleet of the Thran Alliance hovered just ahead, just above them. It was massive. Twenty cruisers, fifty war caravels, and perhaps a hundred smaller craft. Despite their numbers, they all boasted old-fashioned bombards. These craft were designed to unleash a leisurely and leveling rain on a city from miles above, or lie side-on other ships at close range. Since most were also sea-going vessels, their hulls were solid wood and held neither guns nor watchmen. Smooth, blind, and undefended. The ships clustered there like fat grapes hanging from a lofty arbor.

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"Ripe for the plucking," Yawgmooth said. One hand clutched the rail as the other lifted to prepare the fire signal. The communications officer prepared the same message.

A final rill of mountain slipped away beneath the dark fleet. Their engine lights splashed momentarily across the peak as they passed. Then the vessels slipped into the valley beyond. The city was a vast and ragged scab at the center of that valley. The last ram ships cleared the lip of the valley and gave a final thrust of speed. Faint as dusk-light, the engine cast a glow across the ridge.

An alarm bell clanged ahead. Lanterns winked awake along the rail of the nearest Thran ship. Cries went up, audible even on the torrid wind.

It little mattered. Before a single invader could raise a weapon, Yawgmooth's Phyrexian armada shrieked beneath the flotilla.

He dropped his hand, signaling and ordering, "Fire at will!"

Ray cannons ignited. Triangular wedges of gold and green leaked from the casements and splashed across the darkened deck. Columns of pure energy vaulted up. Ram-rod straight, the blasts rose to crash audibly against the hulls. Eight-inch-thick wood incinerated in an eye blink. Twenty-foot-long voids were raked open in the ship's hulls. Things rained out—hewn and smoldering things and hewn and smoldering bodies. Where the bolts weren't spent, they vaulted through the bilge and hold and cabins into engine rooms. Slaughter.

Rebbec crouched at the rail, watching in terror as the Phyrexian armada vaulted beneath the Thran fleet. Debris hailed down from shattered hulls and battered the decks of Phyrexian ships. Chunks of red-hot metal skittered over planks. Burning wood cascaded. To starboard, a hunk of hull crashed atop a Phyrexian gunboat. The vessel flared once as its engine went critical. It fell like a comet from the sky. To port, grain sacks tumbled from a ruined supply boat. They struck a Phyrexian caravel passing beneath and exploded in choking clouds of flour.

Something heavy and wet thumped the deck just behind Rebbec, a man—or half of one. He was gone above the waist,



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his bowel cauterized in place. The remains slid and tumbled across the rushing deck, as though the legs hoped to run away.

How could the Phyrexian armada survive this killing hail?

Rebbec cringed, turning her gaze fore. Just ahead, a great Thran behemoth listed massively and horribly.

"Split the armada! Evade!" Yawgmoth ordered. The command cruiser slid from beneath the Thran caravel just as it jolted down ten feet. Crew spilled from the tilted deck.

"They're losing lift!" Rebbec shouted, looking back over the bow.

Huge and shuddering, the ship plunged among the rushing tide of Phyrexian ships. Two gunboats impacted it and disintegrated. A third caromed from its wheeling hull. A Phyrexian caravel cracked into the Thran gunwale and clove a trough down to its chine boards. Another of Yawgmoth's ships would have struck it head-on, except that the bow gunner flipped his cannon down and blasted a passage through.

Mantled in shattered masts and tangled spars, the Thran ship keeled over and plummeted toward the darkness beyond the city. Crew, equipment, and provisions tumbled out of it like pepper from a spinning mill. The ship struck ground in the midst of encamped Thran armies. The powerstone core split and went critical. Its explosion was unheard amid the firestorm of ray cannons, but the glare of it lit up the vast floating belly of the Thran armada.

"Ripe for the picking!" Yawgmoth shrieked in exultation.

Another Thran caravel plunged. It dropped suddenly, as if the cord that held it aloft had been sliced. It tore through a swarm of Phyrexian ships, dragging three small gunboats with it. A fourth clipped the rigging, spun wildly, and impacted another Thran ship, ripping it in half. Sparking and hissing, the severed sections tipped away from each other and roared away.

Three more craft went down in the next seconds. Twenty more in the next minutes. Phyrexian ships dodged most of them and tore the guts out of more. Yawgmoth carved an

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avenue of destruction beneath the invader's fleet. The sky was falling. Thran ships dropped atop Thran troops. Rock blasted out in a slaying rain. Soldiers tumbled into riven craters. The chasm cut through the sky above was cut below through flesh and rocky earth.

Rebbec clung to the rail. "Why did I think I had to come?"

The worst sight of all came from the ruined city. While falling ships destroyed the army they had been meant to protect, implosion bombs ripped apart the remains of Phoenon. Each bomber left long trails of pulverized rock and bone and flesh. Everywhere within the walls, white blasts crisscrossed. Roofs and walls tumbled into the sucking voids where the powerstones cracked. Orange fires belched up from whatever was left to burn. Red flames leapt from the shoulders of those caught in the blaze. They stumbled and flailed until clothes and skin and muscle were burned away and only dead bone remained to tumble to the ground.

"The cannons are nearly depleted," reported the gunnery ensign.

"Increase speed!" Yawgmoth shouted.

The Phyrexian armada roared faster. Three caravels, one heavy cruiser, and a score of small gunboats had gone down with stricken Thran ships.

"Fire to depletion!" Yawgmoth ordered. "Summon the bombers! Best speed to Halcyon."

The cruiser gave a shuddering groan as the final charges of light spasmed from the cannons. One by one, they issued gusts of gray smoke. The cannon cores went dark. Only the roaring wind remained.

Yawgmoth's cruiser soared out from beneath the Thran armada. His fleet followed. Phyrexian bombers, running light and hollow, met them at the top of the sky. The ships turned, arcing away over the encircling mountains. Once beyond the gray wall of it, lights winked back into being along the rails and masts of the craft.

Yawgmoth counted them, and his face was grave. "We will need every ship. We will need every gun."



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"What now? Will they pursue?" Rebbec asked.

"No. Their losses are too great, their army too vulnerable. They will fear we have troops waiting in the mountains to swarm down on them. They will not pursue."

Rebbec shook her head. "If only we *did* have troops in the mountains . . ."

"This battle was only to make things equal. It was only to winnow their fleet and army and assure Nyoron and Seaton they must remain loyal or pay in blood for forgiveness."

"They will march next on Halcyon," Rebbec said.

"They won't reach Halcyon. Not the city itself. We will meet them at the Megheddon Defile, just east of the city. They must pass down that valley of death to emerge onto the desert plains. The ground troops will be bottlenecked emerging there. The air units will be committed to their defense. We will fling them out of the sky. Meanwhile, our main army will slay them in their hundreds as they emerge. That will be the greatest battle of this war. That battle will live in the mind of the world forever. The Battle of Megheddon Defile."



## Chapter 22

Rebbec was in the quarantine cave when the battle of Megheddon Defile began. For weeks, she had watched Yawgmoth's preparations. She had seen slanting bunkers quarried from the desert floor. She had watched Halcyte and Phyrexian guards training for the coming battle. She had seen the hordes of clockwork killers buried in the sand or hidden rank on rank in flanking regiments. Horrible destruction was coming, and she had not wanted to see it.

Even down here, though, she heard it. A vast boom resounded through the deep cave.

"He's using my behemoths." Glacian's voice, long unintelligible to anyone but his wife, was now almost too garbled even for Rebbec.

The man's phthisis had eased since Yawgmoth removed the powerstone sliver, but his mind had only worsened. The rupture deepened between the two halves of his psyche. His memory failed. Paranoia rose. Confusion and desperation tore him apart. He refused the powerstone therapy that had healed the rest of the city. He refused even to enter Phyrexia, there to be tended. Instead, Glacian spent his hours alone in the dark quarantine cave, accompanied only by his powerstone contraptions, a string of faithful goblins and, of course, his wife. Though she visited him every day, he often accused her of staying away



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weeks at a time. Today, it was a blessing that Glacian's paranoia had a different target than Rebbec.

Another thunderous boom filled the chamber.

"Yawgmoth is using my behemoths." Glacian said. His face quivered in the gleam of the oil lantern Rebbec brought on her visits. "The bastard. He's stolen every invention of mine . . . twisted it to his own ends."

Rebbec heaved a weary sigh beneath the scarf that draped her mouth. With a gloved hand, she patted his arm.

"He's only defending the city, the empire."

"He's destroying them. He's only defending himself."

"Your inventions are being put to good use."

Scabrous fingers clutched her gloved hand. He stared up from shredded skin and powdering bone, out of the heart of mad despair.

"He's climbed inside of me, Rebbec. He's climbed inside all of us."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, pulling away.

"My mind. Those stones he has. What he calls a cure. He implants those stones and can see into the minds of the people. Powerstones absorb the character of a person. I believe that now. They take on the qualities of strong people. He reads our minds. He's put one of his stones in me too." Glacian dragged back the blankets from the scar on his side. It was mounded and infected, stitches like black spiders straddling the cut. "He put a stone in here."

Rebbec shook her head grimly. "He took a powerstone out of you, he didn't put one in. I watched him."

"He put one in. He uses it to ravage my mind. He takes my thoughts, my inventions, my dreams and twists them. How else did he find out about the behemoths?"

"Behemoths are hard to hide," Rebbec said. "Yawgmoth has complete control of the mana rig. It's amazing he didn't discover them sooner."

"The mana rig . . . yes, the mana rig . . ."

"Listen. You lie here alone in the dark. Your mind is . . . is too brilliant to dwell in darkness. It's no wonder you come up with

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these . . . beliefs about what is happening, but they aren't true."

"You listen. I've been afraid to tell you this. I've been afraid even to think it. He's listening all the time, but he can't listen now, not while he's fighting. So, I'll tell you now. Don't tell Yawgmoth. Don't tell him what I am about to say."

Sighing in resignation, Rebbec said, "What is it this time?"

"The Thran Temple. You can take the people away in the Thran Temple. Every stone in that temple is a plane unto itself. It's not just a whole world. It is a whole Multiverse. You could live there forever. Our people could survive."

"Our people will survive. Yawgmoth will win this war. Even if he does not, there is Phyrexia."

"No! Whoever goes there is changed, is destroyed. You can save the rest. You can take them away in the Thran Temple."

"Take them away?"

"A control stone. Create a control stone, just like the ones that move the sedan chairs. Create a control stone and mount it on the central altar of the temple, and you can fly it away from Halcyon, away from the war, from destruction."

Rebbec could only stare, mouth dropping open in amazement.

"You can save our people, Rebbec. They can ascend, just as you have always hoped. You could take them to heaven, take them away from this hell."

A new light had entered Rebbec's eyes, a blue and fragile light in the warm blanket of lamp glow.

"You know it can be done. You know it *must* be done."

"I know it can be done," Rebbec echoed distantly.

"Don't tell Yawgmoth."

"No."

"Don't let him plant one of his stones in you."

"No."

"Promise me you'll do it. Promise me you'll make the control stone. Promise me you'll take our people away from here."

"No." Eyes distant in the black space, she stood, took a deep breath, and said, "I have to go. There is a battle being fought."

"Yes, go, Rebbec. Leave me, but save them. Save them!"



## The Thran

\* \* \* \* \*

By the second day, most of the reserves were spent. The freshest Halcyte troops were weary to the bone.

Not so Commander Gix and his Phyrexian warriors. They fought on despite wounds that would kill mere humans.

"Forward!"

Phyrexians exploded from the entrenchments. Gix ran with them. They were a black and boiling mass. It seemed the old volcano was disgorging a bubbling tide of lava. Their armor was scaly. Their helms ended in barbed horns. The articulated joints of their shoulder, elbow, thigh, and knee plates made them seem inhuman monsters.

"Isn't that what we are?" the commander mused. It was merely an observation, not a condemnation. Yawgmoth had been right about everything. On a day long ago, he had forced Gix to accept the cure for the phthisis, the power that lay in that cure. Perhaps Gix had died that day—the old Gix—but a new man was born. A new monster.

He charged at the head of that surging company of Phyrexians. Commander Gix held his head high, a head now a third larger than it had been. The change had begun shortly after his Phyrexian heart stone had been implanted. Even as his skin grew healthy again, his tangled locks of hair had fallen out. Beneath it, skin and skull both had grown outward. The change at first had frightened him, but a voice within assured there was nothing to fear. Skin and skull grew to allow his brain to grow as well. A newfound clarity of thought seemed to confirm this belief. Suddenly, the whole insane world had come clear to him. Even as his skull had settled into its current, striated form, his mind had settled his devotion to Yawgmoth, his glimpse of the master's vision, his delight in his work.

That simple clarity of purpose impelled his pickax cleanly into the head of a dwarf. The little barbarian trembled for a moment on the pick. It had punched through the top of the thing's head like a snake's fang into an egg. The tip must have

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been lodged in the dwarf's spine to make it shudder like that. Gix lifted the pick, and the barbarian came up with it. No matter. Gix's arms were longer and stronger than they had been. With their bulging sheen and the thick stalks of hair that jutted from them, they seemed almost the legs of a giant fly. Midstride, Gix gave the pickax a shake. Limp and bloody, the dwarf flopped stupidly off it. Gix impatiently spun the haft and brought the ax down to kill another dwarf.

"Just like harvesting mushrooms!" he shouted above the clamor.

Smiles went up along the line of Phyrexians—smiles where there were teeth and lips capable of drawing back from them. Some showed their appreciation only by poking their picks into more dwarf heads. Just like mushrooms—soft and white, with that satisfying little *thup* when the spike penetrated the cap.

Then there were no more dwarves. They lay in messy ruin behind them. Blood came from one end and a similar substance from the other. Barbaric. They couldn't even die well, these little mushroom men. The human warriors beyond at least provided more sport. They yelled and scuttled, landed a few swings, dodged a bit better. They were more like the albino cockroaches in the deep caverns—hard to catch, hard to kill, but not particularly dangerous. The way to kill cockroaches, at least ones you weren't planning on eating, was simply to squash them.

Gix swung his body-laden pickax with one arm, bashing two humans to the ground. He wielded his dagger with the other hand. A slash toward the mouth was always good with a dagger. That way, if the foe tried to duck, he would get his eyes sliced open like a pair of grapes. Gix was strong enough to do that—a slice entering one temple, severing the nasal bones, and exiting the other temple. If the foe tried to leap, he would get his throat cut. If the foe came straight on—as in the current case—Gix's blade cut the man's mouth open from ear to ear. It wouldn't be a debilitating injury for a truly warlike race, but humans were amazingly unwilling to fight on just because



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their jaws hung limp beneath severed muscles. This warrior, for instance—look at his bloody smile and the lower lip quivering across his voice box. See how he falls to his knees and buries what used to be a face in his hands? If a Phyrexian were cut like that, he'd continue to fight on, wearing a permanent grin.

Commander Gix battled onward, admiring the warriors with him. They were beautiful—large heads, wide eyes, ridged noses, tusks, chin horns, pointed ears—and they fought beautifully. One woman sank tigerlike claws into a human's breast and ripped its torso wide open. One man, who had lost his sword hand, stabbed with the sliced ends of his own radius and ulna bones. One child—he must have been no more than ten when implanted—leapt agilely from shoulder to shoulder, biting chunks out of heads as though he were biting apples. Beautiful! Yawgmoth had done more to transform the Thran race than anyone before him. It was as though humanity had been only the pupae form—soft and weak and ugly—of this new species of creatures.

The humans soon were eaten through as well. Gix and his band of Phyrexians had slain thousands, losing perhaps ten of their own. A hundred-to-one kill ratio. Truly these creatures were no more than pupae.

"Forward," Gix shouted. "To the defile!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A third day dawned on the Thran-Phyrexian War.

In the city, the sounds of battle were drowned beneath the cheers of the people. They lined the eastward walls, crowding every elevation that gave a view of the battlefield below. They filled every balcony and overlook of the Thran Temple. Crystals sent their images outward in minute rainbows. It was as though the gods themselves stared avidly at the battle below.

Yet, these gods saw nothing truly. They saw all from a distance. They saw Phyrexian strength and success without seeing Phyrexian grotesquerie and savagery. For the citizens of

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Halcyon, the war had become a faraway spectacle, a carnival in the literal sense—a feast of flesh.

The crowd watched with hushed apprehension. Whenever a Thran ship went down—whether by ray cannon blast or raking light from the mirror arrays—the crowd cheered. Each new surprise of Yawgmoth's brought more hurrahs. Sand-crabs, hidden armies, behemoths, Phyrexian warriors; each brought shouts of hope, cheers, even laughter from the Halcytes.

The sound echoed mockingly in Rebbec's ears.

She stood at the highest point of the Thran Temple. This parapet was not open to the public, was in fact not even part of the original design. It had been added to allow the builders easier access to the matrix of powerstones that made up the temple's roof. Now Rebbec stood here, alone, watching the bloody viciousness unfold.

