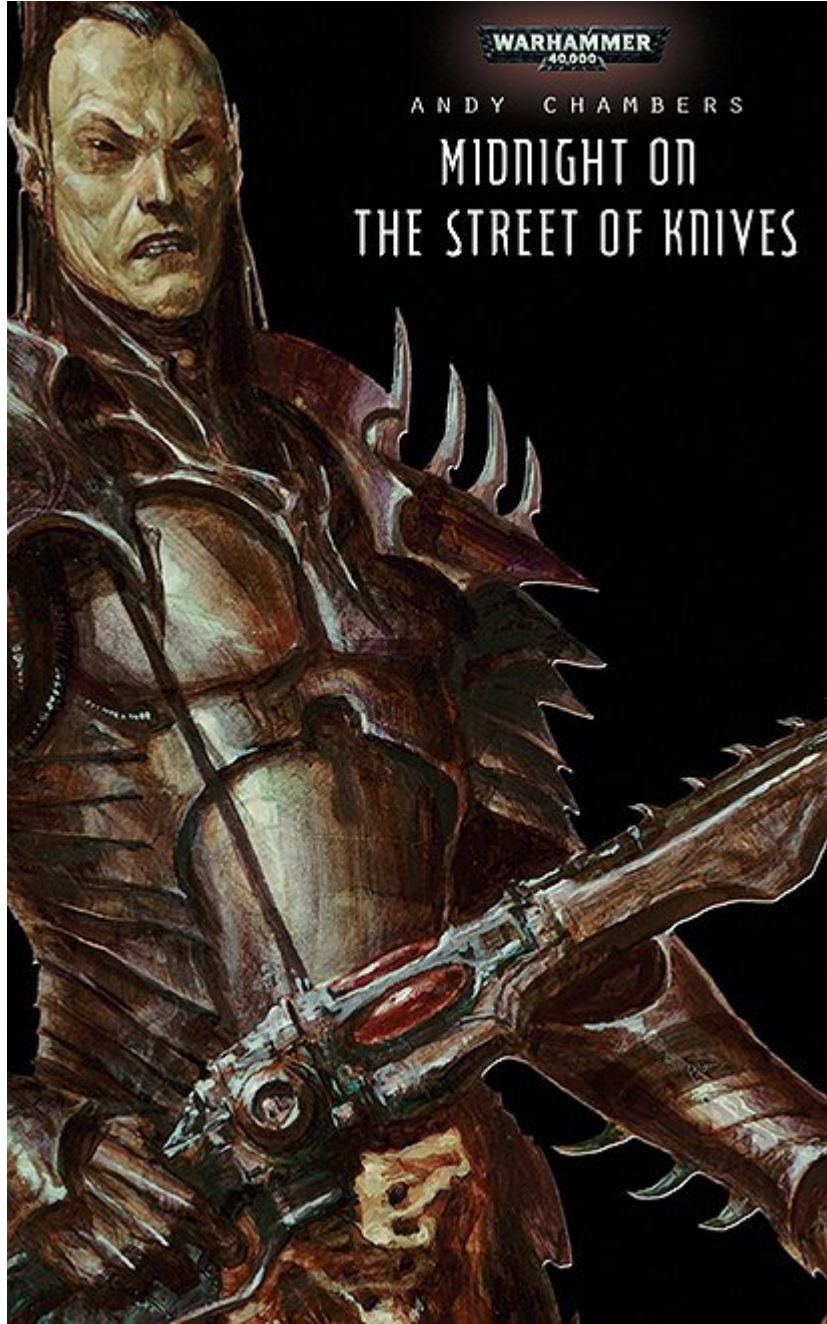


WARHAMMER
40,000

ANDY CHAMBERS

MIDNIGHT ON
THE STREET OF KNIVES



A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY

**MIDNIGHT ON THE
STREET OF KNIVES**

Andy Chambers

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

Commorragh is a city like no other in the universe. It exists outside space and time in the unknowable depths of the Sea of Souls, the realm beyond our realm that idiot savants argue gave birth to all that we know. Commorragh's makers, or rather architects as they would claim, did not fashion the city as one place. Rather each of them used ways unimaginable to lesser beings to fashion their own secret enclaves out of the Immaterial Realm to serve as fortress, sanctum, pleasure palace or arena according to their whim. In time the hubris of these "architects" grew so great that they created something that breached the very walls between realms. As all crashed into ruins they fled to their enclaves like rats into their holes. In time, as they grew ever more fearful of the dreadful child they had sired together, those that survived the tempest strove to connect their realms. So steeped in torture and murder were they that they had no choice. They must do so to feed one upon another and whomever else they could bring beneath their hand.