The Halcyte fleet had already downed more than two hundred of the enemy caravels, which lay in smoldering ruins across the desert floor. Many of these ships had imploded on impact. Their powerstone cores cracked, sucking in matter to fill the void. In this case, matter meant meat—human, dwarf, elf, minotaur, Viashino. How many thousands had been sucked away into nothingness, not even their bodies left to litter the desert? Thousands more did litter the ground. Even from this great height, more than fifteen hundred feet above the desert floor, those bodies and the dark spreading stains from heads and bellies were unmistakable. Most were Thran. Many were Halcytes. A few were even Phyrexians. It didn't seem to matter how many fell. Yawgmoth's war machine rolled onward, grinding bones to meal.

A feast of flesh. The crowd gobbled it up. Rebbec overheard folk pledge to join the Phyrexian ranks. They saw Phyrexian power and prowess, not Phyrexian mutation. No one wanted to be left behind. All wanted to be improved by Yawgmoth, elevated by him.

The temple's tangled spectra suddenly were suffused by a huge glare. Something vast moved among the distant folds of



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mountain. It gleamed like a diamond and rolled like quicksilver. It was enormous. A ball of quintessence? No, a ball of metal. It did not roll but floated among the peaks, heading straight for the battle.

"What are you doing, Yawgmoth?" Rebbec wondered. She blinked, at last making out the strange thing she saw. "The Null Sphere!"

She had helped Glacian design the enormous broadcast station. Rebbec herself had innovated the light metal beams, but she had never intended it to fly. It was to stay rooted to the ground, drawing power from it and channeling it out to every artifact creature in the empire. . . .

"Oh, no!"

Even from this height, the carnage was plain. As the Null Sphere rose moonlike over the battlefield, the tide of Thran artifact engines turned. No longer beating back Phyrexians, the Thran machines joined them and attacked their own forces.

Thran bled and died and were trampled into the earth. Those who yet lived retreated in terror toward Megheddon Defile. It would give them no escape, of course. Yawgmoth permitted no escape.

A cheer rose from crowd within the temple. "Victory! Victory! Victory!"

The battle soon would be finished. The Thran would be finished as well. They were in full rout below, running back toward distant Phoenon. Even the remaining Thran war caravels were fleeing before the Halcyte fleet. The Null Sphere hovered balefully above it all.

Something dropped from the belly of that huge sphere, falling into the center of Megheddon Defile, into the center of the retreating army.

For a moment more, the valley stood there, a crooked wound that cut away into rankling mountains. Then the walls of the defile leapt upward. Something milky white oozed from the center of that wound and flooded both directions down its length. The whiteness overflowed the cliff edges of the defile

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and seeped out and down adjacent valleys and crevices. It poured from the mouth of the defile onto the desert floor. Pearly clouds engulfed the rearguard of the Thran and rolled on toward running Phyrexian troops. The white wave overtook many of them, sweeping them under an opaque cloud.

At last, the milky flood paused, lingering in a malignant semicircle across the center of the desert.

All talk in the temple had gone silent. Only battle sounds came. In the final lip of sound before the blast was heard, there came a faint and ubiquitous scream.

The roaring boom shook the temple as though it were a glass wind chime. Noise pounded every breastbone. Every citizen went to his or her knees. None was left standing.

Even as Rebbec fell, she knew this was Yawgmoth's stone-charger. This was the weapon he had worked so hard to perfect. The device merely charged a powerstone by sucking the life from the land all around it. In a single stroke, Yawgmoth had slain the entire Thran army.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Take the sphere higher," Yawgmoth ordered his artificer crew in the command core. "Away from that killing cloud!"

The huge bulk of the Null Sphere lurched upward. Phyrexians, Halcytes, and artificers steadied themselves.

"Redirect the sphere's mana pumps. Draw mana from that cloud. It is pure energy. Draw it away, before it destroys everything!"

One of the artificers asked, "What shall we do with that much raw power? It will overload the mana batteries."

"Send it out. Send it to every Thran artifact engine in the empire. Shut them down."

Even for the old man, this was too much. "Lives will be lost—thousands of innocent civilians who rely on artifact engines—miners and loggers and fishers—"

"Do it, and be glad I do not ask you to turn those machines against their owners." Yawgmoth's mood seemed to soften. "It



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is only temporary, only until the Thran Alliance sues for peace and recognizes me as the true emperor. Then, all the devices will be reactivated. Then I will have a much greater use for this mana energy. My artificers will rig a channel by which mana power can be shunted from Dominaria directly into Phyrexia. They will draw off killing clouds from the world above and use them to build my world below."

"For-forgive my interruption, Lord Yawgmoth," the old man said. "But I have grave news."

"What is it?"

Fingers rushing across the powerstones in the arms of his command chair, the artificer said, "Our new altitude has given us greater range for visual scan. I've just now picked them up, perhaps a hundred miles out, approaching from the west."

"Picked what up?"

"Two more fleets of Thran ships—two more invading armies."



## Chapter 23

No one survived within the milky, killing cloud. It lingered a whole day before being drawn off by the lofty Null Sphere. There were not even skeletons left, not plate armor or ring mail, not the silver suits of Halcyte guards. The cloud had scoured away the fallen behemoths, disintegrated the ruined caravels, and even eaten the dust of the desert and the sand beneath it and the bedrock too, down to thirty feet. The narrow Megheddon Defile had widened into a broad vale, hollowed out of the rock as if by acid.

Phyrexian ships hovered in stupefaction above that eerie cloud. Then, new orders came: "Land on the desert amid the troops. Take on board as many as you can. Fly them to the city. Resupply and recharge. Prepare to engage."

Engage what? Engage whom?

Beyond shimmering Halcyon, black clouds boiled up from the west—except that they weren't clouds. They were more Thran ships. Two more fleets, and in their shadow marched two great armies. They approached across the searing, waterless desert.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Citizens of Halcyon. You have seen a mighty battle. You have seen the traitors and invaders—the so-called Thran



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Alliance—fall to the armies of right. You have seen the Halcyte guard fight with valor that has not been equaled in centuries and had not been surpassed even then. You have seen the Phyrexian guard fight as angels among mortals—with the pure, vengeful joy that comes from righteousness. You have seen the wonder of the stone-charger in the defile, cleansing our foes in a cloud of white. All of it you beheld from the walls and rooftops and even from this very temple where I stand now.

"I ask you to become what you have seen. Let the valor of the Halcyte guard enter through your eyes and sink down into your heart and become valor there too. Let the righteous vengeance of the Phyrexian guard heat your blood so that you will not shrink from the coming fight but yearn for it. Let the white cloud that cleansed the very ground of the Thran army now cleanse each of your souls of whatever rebel impulses might remain among them.

"This is our moment. The long stairway of history at last gives out onto the broad paradise of destiny. We are stepping through the doorway of futures.

"Of course these armies have come. Of course they want to slam that door in our faces, trap us in with them, drag us down those stairs we have so tirelessly climbed, haul us down to their Caves of the Damned—but that is not where we belong.

"We are no longer among the damned. We have risen out of disease and death into life. We have cured the phthisis that ravages the rest of the world, and now we are curing ourselves even of mortality. From a great distance, you saw the Phyrexian guard. You saw they have the strength of ten mortals. You saw they could fight on when mortals would die. From a great distance you saw the new immortals, and soon they will not be distant. Soon you will be among them and be one of them. They are our destiny.

"This is our moment, citizens of Halcyon. Rise with me into the bright future. Fight beside me against the covetous past.

"I call all those not actively engaged in the defense of the city—I call you to enter Phyrexia now, to join the legion of angels. Shuck the mortal coil and dress yourselves in immortality.

## J. Robert King

"We are ascending. We are becoming Phyrexians. We are becoming gods."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sirens had been sounding for hours. Not a soul remained in the temple. Everyone had cleared the streets.

Many civilians descended to the cave beneath the city and from there to Phyrexia to enlist. Others fled to their homes. Those who had shutters secured them. Those who did not nailed tabletops over their windows. The Thran soldiers were coming—that was the explanation they gave to any Halcyte guards who happened by. Soon not a civilian soul remained in the streets or the temple.

Not a soul except Rebbec. She slouched within the temple's uppermost parapet. She had not moved since the stone-charger was detonated. The horrible sight of it, the terrifying quake, the blast of sound—it had knocked her to her side, and she had not risen. She had glimpsed the mayhem in the all-seeing facets of her temple. The image of Yawgmoth came next, and his voice boomed from the altar out across the world. He urged the people to become what they had beheld.

Rebbec already had. She'd become what she'd beheld, and she'd beheld atrocity.

"There you are," came the dulcet voice of Yawgmoth behind her. He'd climbed the stairs that led to this secret parapet. "You need to come down. It will not be safe for you up here when the siege begins."

Rebbec turned and looked up at him. He was magnificent, dark and battle scarred in the rubefacient light of dusk.

"It has never been safe. Only now, I recognize the peril."

Yawgmoth smiled dazzlingly. He crouched beside her. The smell of smoke and sweat suffused his clothes. He rested a hand on her shoulder.

"It is easy to climb if you keep looking up. It gets hard only



## *The Thran*

when you look down." The dying sun gleamed in his eyes. "Now you've looked down and seen how far you've climbed. It is deep and dark, and it is behind you. You've looked down and gotten spooked—"

"Not just spooked," Rebbec interrupted. "It isn't just dark down there. It's horrible. Look at the people we've killed. You can't even look at them. They're gone, wiped from the world."

Yawgmoth's brow knotted. "You didn't kill anyone."

"Yes, I did. I'm implicated in all of this. The city I've built. The husband I've helped invent weapon after weapon. The man I've guided to the pinnacle of Halcyon—"

Laughter interrupted her, not derisive but open and easy. "You think too much of yourself. You think Glacian would not have made weapons without you?"

"Who else could understand him? Who else could interpret for him?"

"You think I would not have ascended Halcyon without you?"

"Who else could understand you? Could interpret for you?" Rebbec said. She shook her head. "All this talk of ascending—you learned that from me, but you improved on it. I used hope, but you used fear. The Halcytes arose out of fear."

"What does it matter why they rose?" Yawgmoth said. "They rose."

Rebbec flung her hand out toward the battlefield, the scoured earth, and the wide, shallow trench. "This is why it matters. This . . ."

Yawgmoth's face was dusky. "You're tired. You aren't thinking straight."

"I'm thinking straight for the first time in years," she said, turning to push his hand off of her shoulder.

Instead of releasing her, Yawgmoth slid his arm around her back and slipped his other under her legs.

"This is what I have done for our city, our people." He stood, raising her from the cold crystal and cradling her in his arms.

## J. Robert King

"I've lifted them. I'm still lifting them. I'm carrying them away from danger and into hope." He descended the parapet stairs.

Rebbec studied his face. His brow and jaw were so strong, girded in shadow. She saw the sky in his eyes. Distant clouds scudded through the last shreds of sunlight. Hundreds of dark ships circled out among them. Every once in a while, a ray cannon on the wall would discharge. A golden beam flicked outward to dissipate before reaching the Thran ships. Nearest of all, hovering in a weighty halo above the city walls, was the recharged and reprovisioned Halcyte fleet.

Rebbec slumped hopelessly in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Halcyon was ready.

The Null Sphere turned every Thran artifact creature against the invaders. The battle was fast and furious. Blood and bone mixed with oil and steel. The Null Sphere glared balefully at the crimson battle. From that metal moon, Yawgmoth reached down to clutch every Thran machine. He did not released them until thousands of artifact creatures and Thran troops lay in broken pieces on the desert.

Since the skirmish, Phyrexian warships and ray cannons kept the Thran fleet at a radius of four miles. Halcyte guards controlled the city. Phyrexian guards controlled the under-city. Rebbec rested in her home. Glacian languished in his cave.

There was nothing more Yawgmoth could do in Halcyon, and so he worked. His laboratory was Phyrexia. The plane was suffused with power, shunted down from the lofty Null Sphere. Yawgmoth made use of every erg.

On the first sphere, Commander Gix enlisted the hundreds of citizen volunteers who had come to become Phyrexians. Most could not imagine the vast alterations in store for them. Once the changes began, none would want to return to the former weakness.



## The Thran

On the second sphere, artificers worked frantically to build more stone-chargers. Yawgmooth allowed the corners of his mind to aid these endeavors. He spent only enough thought on them to keep the workers hard at their tasks.

Yawgmooth's true attention was spent in the fourth sphere laboratories. There, the vat priests had set aside their work on phyresis in order to study virulent plagues. Yawgmooth wanted a contagion that could infect hundreds of thousands on the plains but would never rise to Halcyon. The priests experimented with diseases that could survive only in desert heat, or that could be packed into powder bombs, or that would affect only non-humans. Lord Yawgmooth had shown great foresight to keep the barbarian emissaries alive for such experiments. By replicating Glacian's life-sustaining machines, the priests had assured that each ambassador could suffer many deaths before his or her body gave out entirely. It had been a bit of poetry. The emissaries had brought a deadly message to Halcyon, and now they would bear back an even deadlier one. Perhaps eight ambassadorial coffins to the eight allied nations would be the best way to send specific plagues to minotaurs, elves, dwarves, cat folk, and humans.

Clutched in the heart of Phyrexia, Yawgmooth smiled. That would be lovely, indeed. A shudder of delight moved through him and through all the world.

Then there was someone with him in the inner sanctum. No one came here. No one knew the way in. No one was welcome here, and yet someone was with him.

He did not withdraw from the clutching heart of the world. He wanted to remain a god, for he knew who this must be.

*Hello, Dyfed.*

"Hello, Yawgmooth," she said, her voice steely in the darkness. "I noticed you'd gotten yourself into a war. I wondered how you fared."

*Well enough, as you can see.* Yawgmooth could sense her presence there in the inner sphere, like the pressure of a tumor in his head. *Well enough.*

## J. Robert King

"Yes," she replied. She walked. Her feet made a slow, clicking, maddening noise on the shell. "You are doing well enough. But what about your people?"

*My people? The Phyrexians?*

"Your people, the Halcytes. The Thran. Your people and my own people."

*They are doing well, as you can see.*

"I can see nothing of the sort. There is tyranny. There is civil war. There is genocide," Dyfed responded. "I should have listened to Glacian."

*Listened to Glacian?*

"He knew who you were from the beginning, Yawgmoth. He knew what you were capable of. He warned everyone—his wife and me too—but we all thought he was deluded," Dyfed said. "Your lies cannot hide the atrocities any longer."

*What atrocities?*

"This phthisis, for one. It was never contagious, as you well knew. You used it to quarantine your enemies and promote your friends. You even learned how to infect a healthy body, so that you controlled who was stricken and who was healthy."

*You are just another skeptic. I have healed the phthisis.*

"You have devised a remedy that gives you complete control over your people. Heal the body but possess the soul."

*I am not harming anyone—*

"You're harming everyone. The only ones you cannot harm are the ones I took away from you—the Elder Council."

*You took them! Where are they?*

"They are safe."

*Why have you come here?*

"I made you a god, and I can take away your godhood."

Yawgmoth was silent for a time. He felt Phyrexia drawing back from him. He felt Dyfed's mind forcing its way between him and his world. From the thousand places it roamed in Phyrexia, Yawgmoth's mind withdrew. He shrank and coalesced



## The Thran

from divinity to humanity. In moments, he stood beside Dyfed, in the midst of that dark space.

"I suppose you can do whatever you want." He smiled grimly. "You are, after all, a planeswalker. I am only a man—and your prisoner. I thought perhaps I was more. I thought perhaps I would save my people."

"The true planeswalker among you, a nascent planeswalker, will rise to save your people. But you will come with me. You will surrender Phyrexia and Halcyon, end this war, and come with me to the Thran Allied Council. Not another life will be lost in this war, unless it be yours."

Yawgmoth tilted his head. "I cannot escape you, but you should know other lives will be lost. Even now, the eight ambassadors who came to Halcyon from the allies—they live on the fourth sphere but only by the exertions of my mind. If you take me out of Phyrexia, those eight will die."

"No, they won't," Dyfed said bitterly. "My magic will heal anything short of phthisis. They won't die. They will return with us and tell of your atrocities." She grasped his hand.

Suddenly, they were on the fourth sphere.

The place was infernal. A red glow filled the world. Giant furnaces reached from the rankled ground to the smoke-shrouded ceiling above. Huge flashes of fire illuminated the horrible place. Humans were utterly dwarfed by the massive mechanisms, but the vat priests of Yawgmoth were no longer exactly human.

Red robed, masked in black, they were impossibly tall and impossibly lean. Eyes glowed in the dark. Razor-tipped fingers moved dexterously across instrumentation. Their own flesh had been transformed by their dark sciences. They swooped up around the new arrivals. Yawgmoth waved them back. When they recognized their master, the vat priests backed away, bowing deeply and fearfully.

Their retreat revealed rows of huge glass vats. Each vat was illuminated below, each filled with a golden oil, and each occupied by a naked, transforming creature. Human forms gave way slowly to monstrous forms. Fangs replaced teeth.

## J. Robert King

Claws replaced nails. Barbed whiskers replaced hair. Horns grew from bone.

"What is this?" Dyfed gasped.

"This is the future. This is power perfected," he said quietly. "But you aren't interested in that. You came to see the ambassadors. Well, here they are." He gestured to a bank of vats behind him.

Dyfed moved forward, astonished.

Unlike the gradual transformations occurring with the vatted humans, these poor creatures had been cut up and sewn back together brutally and mercilessly. Eyes had been sewn into the belly of the dwarf. Fingers had been grafted to the forehead of the elf. A duck's wing replaced one of the minotaur's arms. A mechanical head had replaced the cat woman's skull.

"I cannot heal these . . . these . . . I never thought—"

"Precisely," Yawgmoth said.

He drove a dagger into Dyfed's forehead.

One hand clutched her hair, holding her upright. The other gripped the dagger's hilt, wagging it back and forth to scramble her brains.

"You never thought, and you will never think again. With but a thought, you can jump from place to place, can heal yourself or others. If I pith you, though—if I continually scramble your brains, you cannot think. The best you can do is struggle to reassemble your skull. Meanwhile, I can keep you here."

He nodded to his priests, who swooped silently up around him.

Yawgmoth cradled the trembling woman against him. He worked the dagger back and forth. Its blade cracked against the sides of her skull. A red-gray ooze trickled down her nose. Yawgmoth bent and kissed her.

"You see, my dear, the brain is the seat of thought. Every human faculty has its organ. Remove that organ and you remove that faculty. Even planeswalking. There is an organ in



## *The Thran*

you, my dear, that makes that a possibility. I am going to cut you open and find it and remove it from you and graft it into me. I am going to be a planeswalker, and you—you will be just another hunk of meat in the vats."

PART IV

THE MULTIVERSE



## PART IV

# THE MULTIVERSE







### ***Thran-Phyrexian War, the Last Days: Battle of Halcyon***

All through that black night, Halcyte ray cannons sent bolts stabbing out at the circling Thran fleet. Orange beams flashed into being and disappeared. Only occasionally did they strike a ship and even then were too weak to destroy it. They only thumped hollowly and sent up vapor from heated wood. Still, these attacks kept the Thran fleet at bay. Cannon fire created a four-mile-radius dome into which Thran forces dared not enter. Meanwhile, Phyrexian mirror crews focused moonlight to test their aim. Once the sun rose, beams of solar radiation would rake the battlefield and pop Thran ground troops like ants under a lens.

The Thran were busy too. Crews spent the night rigging smoke vents at the prows of ships, for thick smoke absorbed ray cannon blasts. Thran foot soldiers meanwhile polished their armor and shields to gleam like silver. Cuirasses, helms, gauntlets, shields—they would be mirrors scattering the sunbeams focused on them. Other soldiers, dressed in black, struggled across the nighttime desert toward the mirror arrays. A few escaped notice and smashed portions of the array. Phyrexian guards, in turn, smashed them.

## J. Robert King

The most secret crew of all was Halcyte, led by Yawgmoth aboard the war caravel *Yataghan*. A large ship wreathed in sails, *Yataghan* circled tightly amid sixty-three caravels and twelve merchant ships pressed into service. Each was loaded to the deck with bombs. Each carried three implosion devices, some with crystals still hot from the mana rig forging process. There were also traditional powder bombs in massive supply. Last of all, filling up what space remained, was quarried stone. Even a pebble falling from four miles in the air could kill a man. A larger stone could smash the power core of a ship.

Yes, four miles in the air. No one flew that high. The air there was so thin, men fainted and even died. It was so cold that all exposed skin cracked and froze in a matter of moments. Eyes bulged in their sockets. Brains bulged in their skulls. Madness and death ruled those heights. The Thran fleet would never expect Yawgmoth to rise above his own dome of defense and drop bombs in a ring on them.

For four hours, Yawgmoth's fleet circled tightly above their bejeweled city. They rose little more than a foot per second. The glow of their engines was masked in bright flashes of cannon fire. The crews were told to stay on deck as long as they could stand it, to breathe deeply and let their bodies adjust to the thinner, colder air as they rose into it. When they could tolerate it no longer, they donned leather jackets and drew the hoods around their faces so that they could rebreathe their own air as much as possible. After that, they garbed themselves in the silver armor of Halcyte guards. The form-fitting suits had been modified to squeeze the wearers' legs and force blood up into their brains. The armor also rhythmically compressed and decompressed lungs. When even that was insufficient, the crew were to retire below decks into sealed rooms where pots of water were boiled to help thicken the air. They were abjured to endure wracking headaches by thinking of Halcyon and those they loved. They were commanded to channel their pain toward the Thran fleet laying siege below.



## The Thran

It worked for most. By the time the Phyrexian fleet had reached an altitude of twenty-two thousand feet, only a few hundred crew had fallen unconscious, and only thirty-three had died.

Yawgmooth did better than most. In Phyrexia's embrace, he had been transforming himself—stronger muscle, thicker bone, sharper wit, lack of fear. From the flying bridge nestled high beneath the wreathing sails, he relayed his orders through a speaking tube.

"Command the fleet . . . to fan out in . . . assigned minutes of arc . . . across the desert. Sail to assigned coordinates. . . . A flare over Halcyon will mark the fourth watch . . . in the gloaming dawn . . . drop payloads."

Since then, it had been only agonizing headaches, dizziness, nausea, groans on air so thin and cold that it would hardly carry sound. Yawgmooth had stayed on the flying bridge all the while. Peering past *Yataghan's* wreath of sails, he watched the faint ring of engines widen—pale red stars among cold blue constellations.

Dawn approached, gray below the east. Halcyon cast a dim shadow westward over the head of the Thran army. The Thran fleet drifted in a slow ring far below, just where they should be. If any Thran looked up, looked straight up, they would see the Phyrexian fleet glinting quietly among the fading stars.

The fourth-watch flare appeared over Halcyon.

Yawgmooth's crews lifted ramps that held the gleaming implosion bombs. The devices tumbled overboard, one at bow, one at stern, and one amidships. Next, payloads of powder bombs rolled free, and then loads of gravel.

The first implosion bombs exploded below, an awesome ring of perfect gray circles appearing where decks and rigging had been. Smoke from the powder bombs followed. At last, the sound arrived—a small racket here—caving hulls, staved timbers, failing plates, screaming soldiers. Those sounds were borne away by the manifold popping of smoke powder bombs, and they in turn by the roar of rock hailing down.

## J. Robert King

Sound lags. Yawgmooth watched the Thran fleet die. Ships rolled over. Fires belched from their decks. They spun, collided, ground together, splintered, plunged. As they spiraled toward the sands, doomed crews stared skyward.

"Yes . . . Look at us!" Yawgmooth shouted, though every breath was precious. "See the . . . gods who slay you!"

Ship after ship crashed on the sand. Their power cores cracked. They imploded with a new series of blasts. Sand and splinters, bone meal and blood belched up. A red cloud enveloped the whole fleet.

It was easily enough done, Yawgmooth thought.

From the cloud emerged Thran ships. Somehow vessels had escaped—many vessels. Perhaps one in three. A hundred warships converged toward the city. They were sheathed in smoke from the vents at their prows.

Every ray cannon on the wall fired. Streamers of death jabbed from Halcyon. They struck the tightening ring of Thran craft. A few exploded or straggled downward. Most plunged on in their protective sheaths of smoke.

"Down!" Yawgmooth shouted through the speaking tube to his communications officer. "Every ship, down! Descend to engage!"

The prow of *Yataghan* dipped. The great caravel creaked in the thin, frigid air as it nosed toward the ground. Seams stressed open. Hisses sounded. Ghosts of steam emerged from the sealed chambers below. The stern pivoted up, and the ship began a heady plunge toward the Thran ships below.

"Range?" Yawgmooth shouted as he gripped the rail.

"Four miles and closing!" the navigator called.

The rest of the Halcyte ships banked from their positions and soared downward.

"Speed?"

"Eighty knots and accelerating."

"Intercept?"

Spokes of orange fire stabbed out from the city. They broke across the Thran ships. Most of the beams tangled with smoke



## The Thran

sheaths, dissipating. A few cracked hulls, waking fire and new smoke.

The Halcyte fleet converged on the tightening hub of Thran fighters.

"If they get over the city . . ." Yawgmooth muttered to himself. He shouted, "Time to weapons range?"

"Three minutes."

"Increase speed!"

The engineer's voice came hollowly from below, "I'd have to give the engines full power—"

"Do it!"

"We might not be able to pull up in time—"

"Do it!"

Yataghan leapt down toward the Thran ships.

"Weapons range?"

"In thirty seconds."

"Increase speed! Ready bow guns. Fire! Fire!"

Twin beams of orange radiance lanced out from the prow. The bolts seemed to struggle to escape the plunging prow. They roared out, twining in air, and fused into one great blast of energy. The bolt neared a Thran ship. A white puff of smoke rose lazily from the craft and spread thickly above it. The shot struck the cloud, sparking and leaping. It punched through the top layer of smoke, but the tiny particles plucked the radiance from the air. With a bright flash, the smoke cloud was spent, and the beam with it.

"Fire!"

Again, the bolts jagged out. Again a puff of smoke dissipated them.

That's how it will be then, Yawgmooth thought. His teeth were clenched in an expression half grimace and half grin. That's how it will be, then.

"Increase speed! Prepare to ram!"

A hatch flung back. The engineer—a gray-bearded merchant-turned-warrior—emerged. He stared levelly at Yawgmooth. "We will all die. You cannot order this."

## J. Robert King

"You are relieved of duty," Yawgmoth said. He clamped down on the engineer's collar, lifted him, and with one swift and impossibly casual motion, flung him overboard.

"Increase speed! Prepare to ram."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebbec and a passel of goblins sorted among powerstones in the mana rig's charging chamber. There would be no other orb cracked while the invasion took place. The mirror arrays were needed to burn away Thran ground troops. Perhaps the stone Rebbec needed would be in this chamber.

"No, no, that's a dodecahedron," she said to the goblin beside her, who held a head-sized stone in his hands. "A control stone has to be an icosahedron—twenty sides, not twelve. Besides, that one is too small."

The goblin casually let the stone drop among the others, scratched his head, and clawed through more shards.

The regular solids were the rarest shapes to come from a crystal orb, and large stones were the most rare of all. The floor was filled with pyramids, obelisks, lozenges, and daggers, but there was not a single icosahedron.

Sighing, Rebbec let her hands flop. "Let's try the storage chambers. They wouldn't use a stone like that for an implosion device. Yawgmoth would have kept it aside."

The goblins echoed her sighs.

"Look, I know this is a chore. I know if we get caught, we could be executed as spies, but if we don't do this, the whole city could die."

Nodding their scabby heads, the goblins followed her into the dark vastness of the mana rig. Rebbec led them between smoldering furnaces in the towering darkness. This place had once been her husband's sanctuary. Volcanism and the heat of suns, scuttling goblins and artifact creatures—this place had given birth to every great device in the city and to the phthisis. All the torments Halcyon had begun here, and here all the torments of Halcyon would



## *The Thran*

end. The stone she sought was here somewhere—a control stone that could fly the Thran Temple out of this inescapable trap—

Rebbec fondly patted a goblin on the head.

"It will be here. We will find it. And I will take you with me."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Yataghan* fell like a meteor on the Thran corsair. The crew looked cringing upward.

*Yataghan* struck. Its steel-edged keel clove through rail and deck and hold. The Thran ship cracked open like an egg. There was a shrieking moment when the sundered decks were even with those of *Yataghan*. Foes stared levelly into each others' eyes. Then *Yataghan* plunged on through the corsair. The two halves of the ship spilled away from each other. The thunder of shattering wood gave way to an eerie quiet. To either side of *Yataghan*, shorn sections of corsair tumbled.

"Level out! Climb!" Yawgmoth shouted.

The engines surged. Groans came from the hull. *Yataghan* slued sideways, dipped slightly, and then rose again, through the rain of debris and smoke. An exultant whoop rose from the crew.

"Increase speed. Prepare another ram!"

Through the speaking tube, the navigator asked, "How did you know our ship would hold together and theirs break apart?"

"Simple physics," Yawgmoth said rapidly. "The hull is a dome. A dome can withstand great pressures on its convex edge but not its concave edge—"

His explanation was cut short by an orange blast from the city walls above. A cannon ray raked across *Yataghan*. The speaking tube and the navigator at its other end ceased to be. Amidships flashed away in a roar of flame and smoke. Charred remains—bow and stern—spun crazily, spilling cargo and crew into the whirling air.

Even as Yawgmoth was thrown from the flying bridge and tumbled into empty air, all he could think was that he would find the gunner who did this and rip out his eyes.



## Chapter 24

### *Moments Later . . .*

The powerstone armor saved him. Cuisses clutched his legs as tightly as a bug's carapace and kept them from shattering when his feet hit ground. Cuirasses compressed his torso in a deep exhalation as he rolled down the sandy slope. Helmet and boots flung up banners of sand in long looping swaths around him while he tumbled. Shrapnel followed him in a scouring rain. Bits of *Yataghan* bombarded the armor and fought to slice into the man within. Glacian's designs were too perfect, and *Yawgmoth* was not destined to die that day.

The tumbling roll ended at the bottom of the bank against a tangle of scrub. An ornate hunk of sextant pattered to a stop beside a complex section of nasal cavity. Among the larger pieces of debris was a *Thran* officer—likely the captain of the ship he had staved. The man was killed instantly on impact, but he kept rolling for some time, swathed in the white burnoose of the invading armies.

*Yawgmoth* stared irritably at the man. He glanced up at the sparking wall of the city above.

"Rip his eyes out. . . ."



## The Thran

Though the helmet had saved his life, Yawgmoth hauled the gritty thing from his head and flung it away. It spun atop the sand, took a hop, and landed in the broken arm of the fallen captain. Taking a deep breath, Yawgmoth stood. Dust poured from him. He seemed a ghost rising from the desert. Perhaps the Halcytes would think him slain. Perhaps he would see what they would do in his absence. He strode up the bank and looked back, hoping to see other survivors—enough to form a loyal band.

Instead, he saw Thran soldiers swarm the mirror arrays. They were as thick as ants on the distant devices. Cudgels and battle-axes fell in the morning light, smashing reflectors even as the sun awakening across them. The array teams and their Phyrexian defenders were overrun, slaughtered. In moments, one whole array was destroyed. Shards of glass made a gaudy spectacle in the sand. Other arrays were falling. Two had been lost during the night. Now the other seven were smashed one by one. That meant no solar gun. That meant no more orbs charged until the war was done. That meant no new powerstone cores, no new implosion bombs, no new ray cannon batteries. It might have ended the war just then for a lesser commander.

Yawgmoth had stockpiled powerstones, and his greatest weapons were even then being assembled on the second sphere of Phyrexia.

The Thran bashers concluded their work. Gathering beyond the shattered mirrors, they began a steady march eastward, toward Halcyon. Toward Yawgmoth.

He descended the sand bank. He would have just enough time to strip the Thran captain of his burnoose and insignias. They would fit well enough over Yawgmoth's powerstone armor. The rest of the man could be buried, with only his helmeted head jutting from the sand. It would be enough to fool the Thran troops. Yawgmoth would accompany them to the base of the extrusion and begin the climb. He would destroy a whole contingent of the Thran army and rise, resurrected, into his city.

"And tear the gunner's eyes out."

## J. Robert King

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"Lord Yawgmoth's ship went down," the breathless courier panted rapidly. She paused, calming her voice. "All hands—and our ruler—are presumed dead."

Commander Gix stared out at the garrison of his Phyrexian guard. It would take hours to deploy the ground forces, what with the ruined lift. The Phyrexian steeplejacks, though, could climb to the exit port in minutes. They were amazing fighters, folk with the general body configuration of sloths but the speed of horses. They could gallop across cliff faces as if they were plains. Steeplejacks were smart too. Their human intelligence was quickened by a cannibal wit. They only looked ignorant because of the simian spread of their lower faces, allowing a toothy jaw wide enough to bite off their victims' heads.

"Excuse me, Commander. Did you hear? Lord Yawgmoth is presumed dead."

"Never presume Yawgmoth dead," Gix replied levelly. "He is not. I would know. I would sense it."

"I was told to await your orders," the young woman said, dipping her head in apology.

"My orders—?" Gix began, and then realized he was next in command. "My orders to whom? Who sent you with this message?"

"The commander of the Halcyte guard, of course."

"The commander does not know how to deploy his forces, how to fire his guns, how to drop his bombs?"

"Of course he does," stammered the courier. "But he instructed me to ask if Lord Yawgmoth's presumed . . . condition might cause a change in military policy."

Gix's eyes flared. "Surrender? The commander of the Halcyte guard wants me to consider surrender?"

"He only indicates that all options—*every* option is yours."

"He is a coward and a traitor unworthy of his post." A keen smile filled Gix's face. "Yes. Every option. My orders are these."



## *The Thran*

The commander of the Halcyte guard must resign immediately. I am taking command of his forces."