And so the eternal city was born.

—Adept Xalinis Huo. Hereticus Majoris.

It was midnight on the Street of Knives when Kharbyr spotted his mark heading straight towards him not six stalls up. The street was dark and crooked but it was virtually deserted and the gaunt figure of Bellathonis' servant stood out in freeze-frame in the stark flicker of the furnaces. Kharbyr had been lucky, oh yes, but he'd made the right choice of where to hunt in the first place and that made him feel extremely smug. He was cleverer than the others and he would be the one to claim the promised reward. He treated himself to a pinch of *agarin* while he waited, savouring the clean bite of it in his nostrils and the shiver it sent down his spine. Oh, this was going to be fun.

The whisper had come that Bellathonis' servant had left the Red House earning the package in a hurry and, most importantly, alone. When he'd heard that, Kharbyr had gambled that the haemonculus' minion would cut through here. The Street of Knives was a safe run for as long as it lasted, at least as safe as it got anywhere in the city. The Archon of Metzuh suffered no fractious incidents here that might impede the productivity of her weaponsmiths and artisans.

To underscore her displeasure at such activities, the Street of Knives was patrolled by her incubi, their mere presence enough to deter most troublemakers. The initial excitement of seeing his prey had sent Kharbyr's hand shooting toward his blade of its own volition, but a pair of grim, armoured incubi already had him under scrutiny as if they could sense his intentions. The bodies of the truly foolhardy young blades—the ones who just couldn't take a hint—were hanging on chains from the jagged eaves of the weapon shops. They were left there as Hellion-bait to clarify the point to others to curb their instincts in this part of the city.

With a conscious effort of will Kharbyr unwrapped his fingers from the polished bone grip and calmly turned to examine a display of wickedly curved hydraknives as

the servant hurried past. Naturally, fighting still occurred this close to the Archon's palace, but only over matters of import that were orders of magnitude above this one.

Kharbyr got his first good look at the servant as he passed: a pale, haggard face with red, staring eyes, a heavy jaw and a morose scowl that looked to be a permanent fixture. It was a fitting face for the minion of a haemonculus, a creature of vivisections and interrogations. Thick brows beneath the servant's hairless pate were currently knotted with concern and a kind of mulish determination.

A long, ribbed coat of dark hide flapped from the servant's narrow shoulders with all the panache of partially sloughed skin. No weapons were obvious, but he was clutching the package so fiercely that it looked as if he feared it might make a break for freedom at any moment. He was also muttering incoherently and smelled appallingly of ether and offal. The servant was certainly going to be easy to shadow. Kharbyr let the noisome fool get a little further ahead and then wandered innocently after him.

Xagor clutched the hide-wrapped jar of pineal glands tighter to his chest. As he scurried along he tried to balance speed against drawing too much attention to himself. It was unlikely anyone would try to steal the jar here, but the master would not be happy if Xagor so much as let it out of his sight or, worse still, he lost it. Those that displeased the master were soon begging for death. Xagor knew this for certain as he'd attended them himself on many occasions. With a haemonculus as skilled as the master, death was always a long time coming. No, handling the jar was bad enough, but what he'd heard while he was getting it at the Red House made it all so much worse.

Master Bellathonis was always hungry for news. He instructed all his servants most specifically on the importance of relaying to him any scrap of information, speculation, gossip or rumour as soon as it reached their lowly ears. The master had even gone so far as to demonstrate the alterations he made to servants who proved too slow or stupid to abide by this simple but cardinal rule.