The courier had nothing to say to that.

"I am leading my Phyrexian guard into the city. You will accompany us as we ascend. Deliver your message to the commander in my presence. I want you to have a weapon ready. If he does not surrender to my custody, I want you to slay him. He will not be expecting it from you. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," the courier said, eyes lowered. "Permission to speak?"

"Granted."

"What will happen to the commander, sir?"

Gix's smile deepened. "Perhaps he can be rehabilitated here in Phyrexia. Perhaps he can become a great Phyrexian warrior. If he does not surrender, you will kill him."

"Yes, Commander," the courier replied, hand on the dagger at her waist.

"Lord Yawgmoth is no longer presumed dead. My steeplejacks will recover him."

"Yes, Commander."

Gix tenderly lifted her head. His own fingers were tipped now with clawlike nails. In her innocent eyes, he saw his reflection—menacing and inhuman. At least there was that smile.

"Perhaps the commander has no merit, but if you do, my dear, you may well have a place among us."

"Yes, Commander."

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawgmoth climbed among an elite team of elf invaders.

The elves were accustomed to scaling magnigoth trees, not walls of cold stone. The morning sun cast the west cliff in shadow. These elves would have withered on the east cliff. Here they swarmed like lice. They hoped to reach the summit before midday, when the sun would overtake them and turn the cliff into a skillet.

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Of course, some had no hope of reaching the summit at all—

“Let go of my ankle! What are you trying to do—?”

They were rather paltry last words for an elf. These long-lived folk should die with epic poems on their lips. This was the third who died whining. Actually, he didn't *die* whining. He merely lost his grip of the rock and fell, whining. Then came a sustained wail with an abrupt end. Whining or wailing—it seemed a poor way to die.

Yawgmoth paused to watch. The elf became a puff of dust and a little red mark on the ground. Yawgmoth climbed again, using the handholds the elf had used. Good holds were critical. The cliff face leaned outward, which made it difficult climbing but prevented defenders from dropping rocks on their heads. Even the road that rose up the extrusion avoided this face of stone for lack of footing. It was the obvious choice for a vertical assault, but a difficult climb. Yawgmoth was glad for the powerstone armor breathing deeply for him beneath the burnoose. He was also glad these elves had thought him merely clumsy, stupid, inept—merely human. Otherwise, the three slips that had happened while he was nearby might not have seemed accidents.

“Dare I attempt a fourth?” Yawgmoth wondered to himself as he climbed a slanting crack. “Why not?”

His foot dislodged a jagged hunk of basalt. The rock bounded down, catching an elf squarely in the forehead. The impact made a wet crack. Wide green eyes closed. Attenuated fingers slid loose. The elf peeled away from the cliff face just like a leaf from a wall. He tumbled most beautifully of all, laid out fully. The killing stone rested like a rakish crown on his staved forehead.

“Enough!” came a shrill voice above Yawgmoth. It was an elf warrior woman. She had looped a length of silken rope about a jutting stone and wrapped it around her wrist. Her legs were folded in a crouch against the rock wall, and she glared down at Yawgmoth. “Enough! Move away from us! Ally or not,



## *The Thran*

you humans are so stupid you might as well be agents of—" Her rant broke off. Wide lavender eyes grew wider still. "What is that? Under your burnoose—what is that?"

Yawgmoth glanced down to see the powerstone armor gleaming beneath the open neck of his robes. He drew the throat closed, sensing other elves climbing up around him.

"What is it?"

"Just a souvenir. A trophy, really. I got it from that crashed ship back there. They say this stuff stops arrows and swords and everything."

The elf woman's eyes narrowed, and the emotion behind them shifted. "Souvenirs! Grave robber! Human scum! No wonder you are such a clod. Wearing fifty pounds of armor. Who needs armor on a climb like this?"

Yawgmoth stared up past her. The cliff face was silhouetted black against the bright sky. Dark figures moved rapidly across it, descending.

"Looks like all of us do."

The elf woman turned to look. She gasped.

Yawgmoth grabbed her cloak and yanked hard. The silken cord sliced through. She fell. Yawgmoth managed to foul another elf with the cloak. Both were dragged away.

Three more elves grabbed at Yawgmoth's burnoose. He flung it off, revealing his powerstone armor.

The Phyrexian steeplejacks arrived.

They bounded down the cliff face as though they were running on level stone. Headfirst, they came. Their shoulders worked furiously beneath black mail. Their crescent claws caught easily in any crevice that presented itself. From the nose upward, their faces were still vaguely human, though broad and grotesque grins filled the lower halves of their heads.

One steeplejack opened its mouth. Filed teeth spread in a round bite, and a double-jointed jaw ratcheted wide. It seemed a living bear trap grafted into a human head. Within that enormous mouth, the creature's vestigial human tongue lay slack and puny, a mere flap of skin.

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The steeplejack's first victim gazed dumbfounded at that limp muscle even as it slapped his cheek. The jaws snapped shut around his throat. Then all went black.

Black for one elf and red for all the others. Even in a slim elf body, there are gallons of blood. The steeplejack reveled in the crimson spray. Gore hissed out between the thing's teeth and blanketed the other elves. They shied back, one falling even before the headless corpse tugged free of its severed sinews and tumbled downward. They fell side by side, the body trailing a red spiral in the air.

Yawgmoth gazed happily at the steeplejack. The thing opened its mouth again, letting the skull fall between its teeth. The steel-trap jaws clamped again, crunching through cheek-bone and auditory canal and into the brain case. It seemed only a gray pudding between those teeth.

Three more steeplejacks were even then eating their way through the other elves. Lower down, invaders dropped off the wall, limp with terror. A few flung themselves away, choosing a better death. Some even mustered a line of poetry as they did.

It was lost on Yawgmoth. He heard only the contented work of the steeplejack's jaws, saw only the mottled ball of meat and bone that had once been an elf's head.

"You are one of Gix's boys, aren't you?"

Recognition dawned in the creature's eyes, and it nodded.

"Good, you understand," Yawgmoth said. "I figured you must be intelligent, or you would have bit my head off too. But how smart are you? Do you know who I am?"

The look in the steeplejack's eyes deepened to fear and reverence. It opened its dripping gob, and out tumbled the masticated head.

"Lord Yawgmoth!" It bowed its own head, pressing one wet cheek to the stone.

"Yes," he replied. "Do you think you could carry me to the city?"

The creature nodded avidly, leapt forward, swung an arm around him, and began a lurching ascent.



## *The Thran*

As they went, Yawgmoth contented himself watching the bodies rain down from the sides of the cliff. In time, his attention returned to the laboring figure that carried him. A slow smile spread across his face.

"I know you. You were one of the first health corps workers. Xod. Yes, your name was Xod."

A look of pride shown in the steeplejack's eyes. "Yes, Lord Yawgmoth. Yes."

"You look different," Yawgmoth said in unabashed amazement. "You look . . . beautiful."

"Yes, Lord Yawgmoth."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What is that? What is that?" hissed one of Rebbec's goblins.

The creature was supposed to be helping to install the temple's control stone. Instead, he stood at the western edge of the temple and stared down at the battle below.

"What is that?" Every repetition of that question drew more goblins away from Rebbec and the weighty icosahedron. "What is that?"

"Get back over here," growled Rebbec as she hauled futilely at the pallet that held the stone. The icosahedron they finally had found was huge, the size of a man and four times the weight.

"What is that?"

"What is what?" she yelled.

"Mistress Rebbec," said one of the older goblins. "I think you oughta come see this."

With a final groan of aggravation, she released the pallet. She brushed off her hands and stood.

"I know it's hard to concentrate with battles below, but the whole reason we're trying to get this stone into place is to save us all from the battle. And unless I have some help from you—"

Her admonition broke off midsentence as she stared down past scabby heads, past the gleaming edge of the temple, past even the western wall of the city, to the cliff face.

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There, dark figures bounded, attacking the Thran soldiers who climbed. They seemed black fleas and white lice. The black fleas were incredibly nimble. They swarmed in, and wherever they went, Thran fell to their deaths.

"More artifact creatures? More machines?" Rebbec mused. Surely not. All of Halcyon's mechanical defenders, aside from the sand-crabs, were Glacian's designs. Rebbec knew all of her husband's work. Nothing like this had ever appeared. Still, what else could it be? "They must be machines."

"Naw. Them's people," the old goblin said.

"People?" Rebbec asked.

"Yep. People. That's what Yawgmoth does to 'em. Changes 'em. Makes 'em into Phyrexians."

"Phyrexians—" Rebbec echoed. She had seen minor mutation—hypertrophy, giantism—but nothing like this. Tens of thousands of Halcytes had thronged to Phyrexia, and this is what Yawgmoth was doing with them?

Rebbec wandered away from the spot, shock making her arms and legs numb. "I knew he was . . . improving them, but . . . this?"

There were no sounds of battle here in the temple, but all that went on in the city was shown in prismatic sections through the structure. Rebbec saw more moving forms. Loping, scuttling, capering, vaulting—inhuman figures making their way down the streets.

Her feet felt as if they belonged to someone else as she plodded to the eastern overlook. There, troops marched down Council Boulevard. One side of the street was filled with Halcyte guards, and the other with Phyrexian guards. As severe and frightening as the Halcyte guards were in their silver armor, the Phyrexian troops were not even recognizably human. Fangs, claws, antennae, stingers, hackles, manes . . . it was a surreal procession. At the head of the two columns were their commanders.

"This is what he is doing to them," Rebbec said, disbelieving.

The columns halted on the steps of the Council Hall. Commander Gix and the Halcyte guard commander strode up to



## *The Thran*

the first landing. One of Gix's Phyrexians came with them. It was a hulking figure, two heads taller than the commanders. Its head was a huge ball of muscle. Dagger-sized teeth resided behind a grotesquely swollen jaw. Its arms hung to its knees, and it hunched up stairs too small for its clawed feet.

Gix was addressing the troops. Rebbec could hear nothing. His speech was angry, his gestures clipped. In the end, he gestured the Halcyte guard commander to his knees. The man reluctantly dropped. The Phyrexian beast loomed forward.

Rebbec cringed away. She closed her eyes and hid them in her hands. That man's death, that man's blood, would gleam in a million facets all around her.

A voice broke the silence—the voice of the old goblin. "Mistress Rebbec . . . come see. One of them ape peoples's got Lord Yawgmoth. It's carrying him on up to the city. Lord Yawgmoth's alive!"

Climbing to her feet, Rebbec lifted her eyes toward the bright heavens so she would see none of the atrocities taking place below. She staggered toward the control stone. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and through a tight throat she shouted.

"Get over here, all of you. Get over here. We've got to get this stone in place!"



## Chapter 25

"Off with you then, Xod," said Yawgmoth. He made a shooping gesture with his hands, as though he were sending a dog out to play. "Eat some more heads. Thanks for the ride."

The steeplejack sketched a very solemn bow. His simian frame bent low. "Yes, Lord Yawgmoth." The creature leapt easily over the ring wall. He plunged down the side of the extrusion. With casual ease, Xod reached out an arm and snagged a claw-hold. He caught a second and third and was bounding happily and easily down the rock face. In moments, he had reached another climber. He feasted again. The headless corpse spun away in its own free fall.

Yawgmoth smiled. The defenders of Halcyon had acquitted themselves well. In a week's time, the arsenal of stone-chargers would be complete. A day later, the Thran Alliance would be scrubbed from the face of Dominaria.

"Speaking of scrubbing faces . . ."

Yawgmoth's attention turned toward the third ray cannon on the western wall. Its gunner sat strapped into the firing seat, blasting away. She needed her eyes adjusted. Yawgmoth set out along the top of the wall.

Halcyte guards were thick on the ramparts. They clustered about red-hot ray cannons or poured bins of stone into



## *The Thran*

bombards or fired ballista bombs. They worked with grim enthusiasm and gleamed in pristine armor.

Among them, Yawgmooth was a dusty wreck. The insignias of his rank had been ripped away in the initial fall. Gauntlets and helmet were missing entirely. Even so, the wind in his ragged hair, the glint in his brutal eyes, the set of his scarred jaw—all of it told that this was Lord Yawgmooth, and he was furious.

Heavy-booted, Yawgmooth reached the gun mount. It was a massive bulwark of stone, made to support the weight and recoil of the ferocious weapon. Behind a metal rig that was twenty times her size and hot enough to melt glass, a gunner clung to the fire controls. They were powerstone activated, a box-schematic without the box. Her fingers danced deftly over the glowing stones. The massive gun ground slowly to the left and down to acquire a new target. The grating sound of the engines was joined by a low hum as the charge built within.

"Battle report, gunner!" Yawgmooth demanded above the roar of the gun.

The woman looked up at him, surprised. Her face, red from the heat, grew white. Fingers fumbled across the powerstone controls. The gun ground to a halt and powered down. A moment more of struggling, and the woman had loosed the straps that held her to the firing seat. She stumbled to attention.

"Lord Yawgmooth, I am honored—"

"You aren't wearing your helmet, gunner."

"It interferes with targeting, Lord, and is hot and unnecessary behind the gun."

"Battle report, gunner."

"All goes well. This gun has scored seventeen ship kills, confirmed, and twenty-three assisted kills, unconfirmed, as well as hundreds of troop kills, also unconfirmed."

"How many of ours?"

The woman blinked. Sweat from her forehead pooled like tears under her eyes. "Ours, Lord Yawgmooth?"

"How many of our soldiers have you killed?"

"Have I killed . . ."

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"Have you manned this gun since dawn?"

"Yes, Lord—"

"Do you remember shooting a Phyrexian war caravel? A ship named *Yataghan*? Or was that an unconfirmed kill?"

She was quite white now, sweat forming red lines on her cheeks. "The name of the ship was unconfirmed, yes. It rammed the ship I was targeting and flew into the path of the ray—"

"Did you know it had a crew complement of nearly a hundred? That would be nearly a hundred of our troops killed, confirmed, yes?"

The gunner was silent.

"You might have even better luck if you turned the gun around and fired on the civilians. You might wrack up thousands of kills that way. Did you know I was on that ship? Did you know that attempted regicide is a capital crime?"

The woman fell to her knees before him. She looked up, eyes streaming more than sweat now.

"Forgive me, Lord Yawgmoth. Please. I didn't know. It was an accident. I couldn't see. The *Yataghan* flew out of a smoke cloud—"

"You couldn't see—?"

"I couldn't see."

"Even without your helmet, you couldn't see?"

"I couldn't see."

"No," Yawgmoth said tenderly, cupping her chin in his hand and running his other hand through her hair. "Now you can't see."

It was harder work than he had expected—and messier. She thrashed and screamed, which was unseemly there on the wall, with everyone looking. In the end, he had not actually torn them out, as he had promised himself he would, but really, there was nothing left to tear out except ruptured membranes. She had been so intolerant the whole while, he finally just threw her over the wall. Her screams sounded sweeter the farther away they were.

Yawgmoth patiently wiped his hands on a rag. "Get a new gunner," he barked at the captain, who scrambled to comply. "Preferably someone with eyes in her head."



## *The Thran*

As if drawn by violence, Gix arrived. The idealistic champion of the underclass had become Yawgmoth's most trusted, ruthless, and clever officer. Commander Gix strode regally along the wall, his retinue behind him. Among the Phyrexian guard with him was a tall monster with a clenched ball of muscle for a head. Shreds of red clung raggedly to its dagger teeth. Gix went to his knees before Yawgmoth and bowed his head deeply. The monster at his side did likewise, as did the other Phyrexians.

"Hello, Gix," Yawgmoth said. "You brought the Phyrexian guard into the city."

"Yes. The Halcyte guard commander was a coward and a traitor. He presumed you dead and was considering surrender. The whole war could have been lost. The Phyrexian guard enforced his resignation."

Yawgmoth eyed the toothy monster behind Gix. "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have secured my rule and at the same time advanced your own position. You have saved my city and granted yourself a second army." Yawgmoth smiled genuinely. "Well, Commander of the Guards, the siege is well in hand, as you can see. We need last only another week, and then victory will be certain. Until then, the citizens of Halcyon are in grave danger. Use your Phyrexian guard to round up any Halcytes not engaged in defense of the city, and take them to Phyrexia. Enlist them."

"Yes, Lord Yawgmoth. It will take months to round up all the citizens."

"Make months into weeks," Yawgmoth said. "The siege will be broken in one week, and I want at least half the citizens enlisted by then."

"Yes, Lord Yawgmoth."

Yawgmoth looked out across the glimmering city. Rebbec's temple gleamed beautifully above it all.

"We are creating a new world, Gix, you know that. A new world and a new race. Strong, fearless, obedient, ruthless. Yes, just now they might seem monstrous, but war is monstrous

## J. Robert King

business. When this is all done, Phyrexia will create not monsters but gods."

"Yes, Lord."

\* \* \* \* \*

"He will return to Phyrexia soon," Rebbec whispered into the dark.

She could see only the first ten or so faces huddled there in the silo. At least fifty citizens hid here. Their breath made the place hot and dank. It was the smell of terror. Still, it was better than the septic smell that clung to Rebbec and her goblins.

"Yawgmoth will return to Phyrexia, and when he does, we can all escape. You must survive until then. Do not let the guards find you. They will take you to Phyrexia. They will make you into monsters. Stay here. Stay quiet, and don't give any sign of your presence."

"What are we to eat? What are we to drink?" asked one of the refugees.

Rebbec blinked, thinking. "Isn't there any grain left here?"

"It's all rancid. And there are rats."

Sighing sadly, she said, "I don't suppose you could rig some traps?"

"Eat rats and drink sewage?"

"I know it is terrible. I know," Rebbec replied. "But when it is all done, we will be safe. I will take you to a safe place, a beautiful, clean, safe, bounteous place. You will see."

A different voice spoke out of the darkness. "How will we know it is time?"

"I will place a lantern at the top of the temple. Even in daylight, you will see it. When you see the lantern, head for the temple."

"But the guards—"

"Use the sewers. The goblins will guide you. They know the way. They brought me here tonight. They are taking me all through the city tonight. They will guide you."



## *The Thran*

One of those goblins hissed from the cracked doorway. "Patrol!"

Every voice in the silo grew silent. There was only their breathing. It echoed in the throat of the building. The tromp of booted feet and click of claws filled the street. Most of the patrols numbered only five to ten guards. This one sounded like an army. In time, the footfalls receded to silence.

The goblin hissed, "All clear."

"So, eat what you can. Drink whatever clean water you can find. And wait. When Yawgmoth descends to his hell, we will ascend to our heaven."

\* \* \* \* \*

He was gone. It was as simple as that. Coma. He had awakened from comas before, but not this time. Not with his skin in rags, his temples as sunken as caves, his eyes dilated and unresponsive beneath papery lids. Only the puffing machines, the scuttling goblins, the living casket kept him alive anymore. In all other ways, he was gone.

Perhaps if she had come sooner, if she had come here first, and gone to the refugees after . . . perhaps she could have spoken to him one last time. That was the wrong way to think. Nothing happened by chance. It wasn't even a draughts match anymore. One player controlled both halves of the board—Yawgmoth.

"That's why I didn't make it down here in time," Rebbec said wearily. "He didn't want me to. You were right all along, husband. You were right about him, about everything. He deceived everyone but you. Deceived and seduced us all, except you."

A chill clotted Rebbec's spine. She drew back the edge of Glacian's infirmary garment. Folds slid away from a gaunt hipbone, translucent skin showing the shrunken muscle beneath. Glacian's emaciation was awful. Rebbec cringed, tears coming to her eyes. Even so, she pulled back the gown.

"Gods, no."

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The cut Yawgmoth had made in her husband's side had never healed. Black stitches straddled the gash. The flesh was dark and desiccated. Beneath lurked a malignant mound. It looked to be a tumor, the size of two fists clutched together.

"He didn't. He couldn't have . . ." she muttered, touching the spot. It was hard as rock. "Oh, gods, no! He did! He did!"

"He did what?"

Rebbec whirled, withdrawing her hands. There, in the quarantine cave, Yawgmoth and his health corps monsters stood.

"He did what?" asked Yawgmoth, voice dripping with concern.

She stared into his eyes, wondering if he could see how much she hated and feared him. "He . . . he fell into a coma. He . . . he left me before . . . before I could say good-bye."

Yawgmoth reached her. He wore his white robes of state, the exact hue of the casket where Glacian lay.

"We can heal him, Rebbec. You know that. We can heal anything." He lifted his hand to draw back the strands of hair that had fallen into her face.

Rebbec shook her head vehemently. "No. No. Glacian wouldn't have wanted it. It's the one thing he would not have tolerated."

Yawgmoth's hand flashed out. An odd ring gleamed on his finger. He grasped her arm insistently. There was a jab, like the sting of a bee, and then a welling, burning ache.

Rebbec looked down, a protest tumbling from her mouth.

Already Yawgmoth was speaking. "—weary. Exhausted. You have been the good wife all these years. You'd even allow him to die rather than disobey him. I cannot allow it. You're too weary. Nothing makes sense anymore. Everything true suddenly seems a lie. Every lie is playing at truth. You can't let your husband die just because you aren't thinking clearly—"

That much was true—she wasn't thinking clearly. She couldn't seem to remember what she had been doing today or the last few days. She was weary, bone weary. Exhaustion warmed her. Yawgmoth was right. She wasn't thinking clearly.



## *The Thran*

Yawgmoth stood, lifting Rebbec. He carried her as though she were a lost lamb and he the good shepherd.

“—I’m going to help you and your husband. I’m going to take you both to Phyrexia and heal you, once and for all.”

Rebbec was only vaguely aware of the cave around her. Health corps workers surrounded and lifted Glacian’s healing capsule. Goblins chittered at them and crowded about. She was only vaguely aware of anything but Yawgmoth.

He was so strong, so warm, so caring and truth-speaking and godlike. In his arms, nothing could ever harm her again. He was even gentle with the goblins. He was even patient as he waded through their pawing mob.

“It’s all right, little ones. I’m not going to hurt her. I’m going to heal her.”

The little beasts were pulled aside by health corps workers. One goblin, an old goblin, shouted out after Yawgmoth. “We light a lantern for you, Rebbec. We light a lantern for you!”

Yawgmoth smiled like the dawning sun. “Listen how they love you, Rebbec. They will light a candle for you. They will pray their little goblin prayers. Even the little monsters love you. I cannot blame them. I love you too.”

Rebbec could not imagine greater bliss, except to sleep now in his arms.

“That’s right. Sleep. I will heal you, Rebbec. Once and for all.”



## Chapter 26

Rebbec dreamed a strange dream.

She stood beside Yawgmooth on the first sphere of Phyrexia. They gazed out from a low rill of black stone. The grasslands below, from the mountains to the forest, were covered with a huge . . . thing. It seemed a fungus: brown-white fleshiness, sloping shelves, clustered stalks, opaquely bright, softly solid. The thing smelled of death and dirt but also of life and renewal.

"What is it?" Rebbec asked Yawgmooth in her dream. "What has grown up here in your world?"

His look was incredulous. He gazed at Rebbec with such amazed joy he seemed a young sun god.

"You don't know? Don't you recognize it?"

In fact, she didn't. It was clearly a Phyrexian plant. Its amorphous domes had the same contour as the low-lying mountains. Its stalks were as aggressive and alien as the compacted forest below. Its roots were swollen and sunk into the ground, exactly as Rebbec would have designed pilings for a foundation. . . .

"The infirmary?" Rebbec said breathlessly. It was her design, yes, but it had grown. It proliferated like fungus. Rooftops had become dome after dome in a vast field. Stacked sickrooms had spread in colony after colony. Footings had become literal roots, drawing power from the land. The building she had designed could have held a thousand patients. The building



## The Thran

that now spread before her could hold hundreds of thousands. "My infirmary?"

"Phyresis," Yawgmoth replied gently, wrapping his arm about her shoulder. "Progressive generation. Everything planted here grows. It changes, evolves, improves. It becomes larger, more powerful. It transcends its beginnings. The land transforms things. The land, the power of the Null Sphere, and the god within the land. This colony is large enough to hold all Halcytes. More colonies are growing, enough to hold all the empire, all the world."

It was a strange dream. Rebbec felt certain it was a dream. In the half-logic of sleep, she could not tell whether the dream were hers or Yawgmoth's.

"Even now, I've issued them an ultimatum, Rebbec. Even now, their commanders in their night encampments on the desert are reading my invitation. If they but surrender to me—unconditionally—they will be invited to join us here, in paradise."

Rebbec drew a deep breath of the fertile air. "And if they do not surrender?"

He reached out, enfolding her in his warm cloak. The embrace was loving and protecting.

"An ultimatum must have teeth in it."

Within his robe, the strong, salty scent of him was omnipresent. It was the scent of Phyrexia, distilled to its essence. Breathing that scent infused Rebbec. She clung to him as a child to a powerful savior. He was warm and certain and strong. Within his cloak, all remained as it had been. Beyond it, in the tumbling senselessness of dream, the whole world transformed.

When he drew back his cloak, the low mountains were gone, and the vast field, and the wooded cleft. Now they stood in a vaulted temple of iron strut and steel cable. Slim metal columns rose to a fan vault of delicate metal tracery. Where bosses might have adorned a Dominarian temple, here were clusters of bolts. Instead of wooden carvings, massive hammer beams gleamed with rivets. The floor was mirror-bright.

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Across that floor, in regular rank and file, stood artifact armies. As shiny as the world they occupied, these creatures of steel and glass and powerstone gleamed coldly. Most were man-size, with arrays of articulated legs, compound eyes, segmented thoraxes. Others were mammoths in metal. They were built to plod, massive and unstoppable, through enemy ranks. Turrets of ray weapons perched upon their armored backs. In the distance, half-formed, were a few on the massive scale of the behemoths lost in the first day of fighting. Hunched and vicious, the hulls waited in vast immobility as crews of artificers swarmed them. The artificers seemed maggots working over the empty husks. On Phyrexia, though, maggots did not decompose bodies but composed them. In the far distance, a large factory stood. Lever arms labored against the horizon, sparks leapt from welding arcs, cascades of molten metal flowed into vast forms.

"This?" Rebbec asked. "This is your ultimatum? This is what will happen if they do not surrender?"

Yawgmoth smiled with quiet pride. "This is one result. The siege armies will face these forces and my Phyrexian guard in a land battle the likes of which has never been fought on Dominaria. I will slay only so long as they resist. These forces will give them the chance to repent their perverse war. With them, I can force an unconditional surrender and bring those who survive back into the fold among the rest of us. With these forces and the Null Sphere, I can rule all eight city-states. There need never be civil war again."

It was Yawgmoth's dream. Rebbec knew that now. But how could she be dreaming Yawgmoth's dream?

"You speak as though there is a worse option."

Yawgmoth shrugged noncommittally. "If they rebuff my offer . . ."

Again the robe enfolded her. The spaces danced away. It was a sensation like traveling with Dyfed. Rebbec had the sudden realization that at least here, at least within Phyrexia, Yawgmoth had the power of a planeswalker.



## *The Thran*

The cloak opened to reveal the center of that steaming, hissing, thundering mill they had distantly seen. Machines towered. Smokestacks spewed. Cranes darted. Conveyors ground along. All among them, artificers moved. The gargantuan equipment made them seem only scuttling goblins. Phyrexia transformed them. It perfected them for their tasks. Skin grew rumped and tough. Eyes grew wide in the perpetual murk. There was not an ounce of fat on them. Their work suits hung on lean, hungry muscles.

Artificers and machines were not the most amazing sight. In their midst stood nine exquisite creations. They towered in a circle around Yawgmoth and Rebbec, their shiny fuselages reflecting back the attenuated images of the two.

"Stone-chargers," Rebbec said grimly.

"Yes. If they refuse my offer outright, not one of them will survive. The armies will be wiped out utterly. Nine more are being completed even now—one for each city-state beyond our own, and two for discretionary use. The city states will each be given the chance to surrender, or be annihilated. Once the whole empire is fully in hand, there will be more bombs for every nation of the world. Once the world is mine, the Thran empire will expand to take over the whole Multiverse."

Rebbec's heart flailed like a dying thing. She wished she could awaken from this dream. "How can we hope to conquer the Multiverse? We aren't planeswalkers."

"Oh, but we will be, my dear," Yawgmoth responded with certainty. "We will be." He flung his cloak about her.

For the first time, she resented it. For the first time, she felt the tingling ache of the transit from sphere to sphere. It was as though she had been numbed by a drug that slowly wore off. Even as the spheres cycled around them, she knew this was no dream. This was the all-too-true state of Phyrexia.

The cloak withdrew to reveal the most horrific sight so far. On this crimson sphere, lit by mile-high furnaces belching vast coronas of flame, the ground was lined with gigantic vats. Like furrows on a farm, they spread across the hills. Within each

## J. Robert King

lurked a tormented soul, immersed in golden oil. Some vats held lifeless creatures, seemingly pickled. Others boiled with the thrashing agony of the animal within. Vat priests in their red vestments walked along catwalks above the vats. At intervals, they thrust powerstone rods down into them. Creatures that had been still leapt into sudden motion.

"They are called priests," Yawgmoth said. "But really, they are mere farmers. They are raising crops of new creatures. They are raising Phyrexians."

Rebbec could not even speak. She merely stood there, on a metal landing above the network of catwalks.

"One day, perhaps all Phyrexians will be planeswalkers. Eugenicists in the laboratories above are seeking the key." He took her hand, leading her up a set of meshwork stairs toward a room at their top.

The nine-sided chamber was made of polished steel and lighted with powerstone lanterns. It gleamed in proud sterility. Only the red gowns of the four vat priests there gave any color to the chamber. Slabs of the same metal jutted from the walls—the size of pallets but as cold and unwelcoming as shelves in grave catacombs. Just now, only one of the platforms was occupied. The four vat priests and an assortment of complex artifact machines clustered around the figure. Three of the priests worked diligently, their fingers gory to the third knuckle. Sibillant whis-pers moved among them from behind the black masks they wore. The final priest took assiduous notes of everything said.

"These are my very best surgeons, trained by me personally," Yawgmoth said. "They have been working on this same patient for over a month now. They've very carefully explored and documented every living tissue."

"Living?" Rebbec peered past the priests. The creature in their midst could not have been alive.

The woman was laid open. A long, clean slice ran from the central finger of her left arm, down the palm, across the wrist, along the length of the arm, over the shoulder, across the torso to the right hip, and down to the central toe. All along that



## *The Thran*

cut mark, skin had been carefully flayed back and pinned. Beneath, muscles had been parsed, fatty layers picked apart, tendons cleft and clamped, bones sawn in two. Wherever an organ was revealed, the ports into and out of it had been mapped with numbered pins that pulsed with the movements of fluids. Careful cuts had cloven the trembling outer sacks and laid open the warm centers. One severed lung seemed a pink sponge cake, here and there oozing cherry sauce. The vast and ruddy liver might have been a blood pudding through which someone had run a spoon. The pancreas was white and flaky like goat cheese. The kidney showed the intricate internal geometry of a cauliflower bulb. The intestines were gone entirely, and the stomach was merely a deflated sack. Still, the woman lived.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you tormenting her?" Rebbec said, tears coursing down her face.

"She feels no torment. She no longer has the capacity to feel torment."

"What do you mean?" Rebbec whispered. "You've cut her wide open. How can she not feel torment?"

"She hasn't the capacity. Every capacity of the human being has its seat in a specialized organ or system," Yawgmoth explained simply. "Thought, motion, digestion, speech, reproduction, breathing, healing, pain . . . Disease is merely a dysfunction of these organs and systems. A person deprived of one of these organs is deprived of the capacity of the organ. We have deprived her of the organ of agony."

Only then did Rebbec see the slim metal rod that jutted into the ragged cut in her forehead. The rod jiggled just slightly, with quiet but unmistakable rotation. Within that cracked skull, rotors moved.

Rebbec fell to her knees, burying her head in her hands.

"Similarly, a person granted a specific organ is granted its capacity. Humans cannot fly, for we have not the organ of flight—wings. Granted wings, we could soar like eagles."

"Why, Yawgmoth. Why do you do this?"

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"If there is a planeswalking organ—and there must be one—this woman has it. I soon will have it as well. They will find it in her, and they will put it inside of me."

"You are a barbarian. You are a cannibal."

Yawgmoth stared down at her, honest confusion in his eyes. "This is not barbarism. This is the truth. This is science."

"You kill your enemy and eat her heart and her brain, hoping to gain her courage and wisdom. But you'll never have courage, only ruthlessness, and you'll never have wisdom, only arrogance."

He grasped her arm and yanked her to her feet.

"I do this for our people. I do this for you. When I am a planeswalker, I can make all of us planeswalkers. Don't you see? It is better that this one woman die to save the whole nation."

She tried to pull free, but his grip was implacable. "Let go of me."

Even as she struggled, Yawgmoth's cloak swept around her. "I will never let go of you, Rebbec. As long as I hold you, I have that courage you spoke of, that wisdom. You are the organ of ascendance. As long as I hold you, I am not merely perfected but perfect."

When the cloak opened again, they were in no place and every place. It was dark space, and yet shot through with light. It was a chaos place.

Yawgmoth swelled out to occupy it all. It receded before him until all was Yawgmoth. He suffused her hair and clothes. He pressed against every inch of her. He shone his image into her eyes and sang into her ears. To breathe was to draw him into her lungs, and yet she must breathe. In the last gasping moments before his essence had permeated every last tissue and every curl of her brain, she shut away a secret that he would never know.

Then he wholly possessed her.

\* \* \* \* \*



## *The Thran*

He had desired this moment since he had walked into that infirmary room years ago. He had desired it, but never before had the consummation aided his plans. Now, at long last, it did.