Yes, Master Bellathonis took news very seriously indeed and now Xagor had suffered the misfortune of being told a piece of news that could change everything. A Dysjunction! His hand gripped the neck of the jar tighter as he fantasised about choking the life out of Matsilier for telling him in the first place. The crones predicted a Dysjunction before the year was out. The idiot had been so full of himself he couldn't wait to share a secret and show how important he was. That had made it even worse. Who knew how many others he'd told, or how soon it would get back to the master or whether it had already done so and he, Xagor, the best and most trusted of the master's servants, would presently be excreting from all the wrong orifices.

So here he was, scurrying down the Street of Knives, frantically trying to work out how to get this unwelcome lump of knowledge and an intact jar of glands to the master's manse before someone else got there first. It was big news. A Dysjunction would send the fragile peace in the city tumbling into anarchy, the wardings would all shift and whole tiers could be inundated. It could even be the big one, the end of the city itself. His guts twisted queasily at the prospect. Everyone in Commorragh knew that they lived on the edge of the abyss, but chose to ignore it in a very determined fashion. Being confronted with the fact was an uncomfortable sensation.

Xagor briefly toyed with the idea of fleeing on the assumption that it was already too late, but he prided himself on having a more pragmatic viewpoint. If there was one thing that all the fickle masters of Commorragh could agree upon, it was that runaways were singled out for especially imaginative punishment in order to set an example. In a society that had whiled away countless millennia raising the infliction of pain and misery to a high art form, that meant things far worse than one of Master Bellathonis' comparatively mild bouts of scatological humour. In this regard Xagor had to concede the policy was effective.

No, the correct course was to obey his first instinct and hurry back to face the consequences. If he was too late, well, the master could be almost... indulgent in his punishments if he believed you had tried your best. The master might even reward him. Xagor also prided himself on his sense of optimism. Sadly, that was sorely tested by the idea of Dysjunction. They had occurred before, though not in Xagor's lifetime, and the idea that something as permanent as the city could have whole tiers shift and revolve like some great orrery was anathema to him. The master would surely know what to do.

Unfortunately in another sixty paces the Street of Knives would split into three diverging alleyways. These quickly mired themselves in the under-warren beneath the slave mills like streams entering a swamp. The marginal safety afforded by the incubi terminated there. Entering the under-warren alone was a tacit admission that you were tired of life and expected to be relieved of it soon. It was something that the lurking mandrakes to be found there would apply themselves to most industriously for only the scant payment of your death scream.

There was nothing for it but to take the Short Stairs to the canal and gamble on reaching the Beryl Gate. If he were lucky he'd just be ignored, but the epicureans were always so unpredictable.

Kharbyr glided along on the trail of the oblivious servant. He felt elated, almost giddy, as he slipped through the shadows. He had to fight the urge to skip forward and plunge his blade between those unsuspecting shoulder blades. The dead swung on their chains above him and grinned down with their rictus grins approvingly. *Come and join us, they seemed to smile, we couldn't master our murder-lust either. Always room for one more.*

Kharbyr swallowed and tried to focus. The instructions had been regarding the package. There was no smear of shame in trailing the mark to watch and listen while he carried it. Many had an interest in Bellathonis and wanted to hear about the comings and goings of his minions. There might be a meeting or exchange that he could report back on.

Still, something in Kharbyr chafed at such a dull assignment. Perhaps if the servant were earning something important then murdering him could pay off anyway, or he might be forced to divulge something useful before he expired. Unfortunately, a haemonculus' servant would doubtless laugh at the kind of excruciations Kharbyr could inflict on the spot in some alley, but if he could be kidnapped...

Kharbyr was so caught up in his musings that it took him a moment to register that the servant had vanished. Momentary panic edged with irrational fury swept over him. Fool! Strike when you can—never hesitate!

Xagor went bounding down the elegantly sculpted Short Stairs like a goat down a mountainside, clinging to his jar for dear life as he took the curving steps three at a time. Just before he'd turned off, he'd had the unpleasant feeling that someone really was following him and that it was not just his well-developed paranoia at work this time. The stairs would be a good place to try and lose any shadows, providing he didn't do so at the cost of breaking his own neck.