Suffusing her was like suffusing Phyrexia. He was the blood in her veins, the spark in her nerves. He sensed every corner of her being. He knew every thought. She was a world unto herself. Every memory, every thought was his. He saw the city when she had arrived, and the city when her temple was complete, and the schematics of every building that had gone up in the meantime. He saw Glacian when he was young and healthy, smelled ozone in his mana rig suit, felt the soft warmth of his hand. Yawgmoth heard echoing speeches among the dissolved Elder Council, tasted the bitterness of the water she had drunk last night, glimpsed the refugees clustered in their silo. . . .

So that is what she is planning, he thought. She is planning to fly the refugees out of here—or was planning to do so. Surely not after this—

Hatred. She hated him. She felt only terror and loathing in his presence. Part of that terror was respect, of course. Part of it was a realization that he could not be bested or even equaled. Yawgmoth was heartened. Respect was something, but he had expected love, not loathing. Perhaps it was only recently she had come to hate him.

Was it when he took her away from Glacian? No, then she had felt drug-induced adoration. Was it when she saw her first Phyrexian up close? That had deepened the loathing and heightened her determination to save her city, but the hatred went back farther. It was there already when he had dropped the first stone-charger in the defile. It was there when he implanted the Phyrexian heart stone in Glacian. It was even there, in natal form, when Dyfed had transported the imprisoned elders to Mercadia. Noting what that world looked like, Yawgmoth pressed back farther. Though slender and small, her tiny hatred stretched all the way back to their first meeting, when Yawgmoth took a skin sample from her husband.

## J. Robert King

Yes, but where there is hatred, there is also love. They are halves of a whole. Every love contains a thread of hate, and every hate a thread of love.

She had no love for him. Not now. Not ever.

Yawgmoth was astonished. He had been certain of her love.

It no longer mattered. He possessed her utterly. He knew her every secret. Nothing was hidden from him now. He was in her every tissue, every thought. She no longer even had a mind without him. What need did he have for love?

Phyrexia did not know me when I first touched her, but she has come to love me. Rebbec will be the same.

Perhaps a day had passed before word of the Thran attack came. They had slain all the steeplejacks. They had slaughtered the army guarding the road. They were scaling the walls en masse. They were climbing into the city. They were fighting in the streets.

Yawgmoth had his answer. His foes had refused the ultimatum. Their hatred was strong. There was not even a little love in it.

He thought of the nine bombs, tall and gleaming. Yawgmoth slowly withdrew himself from the enfolding heart of Phyrexia. He slowly withdrew himself from Rebbec too. He would leave her here. There was no will left in her. Even if she wanted to escape, she couldn't. The heart of Phyrexia would keep her here, forever.

With that thought, Yawgmoth appeared in the midst of his nine stone-chargers. Already the artificers were busily loading them into a sled to bear them up into the city.

"Soon the Thran will taste my anger."





## Chapter 27

Yawgmooth and a corps of Phyrexian guards reached Halcyon's fifth aerial port just before the stone-chargers did. It was lucky.

The port was overrun with Thran. *Wrath* and *Vengeance*—Yawgmooth's last two personal caravels—were captured. A crew of minotaurs swarmed the decks. Some carried dead crew to lay decorously on the dock. Others gathered and inspecting the weapons of the fallen. A few charged the ships' ray cannons. They were getting ready to cast off, to use these ships against the city that created them.

"I should have told Gix to defend this spot first," Yawgmooth hissed. Gix was off commanding the defense of the upper city. Yawgmooth bitterly drew his sword. He turned to one of his Phyrexian guard—a woman with filed teeth and wide eyes. "Tell the bomb crews to wait on the stair, out of sight with the doors bolted, until the ships are secure."

As she departed, Yawgmooth stormed onto the floating dock. Ten Phyrexians followed. They charged the minotaur who carefully tended the dead.

One could not surprise a minotaur; bull men were cannily alert. Deadly horns, fiery eyes, snorting nostrils, and a chest as broad as a wagon bed, the minotaur rose to his feet before the onslaught. He drew steel in both hands, his nails as ebony as his hooves.

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Yawgmoth leapt to the attack, tangling his weapon with the minotaur's. The powerstone in Yawgmoth's sword flared with each echoing blow. It should have sliced right through the bull's blades except that the beast also bore powerstone swords. He had evidently liberated them from the fallen guards.

Yawgmoth could not surprise the minotaur, but he could impugn the beast's honor. "Ah, looting the bodies?"

The red fire in the minotaur's eyes turned to blue. "I am guarding them, preparing them for burial."

Yawgmoth charged in while the minotaur explained, shoving the beast off balance and onto one foot, dangerously near the edge of the dock.

"Stripping them of weapons isn't preparing them for burial. Warriors should be buried with their weapons."

The bull man had just regained his footing and fought forward when that verbal blow came, and it had been a blow. Yawgmoth had worked among these creatures. He knew their strict codes of conduct. Warriors—even enemy warriors—were to be buried with their weapons.

"These swords came from stores below decks," the minotaur managed, landing a skidding attack on a shoulder plate.

Yawgmoth lurched beneath the blade, twisted, and pulled free. "Next you'll be going through their pockets. Next you'll be stripping their clothes."

The blue flames became white. The minotaur roared and lunged.

He had over-committed. Yawgmoth stepped back, letting the creature crash past. He swung his blade, sinking it into the creature's side.

Even gushing blood, the beast whirled and lashed out.

Yawgmoth received the attacks as though the minotaur merely handed him items he had requested.

"What are you going to do next, rut with the dead, you filthy beast?"

There was no roar this time, so intense was the minotaur's hatred. He barged, bloody, into Yawgmoth and flung him to his



## The Thran

back beside the dead. In three-fingered hands, swords whirled. Powerstone blades sank into flesh. It was all Yawgmooth could do to knock back the blows. He was losing. He had enraged the beast, but not enough to get the better of him. Until—

"You care nothing for these warriors. . . . Guarding them? Preparing them for honorable burial? Minotaurs know nothing of . . . honor."

The beast hurled the powerstone blade down to cleave Yawgmooth's head. At the last moment, Yawgmooth rolled aside, and the sword cleft the head of one of the deadmen. It sliced through the skull and into the pier beneath.

The sword was stuck, gripped not by wood but by the stupid incredulity of the beast. He had desecrated the honored dead, the very ones he had been given to guard.

Next moment, he joined them. Yawgmooth's sword pierced the minotaur's belly and carved upward through gut and rib and lung to slice open his ripe, red heart.

Even as the massive warrior crashed down beside the human dead, Yawgmooth rose. He was mantled in blood, his own and the blood of the bull. Only his powerstone sword shone cleanly. A whoop went up behind him. Yawgmooth turned, seeing his Phyrexian guard had made similar work of the other minotaurs aboard *Vengeance*. Some of the warriors were busy pitching dead bodies over the rail. Others cut loose a trophy for their belts or a snack for their mouths. Their captain was the one who had whooped.

She shouted, "*Vengeance* is secure."

"*Wrath* is secure," came another shout.

"The dock is secure."

Yawgmooth ordered the captain, "Tell the crews to bring up the bombs. Send a messenger to find Commander Gix and order him to drive the refugees from the temple."

The captain acknowledged the orders and rushed off on Yawgmooth's bidding.

Meanwhile, Lord Yawgmooth strode up the gangplank of *Vengeance*, dripping gore. It was a very old image of death—

## J. Robert King

bodies and blood. Soon he would redefine the image of death, he and his nine stone-chargers. They would make death a thing of pure white, without even bones to sully the desert. He would scour it of the mistakes of the past. In white fire, he would annihilate the whole Thran army.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was gone. Oh, the bliss of it. The monster was gone. He had torn through every fiber of her, raked every nerve, threshed every thought.

No, not every thought. He had stolen every thought but one. If he had known that one thing, he would have possessed her utterly, and no one wants to be possessed utterly.

She had once loved him. That was the secret. She hid it in plain sight, masking it in the name hate.

Now it *was* hate. Love was gone. Now and forevermore, it was hate.

A moment before, she could not have thought such a thing about Yawgmoth. In this secret place, though, Rebbec could think clearly. Her will remained. From that secret place flowed rage, which filled the raw void he had left in her. It stung like bitter spirits, but it also warmed her. She halted the advance of that angry tide. There was one thing that remained to be done before she let it fill her completely.

*I must do it, while there is still enough of his smell in me. I must do it now, while the world still thinks I am he.*

Rebbec summoned Phyrexia. She reached out for the world. She expanded her being outward and felt it tentatively take hold of her. It knew she was not Yawgmoth, but it sensed its master in her being, in her blood, and it responded tentatively.

Rebbec did not flow out on the tides of the world as Yawgmoth did. Her essence did not convert itself to the blood of Phyrexia. Still, she could feel the pulse of the land and sense what it sensed. She searched through it, her mind determined and yet frightened.



## The Thran

Phyrexia knew she searched and wondered what she searched for.

*I seek my love*, was what she thought.

The world was mollified. It told her Yawgmoth had ascended.

Rebbec did not cease seeking, a sad and grieving child.

The world allowed her her grief. It allowed her to search.

Then she found him—not Yawgmoth, but Glacian.

He was in the same raised laboratory as Dyfed. He had just arrived. The four red-robed vat priests were busy arraying him on an adjacent pallet. His white casket lay nearby, the life-support mechanisms gingerly positioned around him. Priests moved his withered limbs with reverence and buzzed excitedly. One of them was very slowly, very carefully, drawing a line from the middle fingertip of his right hand, up the arm and onto the shoulder. . . . Except he wasn't drawing the line, he was incising it. Beads of ruby blood welled up slowly from the cut mark.

Terror, like a drug, moved through Rebbec. The vision faded. She sensed uncertainty in Phyrexia. The world withdrew from the touch of her mind. Her terror repelled it, a foreign thing—Yawgmoth never felt terror.

*He wanted to do it himself*, Rebbec projected into the cloud of doubt that hissed around her. *He will be furious when he discovers what they have done.*

There was a pause in that great mind. Yawgmoth did not feel terror, but Yawgmoth's servants felt it. Deep terror was the soul of Yawgmoth's greatest servants. This one, this Rebbec, must be his greatest servant. Who else would he invite into the inner sanctum? Who else would smell so pervasively of him?

What shall we do?

The mist that had separated Rebbec from the world was thinning. She had to be careful now. Any more suspicion might break the tenuous tie. *What does the master do to those who disobey?*

He kills them.

*Then let it be done as he would do it*, Rebbec responded.

## J. Robert King

The thought was no sooner formed than Rebbec felt the four dark souls wink from existence. She could see them, Yawgmoth's four greatest eugenicists slump down one by one. They did not clutch their hearts but their thighs, hands over the Phyrexian heart stones implanted there. She felt not only their dying souls but the wet rupture of organs within them. Muscles spasmed, cut by the jag ends of broken bones. Their own musculature became great gizzards, grinding bones and innards into a digestible paste.

They weren't the only ones dying. Dyfed, too, began at last to die. The deaths of her attendants meant her own death. Rebbec was relieved to feel it happening.

The world mind grew distressed.

*Yawgmoth was finished with her, Rebbec lied. He had learned all he could from her. He sought the planeswalking organ. The vat priests had scrambled it when they scrambled her brain. Incompetence. It is why he brought Glacian here. His planeswalking organ . . . she stopped, glimpsing the truth in the mind of Phyrexia. Glacian was a nascent planeswalker. It was why Dyfed had come to visit him. It was why Yawgmoth had kept him alive so long and brought him here to dissect. Struggling to maintain the easy tone of her thoughts, Rebbec continued. . . . is still intact. That is why Yawgmoth wanted to cut him open . . . himself.*

There was belief and understanding in the great mind.

*He too will die, if left untended.*

Through Rebbec's mind flashed images of the myriad vat priests working the catwalks nearby. Some of them lifted their heads, as though hearing a silent thought.

*No, Yawgmoth wished to do it himself.*

He is not here. He is in Halcyon.

*I will take Glacian to him. Move me to the laboratory. I will pack Glacian in his healing capsule. You will take us to the portal, and I will take him to our master.*

There was suspicion again in that vast mind.

Rebbec let her once-love for Yawgmoth roll out in a lying flood.



## The Thran

Immediately, the darkness of the inner sanctum sifted away.

Rebbec stood in a nine-sided laboratory of polished steel. Her lacerated husband lay on the shelf on one side; Dyfed died quietly on the other. Four vat priests were dead heaps on the floor.

Rebbec knelt by her husband and stanchd the blood flow from his wound. She lifted him. He was only a bag of bones. Cradling him, she took him to the healing capsule. All the while she worked, arranging life-support mechanisms, she felt the mind of Phyrexia press upon her, watching uneasily. The moment the casket was closed, Rebbec and Glacian dissolved away.

They reappeared on the first sphere, the fungus city spreading to one side and the great black portal to the other. Not waiting for the world to change its mind, Rebbec hefted the end of the white casket and dragged it, hissing, across the grassy ground. She watched the blue sky as she went, waiting for a bolt to leap down out of it and slay her and Glacian at last.

The foot of the coffin grated on stone. She looked about. She stood within a dark cave, beside the mirror podium and steel-and-glass book. Phyrexia was only a blinding and horrible vision through the portal.

The Caves of the Damned were the most wonderful sight Rebbec had ever seen.

"Now to scare up a few goblins to help me hoist this thing to the city." Heaving the capsule, Rebbec dragged it away from the gateway.

Yes, she would take Glacian above, but not to Yawgmoth. She would take her husband to the temple they had designed. Once within, they could fly away from all this madness.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a beautiful thing to fly this way. There were no Thran ships in the sky. The Phyrexian fleet was minuscule, but nine caravels was enough. Yawgmoth led them from his own warcraft, *Vengeance*.

## J. Robert King

He did not even command *Vengeance*. Not in words. Not in orders. The crew knew what he wanted. Pinpoint accuracy was not critical with stone-chargers. He gave no orders. They would have soured the taste of wine in his mouth. They would have pulled his attention away from the spectacle unfolding below.

The Thran and their allies filled the desert on all sides. Their forces stretched away to the mountains in the west and the hills in the east. It seemed the whole world had risen in outrage against this single city, poised in the heavens, within reach of the gods. Of course they would, these violent beasts, half-cows, half-cats, half-lizards—stunted dwarves and wilting elves and thick-browed men. The Phyrexians had risen above them all. They had climbed the chain of being and were ready to ascend that last step.

Let the rest descend, Yawgmoth thought, staring down at the moiling multitudes. Let them all descend.

The first bomb, silver in the sunlight, tumbled free of *Vengeance*. It toppled end over end. The flashes from its fins swept over the army of dwarves below. They looked up from their crude assault engines, paused beside their laboring donkeys, and gaped at the sparkling doom that fell on them. The bomb righted itself, point downward. Its fins gave it a spiraling descent. Soon, it was but a silver spot against the staring army. Then it was nothing at all, only its shrieking whistle reaching *Vengeance* and her lord.

A white smile spread across his face.

As if in answer, a white circle formed below. It spread outward with the speed of a dilating eye, a uniform disk of force. The dwarves silently disappeared in that cloud. In moments, it had flashed to the base of the extrusion and out to the mountains on the far side. Its center swelled upward in a tremendous bulge. From the middle rose a fat column of force. Tracers of burning things shot into the air beside the superhot column. Killing clouds rose in rings around the spot.

"Beautiful," Yawgmoth said, sipping his wine.



## The Thran

Only then did the sound of the explosion reach *Vengeance*. The craft jolted, seized in a giant hand of noise. It was omnipresent. It was too loud to hear. It swept past, enveloping all the world in thunder.

A second bomb rolled from the ship, over an army of humans doing their best to flee from the first blast. There would be plenty of fleeing today but no escape. The humans died as suddenly and spectacularly as the dwarves.

There were seven more bombs left.

"One for each city-state, and one for Yawgmoth," he quoted. He sipped his wine and watched his foes dissolve in a pure, scouring whiteness.



## Chapter 28

Through the sensory conduits of his command seat aboard the Null Sphere, an old artificer watched his people die.

A moment before, hundreds of thousands of Thran and their allies had filled the desert below. Now only their ghosts remained—a wide ring of white cloud. The Null Sphere drew their ghosts upward and channeled the power into Phyrexia. Yawgmoth not only slew the Thran. He feasted on them.

There was a way to stop him, though. The old man and his artificer colleagues would have to sacrifice their lives, but at least Yawgmoth would be stopped.

"Take us higher," the old man said breathlessly. He turned his head toward the Phyrexian that controlled the Null Sphere's altitude.

The beast glowered at his powerstone console. "Any higher, and you humans will die of asphyxia."

"This low . . . we cannot draw mana . . . from the whole cloud," the old man lied. "The city . . . will be engulfed."

The Phyrexian hesitated.

"Now . . . or all is lost!"

The Null Sphere soared suddenly heavenward.

The old man felt himself black out. He knew he was dying. The others would die too. Their corpses would short out the command seats, and the Null Sphere would be nullified. It



## The Thran

would no longer draw off the roiling mana below. Dying, they would trap Yawgmoth in his killing clouds.

Death was sweeter than he could ever have hoped.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was beautiful. Halcyon floated high and safe above roiling mana. White clouds. Pure clouds. Scouring, cleansing clouds. The rebellion was over. The Thran Alliance was only a memory. Not even their bodies would remain on the desert. Not even the desert would remain, but scoured bedrock.

Yawgmoth lifted the wine bottle. He turned the green glass speculatively before him. The last drop of wine wormed along the base of the bottle. It was blood-red, but seemed black within the glass.

There were nine more bombs aboard *Wrath*. The crew had orders to drop one in the heart of each city-state that did not surrender unconditionally—one for each city-state and one for Yawgmoth. After the empire was brought to heel, there would be nine more bombs—one for each of the allied races and one for Yawgmoth. Then there would be bombs for the Multiverse—nine and nine times nine and nine to the ninth power. It all began here, in this heavenly city among the purgative clouds.

Yawgmoth dangled the bottle over the rail and casually let it drop. He watched as it plunged, tumbling, toward the clouds. Wine bled from the neck of the thing. Even before the bottle disappeared, it began to dissolve in the acid air.

For the first time since the bombing had begun, Yawgmoth rose from his seat beside the rail. The desert was purged, but there were still Thran soldiers overrunning the city above. It would be a fight in the streets and houses and rooms of the city. It would be like the phthitic riots. *Vengeance* could menace from the skies but do little more than that. Yawgmoth's place was in the fight, not above it. For the first time since the bombing had begun, Yawgmoth gave an order.

## J. Robert King

"Fly over the city. Over the granary."

Since the days of the riots, those granaries had harbored rebels. *Vengeance* topped the bleeding walls and approached the jumble of silos and storehouses. Figures swarmed the white cylinders: cat people, lizard men, dwarves, elves—roaches, silverfish, earwigs, flies. He could fumigate the city—Yawgmooth could slay them all with a thought, and that fact comforted him—but his own folk would die. Phyrexian and Halcyte guards fought the swarming Thran in alleys and doorways.

"Even if I lose all Halcyon, I still have Phyrexia."

*Vengeance* nosed out above the silos of the granary.

"Drop bow anchor."

The rattle of chain came, and the anchor plunged. Its crown smashed a dwarf too stolid to leap aside. Yawgmooth swung over the rail, climbed down the chain, and stepped from the anchor, his feet gory. The image made him smile. He was stomping a new vintage in blood.

Yawgmooth drew his sword. The powerstone in its hilt winked conspiratorially toward its master. He flung out the blade and easily cut a charging elf in two.

"Raise anchor!" he shouted.

Even as the ring lurched upward on the chain, Yawgmooth seized a lizard man and flung him down, impaling him on the anchor. The fluke jutted through his scaly back. Impaled alive, the Viashino writhed on the rising anchor.

"Patrol the city!" Yawgmooth ordered *Vengeance*. He turned, eager to kill again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There's a ship up there!" Rebbec said, peering through the sewer grate. "A war caravel."

In the fetid murk of the sewer, six sets of goblin eyes grew wide. The healing capsule they bore between them glimmered beneath the smudges and grime that draped it.

A goblin muttered, "Phyrexian or Thran?"



## *The Thran*

Rebbec said, "What does it matter? The battle is thick here. We can't emerge safely."

Her point was punctuated by a roaring scream. A minotaur tumbled into the culvert and pitched against the grate—or half a minotaur. Gore and innards made a gruesome cascade at Rebbec's feet.

"Granary always safe before," the goblin said.

"Well, it's not safe now," Rebbec replied. "Yawgmoth knows about it. He's been inside my mind. We'll have to reach the temple another way. Farther up."

The goblins nodded in the murk. They preferred underground passages anyway. Not that they were without their dangers—inescapable cesspools, deadfalls, rats, disease, but better these dangers than swords through the back. Goblin feet pattered through trickling sludge.

Rebbec followed. "I shouldn't lead us any longer. Yawgmoth knows everything I know. He knows everything I would do, would try. One of you should take over. How close can you get us to the temple?"

A fangy grin shone in the murk. "I know way. I bring you up Council Hall dungas."

Rebbec laughed. "Good. You do that. Bring us up beside the Council Hall. We'll have to fight our way to the top of the dome."

"We not fight. We fly. We take flying chair."

She was about to object. Yawgmoth would expect her to object. "Yes. You are right. We will take a sedan chair. When we are all in the temple, we will fly away from here. We'll fly away from the war and the horror of it all. We'll fly into the heavens. You lead on."

"Up the dungas! Into heaven!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The temple was crammed with refugees—two thousand of them. More arrived every moment. They clustered thickly on the Council Hall dome. They leapt to the packed portico.

## J. Robert King

They pressed shoulder to shoulder in the main hall, children perched on shoulders to keep from being crushed. Every balcony was full, every spiral stair. Folk sat atop any flat spot. Even the altar was piled high. Only the control stone itself was empty. They all knew that to climb atop it could send the whole temple crashing down.

When refugees first arrived a day ago, they had been furtive, struggling to hide in prismatic walls. As the night wore on, more came, and more. The floors filled up. Silence gave way to whispers. When morning dawned, the once-gleaming temple was opaque with packed bodies. There was no hiding now. There was only a fearful question—who would arrive first, Rebbec or Gix?

Gix.

The river of refugees came to an abrupt end. Only a hundred or so remained, pushing to reach the pinnacle of the dome. Those leapt who could, though the entry portico was already too crowded. Folk in the temple shouted them back. Still, they jumped. Some gained the temple. Others fell. Their broken bodies joined the red slick on that side of the dome.

The stairs turned into a crimson cascade. At the rear of the line, Phyrexian guards flung down those ahead of them. Their scarlet claws hewed the backs of the folk. Bodies and blood made a gory wake behind them. They marched upward with an even and ruthless tread. All the while, their grim figures grew clearer—wide eyes, gray skin, barbed whiskers, tortured muscle, horns, talons, fangs. . . .

Terror swept through the temple, borne on a single word. "Phyrexians!"

At the head of the company was Gix himself. "Take the temple!"

"Don't let them across!" shouted refugees. "Don't let them across!"

The first taloned horror easily vaulted from the dome. It clutched a trio of women. Its claws sank in. It scrabbled to climb over their bleeding forms and into the temple. Shrieking in terror, the refugees behind kicked the three women off the temple. Phyrexian and women fell.



## The Thran

A second Phyrexian leapt into the vacated space. It slew five refugees before someone stabbed it and dumped its body. Weapons were passed to the front. The next monsters who hurled themselves toward the temple plunged, swords sticking from stomachs and throats. More weapons came, but they would not be enough. The monsters were too violent, too voracious.

"Shift the temple. Shift it away from the pinnacle!" someone shouted.

The idea swept back through the throng. Refugees on the altar clambered up beside the control stone. They set their hands on it and pushed. With a slow but implacable motion, the great temple drifted away from the pinnacle. It moved smoothly, with no more sound than a sedan chair.

Gix shouted for the rest of his guards to jump. Four more Phyrexians tried. They fell and broke apart on the dome below. Gix was left to shake a bloody fist at the retreating refugees.

A rabid cheer went up from the temple, a sound of vengeance. The temple drifted to a halt, safely removed from the pinnacle. They would shift it back for no one except Rebbec herself.

A black blot smudged out the sun. *Vengeance*. The war caravel slid lazily into place above the temple.

Shouts of adulation died away. Surely Yawgmoth would not bomb his own people in their temple?

Nine long ropes dropped over the rails. They had not snapped straight before nine black figures descended—more Phyrexians. They dropped hungrily on the heads of the crowd.

\* \* \* \* \*

This had been even more fun than his journey aboard *Vengeance*. Killing hundreds of thousands with white scouring clouds was beautiful, but this one-on-one dance of steel and blood—this had been fun.

Yawgmoth had lost count of his kills. They had come very rapidly at the beginning—killing like breathing. Now the Halcyte guard had locked down most of the granary and were

## J. Robert King

cleaning out the last hidey-holes. One was above, the top of a grain silo packed with half a dozen Thran. A silo ladder rose up a dark shaft overhead, and blood dripped from a fresh hand print on the lowest rung. It would be death to climb that ladder. A knife dropped down the shaft could sink through an eye or even a skull. There was no point in it.

Yawgmooth stepped away from the silo, glancing up at the peak of it. A pair of Halcyte guards stood nearby. Yawgmooth motioned them over. The white-armored soldiers rushed to their lord. They went to one knee before him and bowed their heads.

"How may we serve, Lord Yawgmooth?" one of them asked.

"Chop down this silo," Yawgmooth said simply.

The one who had been silent now looked up at the cement structure. "Chop it down, Lord?"

"Chop it down as you would chop down a tree," Yawgmooth said simply.

"Yes, Lord Yawgmooth," the first said.

"With what," the other asked, quickly adding, "Lord?"

"Your powerstone swords will cut stone. Cut into this silo until it falls."

They both nodded at that. Rising, they hurried to the silo, checked for a clear spot where the building could fall, and began chopping.

"Business concluded," Yawgmooth said, walking away from the spot.

He reached the street beside the granary. All along the thoroughfare, silver-armored Halcyte guards patrolled. Red masses of meat lay in heaps on the road. Phyrexian troops crossed the street at their half-jog, eyes and claws eager for some new prey. They had run short of cat and bull and lizard flesh. Occasionally defenders would enter a smashed doorway and Thran corpses would fly from windows and crash down in the street. On the whole, the buzz of battle was now an idle, hungry sound.

The city was well in hand. The Thran soldiers below were washed away. All that remained were the traitors in the Thran Temple.



## The Thran

Yawgmoth stared up at the dangling gem, its heart black with treason. It was his one great mistake, that building—his last great mistake. The temple was Rebbec's gleaming vision of heaven, which would forever war in his people's mind with the true heaven of Phyrexia. Rebbec had even equipped the thing to fly away. The only reason it had not was that the traitors waited for Rebbec, their savior.

Yawgmoth allowed himself a small smile. Their savior was now his.

The crackle and groan of shifting stone drew his attention away from the temple. The silo was falling. The guards had hewn out a wide gash near the foundation. The leaning weight of the tower shattered the wall. With slow majesty, the silo toppled. Its lower edge pulverized and disintegrated. The cylinder of rock cracked like an egg as it went over. The top, where Thran soldiers hid, hit last and hardest. With a thunderous crash, it fell to rubble. Amid the grinding and bouncing hunks of stone were human figures, visible for a moment before being pounded to mush.

"Six dead," Yawgmoth said dispassionately as he turned back toward the crowded temple. "Two thousand on the verge of death."

Even then, *Vengeance* circled toward the gemstone building, a fresh company of Phyrexians ready at the ropes. It came about over the city wall. Suddenly, it was gone. A dense cloud, as white as milk, ghosted up from beyond the wall. It enveloped the war caravel in its curdling mass and continued upward.

It was a killing, scouring, purifying cloud. It would turn granite to sand and sand to ash. It would obliterate flesh utterly. It would leech the charge from any powerstone it contacted.

*Vengeance* was visible once last in vague shadow, already half eaten away and rolling over. It struck the disintegrating wall and then plunged from sight down the cliff face.

"No," Yawgmoth said in disbelief.

Silent and patient, the killing clouds rose on all sides of the city. Their white heads curled and edged out over Halcyon.

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They converged in a closing dome above them all. The whole of Halcyon would be destroyed.

"No," Yawgmoth gasped again.

Worst of all, the Thran Temple and its cargo of traitors and corpses rose with sudden, terrific motion up and out of the white dome. Tongues of cloud licked the edges of the temple as it shot upward, but then it was beyond them.

"Two thousand traitors, escaped," Yawgmoth breathed.

Then the dome was complete. Pale death closed over Halcyon.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The temple's gone," Rebbec hissed within the culvert. They had just reached the upper city, just glimpsed the embattled temple above. Goblins had begun prying at a grate on Council Boulevard, but now the temple was gone. "And something worse."

"Something worse?" echoed fearful voices behind her.

"A mana cloud. A killing cloud. It's enveloped the city."

Goblins stopped prying. They craned to see past the iron bars.

An eerie silence came to the sewer and the streets beyond. Into that silence intruded a horrible sound. Wind moaned through a vast structure. Tiny bells sounded—not bells but crystals ringing against each other. The tintinnabulation quickly became cacophony. Atop that high jangle came a chorus of two thousand throats screaming.

The Thran Temple came down through the descending ceiling of cloud. It was canted on its side. The faces of refugees flashed in spectrum over the city—massive and beautiful and doomed. The temple struck. It broke in a million pieces. Crystal shot out in razor shards. Implosions rocking the city.

"Down!" Rebbec yelled. "Down. Descend! It's our only hope. Away from the light! Away from the white cloud! Down to the Caves of the Damned!"





## Chapter 29

The white clouds descended. Thick as milk, they descended. Whatever they touched turned to powder or ooze. Limestone sloughed down in runnels of ash. Basalt crumbled like soggy cake. Clay rooftops melted. Brick walls slumped in yellow dust. Wood simply evaporated. People—running, shrieking, scrambling people—became skeletons that ran on a few steps before the bones lost volition and the joints separated and all tumbled toward ground but dissolved before they could strike cobbles that, too, dissolved. People died. They died in Halcyon as certainly as they had died on the desert plains below. They would die in Losanon too, when *Wrath* did not receive the unconditional surrender it demanded, and in Wington and Seaton and all the others. Within a week, the whole empire would turn to white memory.

Halcytes fled down toward Phyrexia. They went like rats scurrying away from a sudden, bright light. Panting and shrieking, they flung themselves down any hole that presented itself. Some were deathtraps—wells and cisterns. Clouds billowed into them and ate away whomever hid within and brought walls and ceilings slumping after. Other holes—the ones that stank of sewage or sulfur—they led down into a fetid, welcoming darkness. The putrid air was redolent with life or at least the leavings of life—a glad smell when one is pursued by white, cleansing death.

## J. Robert King

Rats headed downward as well. Rats and dwarves, toads and lizard men, alley cats and cat people, vermin, phthitics, goblins, and elves, thick-browed barbarians and minotaurs, they all knew to run down into darkness. Foes who would have slit each others' throats in the gleaming city now ran side by side through the murk. They followed each others' makeshift torches, climbed down the ways that others had proved safe, skirted the pits where folk had fallen. They did not slay each other, but neither did they save each other. They would happily follow a surefooted minotaur down a slick channel and just as happily climb over his corpse wedged in a ruined sluice. The divisions of nation and city-state, of race and gender, dissolved. It was not a mad throng, but tens of thousands of mad individuals flooding away from light and down into darkness.

In time, all those winding channels led to the great cesspits. Those had doors to further descents, which led inexorably to the mana rig. Gargantuan furnaces, enormous crystals, inexplicable machines, but no doors—only coal chutes into blazing ovens. The refugees arrived and moiled and flooded, water desperate to find a path downward. Perhaps there was no path downward. Perhaps they would all be crushed against the furnaces, and the air would be breathed up, and the white death would blanket them all.

Then a voice spoke. It came from everywhere and nowhere at once. It echoed in unseeable heights and in the chambers of terrified hearts. The voice of Yawgmoth.

"People of Halcyon, people of the allied foes, hear me. Even now, a wave of death settles over all we have built. It draws the power from every crystal that held our nation aloft. Towers fall. Walls crumble. The dream of Halcyon is over. We have seen the Thran Temple fall. We have seen the walls of our city turn to ash and sift away. This cloud will course down the channels that have brought us here. It will reach even this deep spot and supercharge the eighty-one crystal spheres here. They will explode with a force that will level the whole extrusion."



## The Thran

A groan of terror rose from the moiling multitude. Fingernails clawed at any crack that might be a doorway.

The voice of Yawgmoth came again.

The throng quieted beneath its mesmeric balm.

"It should be a time for utter despair. The dream is over. All is lost, but not all. I have prepared a perfect place for you—a world beyond illness and death, beyond wars and plagues and famines. Oh, my people, how I have longed to bring you to paradise."

The aching compassion in his voice swept like a black wind through the chamber. The people breathed it in. Their lungs tingled and their hearts forgot panic.

"Let me tell you of this land, of Phyrexia. Its entryway lies in deep bedrock, and the world itself exists in a place not of this plane. It will never be destroyed. It is a bounteous world with wide and fertile plains, golden with wild grain and rich in primeval game and deep in black earth. There is endless farmland for any who would work the soil and bring forth its fruits. Above are the plain tower mountains, snow-capped and robed in ancient woodlands. Below stretch deep jungles as impenetrable and fecund as the forests of Jamuraa. And lakes, yes, and oceans, yes, and growing cities of design more glorious than all the cities of the empire."

Each word set a bright image floating in the darkness.

"I have prepared this place for you, my people—even for you, my onetime foes. I have made it for you, for I am a god. I ask only that you enter it. I ask only that I may be *your* god."