The Short Stairs wandered between gates into the Hy'Kran and Metzuh tiers of the city in a fanciful curlicue of stone, metal and glass that jutted right out over the smooth, dark silk of the Metzuh's Grand Canal in several places. Other steps, spirals and esplanades branched irregularly from it following their own unfathomable logic. They were called the Short Stairs because they only connected two tiers, whereas the Long Stairs beyond Hy'Kran crossed half a dozen. Xagor had heard a story once that the Short Stairs formed a word or message when seen from a distance, but no one seemed to agree on what it said.

Xagor was soon forced to moderate his pace. There were plenty of open landings where the Short Stairs simply stopped in open air to afford a stunning view of the Grand Canal and its drifting pleasure barges. A much closer view of the canal awaited those who neglected to spot such sudden drop-offs. On the positive side, there were more subjects here and that was what he needed right now. He slowed right down as he started to pass amongst them, trying not to imagine what would happen on the Short Stairs during the Dysjunction when the tiers began to move.

He was among slaves here, or valued servants like himself hurrying after their master or mistress' bidding. But there were highborn here too, strolling individually and in groups. The crisscrossing streams of slaves and servants parted around the highborn like water around stones, carefully keeping out of immediate striking range. Xagor adjusted his descent to head toward two of the larger groups of highborn coming up from below.

Kharbyr sprinted heedlessly back along the Street of Knives, casting around for Bellathonis' servant. The two incubi were regarding him with distinct interest by the time he came to steps leading down. He darted onto the Short Stairs and stopped short, regarding the noisome masses he found there with disdain. Scrawny, half-naked slaves were streaming up and down it like rats.

He could see the servant, heading down towards a fistful of warriors bearing marks of The Scarlet Edge. Kharbyr found himself sprinting again, furious that this stupid, easy-to-follow piece of dross was being such a pain. He had to accept a galling loss of face as he passed other highborn and they made cutting remarks about him to his back. In their place he would have done the same, but letting the taunts go unanswered was a humiliation almost too much to be borne. He cut down a particularly dim-witted slave that couldn't move out of the way fast enough and that made him feel slightly better. The loathsome haemonculus' creature was going to die for this. Bellathonis' servant or not. He could worry about the consequences later.

It was dark by the canal, so dark that Xagor had to navigate last spiral of the stair virtually by touch, all the time terrified that a misstep would make him drop the jar.

The gaily-lit pleasure barges outside seemed to emphasise rather than mitigate the gloom as they glided past.

The Grand Canal ran in a broad, lazy circuit all the way around Metzuh tier, bounded by the warding on one bank and the palaces of Metzuh on the other. Supposedly, the canal had once been filled with a pure, sweet-smelling narcotic oil but now it was such a strange mélange of drugs, wastes, chemicals and excreta that it defied classification. The scent alone could be overpoweringly hallucinogenic, a dip in the stuff brought madness or oblivion.

The promenade along the canal bank had long since become the exclusive territory of those Metzuh highborn most given to hedonism and sensuality as their current diversion of choice—the epicureans. Any slave foolish enough to venture down here would be taken for sport in the blink of an eye and it was not a wise place for servants to tarry. Opulent dens and flesh halls cluttered the bottom of the tier and sprawled out across the broad tiles of the promenade very much like their patrons. The odd docks and piers periodically jutting out from the canal side played host to a number of fanciful craft.

Beyond the curve of the canal and out of sight at present, Xagor knew there was a slender bridge that pierced the warding at the Beryl Gate. Through the gate were the Aviaries of Malixian, who some called “the Mad”. The noble Archon Malixian was one of Bellathonis’ most favoured patrons, in no small part thanks to the suite of laboratories the archon had granted him. Such was a true mark of distinction when so many haemonculi had to make do with whatever garret or basement they could find to set up shop. The Aviaries would give safe passage all the way to the Screaming Tower where Bellathonis currently conducted his work.

Kharbyr paused to let a pair of masked revellers move past before swarming down a trellis into the welcoming darkness on the promenade. He sank himself deeper into the shadows while he looked around for signs of his mark. The gloom fitted his mood. He was coming to the disquieting realisation that he had lost the trail. If the servant was meeting someone along the canal, he could be hidden inside any one of a dozen salons or dens by now. He might have even boarded a barge and be so well out of reach he may as well have grown wings and flown away.

Weighing the options, Kharbyr considered what little he knew. The servant had left the Red House earning something he hadn’t had when he arrived. He’d been alone and he’d left in a hurry. The last two facts didn’t really fit with him going to meet someone. He wouldn’t be hurrying if things had been pre-planned and Bellathonis was unlikely to entrust anything important to a lone servant in any event. Something unexpected must have happened inside the Red House to send the servant haring off like that without waiting for an escort. So where would the servant really be going? Kharbyr felt his spirits lift at the realisation.

The servant was running straight to his master.

Xagor hugged the jar to himself and strode along with what he hoped looked like a purposeful gait. His hands were sending sharp needles of pain up his arms with every step but he welcomed them. Those who would serve pain must first learn how to endure it and then how to love it, so said Bellathonis as he had tortured Xagor for the

first time. To some a Haemonculus is nothing but a torturer, but those with the calling know that even the lowliest of them aspires to something much greater.

The promenade was almost quiet. High pitched wails and screams floated down from above, seemingly muffled by billows of sweetly-scented mist from the canal. Xagor had already slipped past one duel between two highborn and a less formal affair between two groups of revellers over some real or imagined slight, but that was quiet by the standards of the area. The high-arched bridge to the Beryl Gate was coming into sight but the loose groups of epicureans were coalescing more and more into a crowd. There was some kind of disturbance up ahead that seemed to be getting closer. A barbed metal spine could be seen rising above even the tallest highborn in that direction and it was steadily forging a path through the mass towards him.

Kharbyr carefully made his way along the canal edge blending in as best he could. He struggled not to sneer at the antics of the epicureans every time he saw them fighting with one another. Their skills were like those of children in their fifth year of training, all showy hack and slash with no hint of finesse. He was sure he could take any of them easily and was sorely tempted to try his hand, but there wasn't time. He had to get to the bridge and through the gate. A small bribe to the guards would soon tell him if the servant had got there first and if he hadn't then Kharbyr could simply slip inside and choose his spot for ambush.

A commotion behind him made him turn and stop in his tracks. A murder engine was edging out onto the promenade, its jewelled snout swinging back and forth like a beast searching for spoor. Epicureans flinched away with unseemly haste as the hideous contraption approached. Kharbyr wondered if it had been set on the trail of anyone in particular or had just slipped its leash to inflict some random carnage of its own volition. As the epicureans scattered, one figure stood unmoving. With a shock Kharbyr realised that it was his mark, the haemonculus' servant, who was just standing there holding the package and gaping at the multi-bladed death machine gliding smoothly towards him.

Xagor recognised the workmanship of the barbed sting even before he could see the magnificent engine itself. It was one of Vlokarion's Coven of Thirteen, a matched set of Talos built for the amusement of Archon Yrdiir Xun by the legendary haemonculus Vlokarion four millennia ago. The device whispered forward on unseen grav-motors, evidently searching for a new client to embrace inside its cage of filigreed bone. Jointed, insectile-looking arms rose from its flanks, poised with exquisite malice to display their array of blades, saws, hooks and probes. Most of the highborn moved more discreetly out of its path, not wishing to attract its attention now it was fixed on him. Xagor simply stood mesmerised by the glittering beauty of it.

It drifted closer, seemingly intrigued by his immobility. Theoretically, a Talos was nothing more than a mobile torture machine with no mind of its own. Its sentience, its anima was drawn entirely from the client it embraced and kept in a permanent state of agony. The symbiosis was complete: the Talos gained awareness and personality from the client, the client gained the will and the ability to share their suffering with whomever the Talos chose. Xagor could see that the current client was

coming to the end of their journey and wondered how long they had been incarcerated. A well-made Talos was as skilful as a surgeon in its work. Those built by Vlokarion were said to keep their clients alive for centuries. They were also said to have grown to have their own strange kind of sentience in the millennia since their creator's demise.