Suddenly, there was movement in the deepest, darkest corner of the mana rig. There came a grating rumble. Massive blocks slid back. A cold blackness opened in the wall. Already the stalled throng shifted and flooded down into it.

"There, the invitation is given. The way is open. I am the way. Receive me, and enter into paradise."

They did. Every last creature opened his or her solitary heart to Yawgmoth, and he entered them. They were no longer solitary, for Yawgmoth dwelt within. Ones became

## J. Robert King

twos, and twos became fours and eights until they all were made a mad nation.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wait," Rebbec told the goblins, whose claws fidgeted at the edges of the healing capsule. They were anxious to join the procession out of the mana rig and down into Phyrexia. Rebbec grasped the healing capsule and forcibly pushed it down. "Wait. We can't carry this through that press. Wait until the way clears a bit."

The truth was, she was in no hurry to reach Phyrexia. She half hoped the cloud would catch her here.

"Open it," she found herself saying.

The goblins looked at her in consternation and surprise. One piped. "No time. We flee now!"

"Open it," Rebbec repeated. "I want to see my husband's face."

Scowling, the goblins complied. Their scaly hands expertly worked in the dark. They were good creatures—more steadfast than any human she had ever met and more clever than half of them. They understood her husband like no one else, even better than she. "My goblins," Glacian had called them, with the same tone of voice a man would use to say, "my friends." Claws slid beneath the lid of the capsule, and the goblins pushed it open.

Rebbec leaned over the capsule, knowing even before she saw. Glacian lay absolutely still. His chest did not rise and fall. The breathing mechanism was quiet. Its powerstone driver had been knocked loose. It lay beside Glacian's still face.

Rebbec touched him. His body was cold, as cold as the stone beneath her. His skin was as pale as bone. Her hand ran across eyelids that for years had clenched in pain. They were smooth. His lips—for she kissed him now and realized she had not kissed her own husband since Yawgmoth had arrived—were cold and beginning to stiffen.



## The Thran

"Master Glacian?" a goblin said, jiggling the man's leg.  
"Master Glacian?"

"It's too late," Rebbec said. The sound was empty in her mouth.

"Aww. Master Glacian. . . . Aww. . . . He was good man," the goblin cooed.

Rebbec nodded. "He's been trapped in a flaming building for years, and now at last it has collapsed on top of him and burned him up."

"Too late for master."

The youngest goblin piped up. "Not for us. Not too late for us. We leave him here. We can go."

"Yes," Rebbec responded. "Leave him here. You can go."

The young creature gave an anxious leap and dashed away into the shouldering horde. Two of the others followed, bowing in respect to Rebbec before they disappeared. The final goblin lingered a moment longer.

"You coming?"

Rebbec shook her head.

Nodding sadly, the goblin turned to go. In three steps, he merged with the black river of refugees.

Rebbec took a deep breath of the stale air—the smell of herded humanity. All too soon she would be alone forever. Already, she was alone forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a tortuous route down to the Caves of the Damned. There was little light and much death. Folk stepped from blind cliffs or struck their heads on stalactites. Always, the next in line forged ahead. They trod first on the bodies of the fallen. The leaders led and died. Those behind pressed forward with desperate weight.

At long last, they reached the bottom. Halcyte guards guided them. What a glad sight were those silver-armored warriors! Now the way would be clear. Now no one else had to die.

## J. Robert King

At the heels of the quick-marching guard, the refugees swept down through the caves. They reached the great cavern that had once held Untouchable noble houses. Now the cavern bore no memory of them. It had been cleansed by Yawgmoth's touch. Only insectile machines filled the spot, guardians on either side of the glimmering, inviting portal.

Laughter mixed with hoots of joy. Songs rose among the refugees. They were old songs that spoke of the founding of the empire, of the beautiful and plentiful land that awaited those bold enough to enter. These folk were bold. They marched behind bobbing helmets—Yawgmoth's nation.

They neared the portal. Sunlight streamed through. Between helmets, there were glimpses of verdant forests, vast plains, gray mountains, even a city of elegantly sloping roof-lines. The songs quickened.

In a sudden rush, they were through, into the sunlight of a new world. It was vast and beautiful. The way was lined with expectant Halcyte guards. Troops stood, rank on rank, to the verges of the forest below and into the middle of the plain above. Behind the wall of silver armor was armor of a different sort—imbedded in skin and muscle. Perhaps it was metal plate or perhaps modified bone. Whatever, it forced the skin out in ridges and lines. The soldiers there had other alterations—horns poking up from shoulders, claws grafted on where once human hands had been, metal implements sewn into suppurating wounds.

The song died on the refugees' lips. Some tried to turn back. Those behind, craning for a view of the new world, forced them onward.

Just ahead waited the savior Yawgmoth, the god Yawgmoth, surrounded by his hideous creatures. He opened his hands expansively.

"Welcome, my children. Welcome to Phyrexia!"





## Chapter 30

Rebbec was alone now. Glacian was dead. The refugees had fled. Only the dead and dying remained in the mana rig. Only Glacian and his ilk, and Rebbec and hers.

As the rumble below receded, the rumble above approached.

It was a deep, immemorial sound. Hundreds of millions of tons of rock ground to grains of sand, and those grains in turn burst to leave only the dry husk of matter. It was the sound of life dissolving into death, and it approached.

"It is going to grind our bones, Glacian," Rebbec said with dry compassion. "It is going to grind us away to nothing." She patted his side gently. "Then we won't be alone anymore."

There was warmth beneath her hand. Glacian's side was warm.

A breath of hope hitched in her throat. "Could it be—?"

She touched his chest. It was cold and still. She touched his neck. The flesh was as algid as a meat in a cellar. There was no pulse. Her hand retreated again to his side. It was feverishly warm.

"What is this?"

She drew white cloth from the black wound in his side. Beneath its savage stitching, the outline of the Phyrexian heart stone was obvious. Heart stones were uncharged crystals, though; this stone glowed with heat and light.

## J. Robert King

Eyes cold in the dim chamber, Rebbec felt along the inside of the healing capsule. Her hand settled on a slim case of implements. She opened them, finding three scalpels. The smallest flashed in her fingers. It sliced open the mound of flesh.

“Gods—”

The skin split back like the desiccated rind of a old orange. Out tumbled two fist-sized stones, deeply red and sparking faintly in the murk. Ropy lines of blood clung to them. Rebbec poked one stone away from the wound. She edged it up onto the white robe. It glimmered within its mantel of gore. She nudged the other stone up beside it.

“A *charged* heart stone? Yawgmoth implanted a charged stone in him?” she murmured incredulously.

Even she, who had felt Yawgmoth crawling through her every tissue, even she was surprised by this treachery. He had removed a charged sliver and replaced it with a charged stone—with two stones! No wonder Glacian had died.

The roar above grew suddenly louder. It would not be long now.

Flinging away the scalpel, Rebbec savagely snatched up the two crystals. Congealed blood draped her wrists. She didn’t care. The stones were warm. A gentle light danced within them—the same gentle light in each. They were not two stones, but two halves of a whole. Wiping the jagged edges against her husband’s robes, she lifted them, lined them up, and slowly brought them together.

As the halves neared each other, the light in them intensified. What had seemed only a failing spark became a flicking flame and then whirling fire. The crystals glowed. They beamed. Jags of energy arced between them. With each jolt, the heat increased. Blood dried, burst into quick flames, and blazed away. The heat was excruciating.

Rebbec thrust the halves together.

They met. Shorn edges joined and fused. The separate blazes in each half fled together and ignited a white-blue radiance. It was blinding. It was searing. It illuminated the whole mana rig.



## The Thran

Those who lay dying moaned, thinking the white cloud had set upon them.

Rebbec tried to shy from the radiance. She collapsed, but the thing was still clutched in her hands. It would not release her.

A mind spoke to her out of that crystal, a mind that had been split in two: *Darling, I am here.*

She could not respond. She was terrified.

*It is I, Glacian.*

"How? How can you be here?"

*Empty powerstones absorb great energies. They take on the properties of the energies they absorb. This stone has absorbed my power, my personality, my mind. It is charged with my mind.*

"A planeswalker," Rebbec said in remembrance.

*I had that destiny within me, yes, though it was never realized. But it lives on in this stone.*

The light was so beaming, so warm, she did not want to think of the coming cloud. "Yes. You live on."

*You must descend, Rebbec. We must descend.*

She had never thought she would hear this, not from Glacian. "No. Yawgmoth is a monster. We cannot join him."

A laugh came from the stone, Glacian's derisive laugh. Of course not. *We descend only to trap him forever.*

"What?"

*He will try to return. He wants to rule Dominaria—he wants to rule the whole Multiverse, but Dominaria first. It is his holy land. Once the Null Moon has drawn off the mana clouds, he will try to return.*

"Yes, of course he will."

*But we can stop him, you and I.*

"How?"

*This stone he implanted in me, this heart stone—it was Yawgmoth's idea of poetic justice. This was the crystal Dyfed used to open the portal to Phyrexia. Recharged and rejoined, the crystal can seal that portal forever.*

"Oh, Glacian."

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*I will be the gatekeeper. You need merely set the crystal on the mirror-podium, and the portal will close. I will remain, keeping Yawgmoth and his monstrous nation locked away. He is no planes-walker. He will not escape his Phyrexia. His world will become his prison.*

*"Oh, Glacian, I can't sentence you to that, to an eternity alive and alone in stone."*

*It will be a long eternity, yes, my dear, but a glad one, knowing Yawgmoth's torment. Again came that raking laugh. And knowing the world—the Multiverse—is safe from him. I was right about him. I was right all along.*

*"Yes, and we were wrong about you," Rebbec said. "You were always a curmudgeon, but a good man, a very good man, and I loved you."*

*Then you weren't wrong about me. His presence, for one brief moment, seemed to wrap around her. There was a fleeting, ephemeral kiss. And I loved you. Now you must descend. We must banish Yawgmoth once and for all.*

*"Yes."*

\* \* \* \* \*

The refugees had all passed through the portal. The few who had fled had already been hunted down and slain by artifact creatures. Their bodies were still warm when they reached the flesh vats. More shiny machines waited at their posts, ordered to chase down any creature that emerged from the portal.

Yawgmoth sighed with pleasure. Minotaur muscle, dwarven pragmatism, elven longevity, feline grace, reptilian armor—the Phyrexians would benefit greatly from their fallen foes. Even now, the priests sliced and categorized and pickled their flesh. Hamstrings and femurs, brains and hearts, livers and spleens emptied into the grinders. All was right with the world. Yawgmoth was in his heaven.

He sifted down through the spheres of Phyrexia, heading for the heart of the world. It ached for him. Phyrexia had received



## The Thran

tens of thousands of new souls, and it was glad, but it ached for Yawgmoth. Yawgmoth could not bear the separation either.

He arrived in the inner sanctum. Phyrexia received him. It swelled gladly around him and took him into its heart and drew him up and out. Yawgmoth exulted in the transformation from man to god. He loved Phyrexia best just then, as he ascended through her into glory. Limits fell away. The walls of numbness thinned and at last became but slender membranes. Through them passed every desire, every fear, every hope and dread in the world. It was a populous place now. He delighted in the souls before him. He examined them, held them in his hands, bit into them as if sampling pears in a marketplace. Every sensation, every passion infused Yawgmoth. For a time, he was glad and sated and vast in his world.

Then he remembered Rebbec. She was not in the inner sanctum. In his delight, he had forgotten her. He was so accustomed to entering his world this way, alone, and was so ecstatic with his transformation, he had forgotten she should have been here. He longed for her hatred, her all-consuming hatred. He longed to climb through her being and possess her and feel her hatred. It was as delicious as love. Where had she gone?

Rebbec was not in the inner sanctum. She was not in Phyrexia.

He asked his world. Phyrexia showed him what Rebbec had done, how she had slain the rebellious vat priests, had taken Glacian to Halcyon. . . .

So, she was dead. Rebbec and Glacian both. The thought made a small, flat regret in Yawgmoth's soul. He would miss their hate. It was disappointing. A hatred that powerful could stab out even from the grave. . . .

Suddenly, Yawgmoth knew. He knew what they would—what they *must* do.

It was not regret but panic that flooded through him as he pulled away from his world. He descended from divinity to humanity and flung his being out to the portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

## J. Robert King

Rebbec approached the portal, terror filling her heart.

All around, Yawgmoth's metal defenders crouched, ready to spring. She staggered toward the mirror podium. Beyond, Phyrexia beamed, sun-bright—blue skies and gray mountains, emerald forests and golden plains.

For a moment, she wondered how she would choose death over such a life. Then her eyes settled on the vast mushroom city. Figures moved there. They thronged the streets—herds of cattle stripped, branded, sliced open, fitted with heart stones, made into loyal Phyrexians.

Death would be far sweeter.

She strode forward. Every Halcyte guard was busy with the harvest. None remained beside the portal. She reached the mirror podium.

*It is time, Rebbec. Seal it away forever.*

"Yes," she said quietly. "It is time."

*Why do you wait?* urged Glacian within the stone.

"I want to see the sky just a moment more," she said sadly, "and touch you a little while longer. The moment I seal the portal, I am alone in darkness."

"You need never be alone again, never be in darkness." Suddenly silhouetted against the bright sky stood Yawgmoth. He was tall and beautiful in his world. His eyes were as bright as stars. His cloak swirled about him. "Come join us. Come, receive me."

*Now, Rebbec. Seal it, before he steps through to drag you in.*

"He won't step through," she said confidently, loud enough for Yawgmoth to hear. "He won't risk being trapped on this side, where he is only a mortal man. He wants me to live with him. He doesn't want to die with me."

"Put down the stone and come with me, Rebbec. I offer life. Abundant life. Eternal life. Leave the dead man and his dead world, and come with me."

*Close the portal! Why do you wait? Do you want him to tempt you?*

"I want to see the sky," Rebbec said. "I want to touch you, to hear your voices—"



## The Thran

*Voices?*

"The moment I close the portal, I will be alone in the darkness—"

*You loved him? You loved him too!*

"I want to see the sky a moment more."

"Come, join us. Live, Rebbec! Live!"

"Good-bye, sky. Good-bye, husband. Good-bye, Yawgmoth."

*Good-bye.*

"No!"

She placed the stone in its mirror sconce atop the pedestal. The crystal released her hands—Glacian's last touch. No sooner was the stone in place than light flared though the cave. Long crystals in the ceiling blazed. Lightning surged outward along the wires that spread from the pedestal. All around the room, the metal guardians of Phyrexia came to brief life. Sand-crabs snapped their claws as energy crawled along their carapace. The shimmering curtain of the portal wavered and began to fade.

With a sudden, quiet snap, it all was gone—sky, Phyrexia, Yawgmoth, Glacian. The lights overhead blinked out. The mechanisms shivered to a halt. Where the portal had been, only a wall of stone remained. Before the wall, in its mirror pedestal, the powerstone glowed quietly. It seemed a pair of hearts, pulsing in synchronous beat.

Yawgmoth's final shout echoed away in the Caves of the Damned.

Alone in darkness, Rebbec turned and walked. She left the caves behind forever.

Rebbec ascended the long, tortuous path out of the darkness. Into a cloud of white, she ascended.

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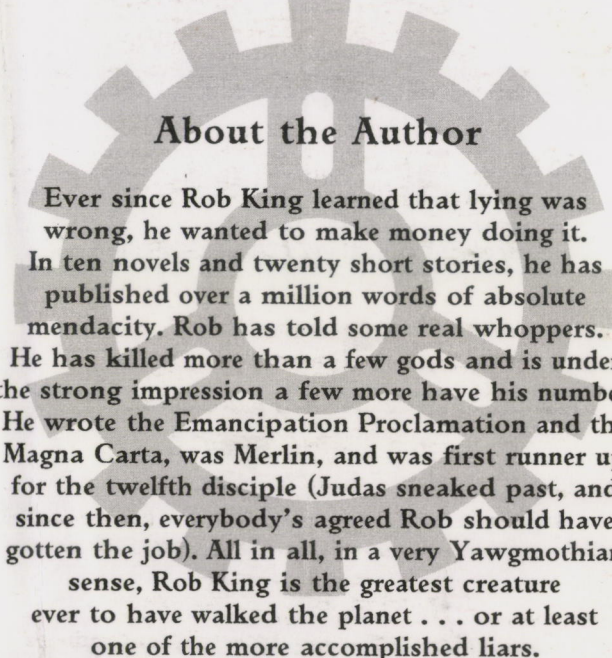
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*December 2002*





## About the Author

Ever since Rob King learned that lying was wrong, he wanted to make money doing it. In ten novels and twenty short stories, he has published over a million words of absolute mendacity. Rob has told some real whoppers. He has killed more than a few gods and is under the strong impression a few more have his number. He wrote the Emancipation Proclamation and the Magna Carta, was Merlin, and was first runner up for the twelfth disciple (Judas sneaked past, and since then, everybody's agreed Rob should have gotten the job). All in all, in a very Yawgmothian sense, Rob King is the greatest creature ever to have walked the planet . . . or at least one of the more accomplished liars.

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