Now the machine floated there before him and seemed to regard him with its gleaming sensors. The pitiable-looking client shifted and mewled feebly within their cage. Without thinking, Xagor slowly prised one hand away from his jar to reach out and stroke the curving metal prow. Weapons slid partway from pits in the Talos' gleaming skin and then back again uncertainly as his hand came close.

Kharbyr slipped deeper into the crowd. Once a healthy space had been cleared, there were plentiful spectators jostling to watch the torture engine go to work. In what was sure to be a disappointment to them, but a relief for Kharbyr, the thing hadn't started ripping the little idiot in front of it into confetti yet. He was going to lose his mark—and the package too—once the murder machine got going. Right now it seemed bemused that anyone would have the temerity to just stand there in front of it when it was on the hunt, but that wasn't going to last.

He surreptitiously felt through his belt loops for a vial containing faerun. When used on a blade, faerun would make even shallow cuts inflict such nerve-shredding agony that the recipient would be utterly terrorised. Typically, he would use it on someone already restrained because it was liable make a victim run like the hounds of hell were after them.

Luck was with him and he found he still had a few drops of faerun left. He used it lavishly on his blade in a quick, practised move while glancing around for a likely victim. There was a youngish-looking female nearby, pierced, tattooed and naked to the waist. Kharbyr sauntered past and delivered a quick slice across her unprotected ribs without even breaking his stride. Only then did it strike him that the effects of the faerun might get totally altered by whatever concoctions were already coursing through the epicurean's system.

He heard a gasp and a little cry as he let the crowd swallow him up, but not the kind of shrieks he had hoped would distract the torture engine. Just then the crowd scattered as the machine rose higher and then surged forward as the girl started running. His mark was left standing there, dumbly watching the machine go. Kharbyr decided to keep the fool in sight from now on; who knew how many other ways the servant might find to get himself killed while Kharbyr was waiting to kill him in the Aviaries?

Xagor wistfully watched the Talos leave. To be excruciated by such a device would have been a life-long honour for a devotee of pain like him. Tragically, that made Xagor a most unsuitable client from the Talos' point of view.

Xagor realised that something was wrong as he climbed the arching bridge towards the Beryl Gate and what should be sanctuary. The warding between Metzuh and the Aviaries was clearly visible this close to the gate, a swirling, translucent boundary of sickly colours curving away in all directions. The high, caged peaks of the largest Aviaries could be seen beyond, rendered hazy by the warding as if they

had been sunk underwater. Xagor twisted his jar between aching hands and kept going. He was so close now that he had to go on; the only alternative way to the master's tower from here didn't bear contemplation.

Traffic seemed unusually sparse and that was worrying. He was a lot closer to the gate before he realised that everyone ahead of him was being turned back and a corner of his mind started gibbering with panic. A knot of Archon Malixian's warriors were standing in front of the gate in full panoply and letting no one through, as far as Xagor could tell. He considered asking one of those being sent back what was going on, but he decided that would just make him look suspicious and anger the warriors. Malixian's followers often shared the Archon's distaste for what most in Commorrhagh would commonly frame as "sanity".

He licked his lips and approached the warriors. They didn't swing the jagged maws of their splinter rifles to cover him so that was a good sign. They weren't moving out of the way either, so that was not so good. He stopped respectfully a few paces short of them.

"I—" Was all Xagor got out before one of the warriors laconically cut him off.

"None may pass."

"I'm about my master's business, it's very urgent." Xagor wheedled with an uncomfortable feeling of taking his life in his hands.

"None. May. Pass."

The warrior's face was unreadable behind his masked helm, but he spread his fingers upright as he spoke and ticked off the words with his fingers to create a crude gesture for emphasis. The other warriors sniggered and aimed their splinter rifles at him.

"I serve Master Bellathonis!" Xagor squeaked.

"Well that makes all the difference, doesn't it? In you go," the warrior said with disarming civility. He stepped aside and the jagged weapon maws dropped away. Xagor sensed a trap.

"Might I ask what's going on, why you're turning the other people back?" Xagor asked as politely as he could manage. Archon Malixian and the master had been as thick as thieves recently, hopefully that still held true.

"You might, and if you did I'd tell you that you don't want to be in the Aviaries right now."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

"It's going on right now? It isn't about to start or nearly over?" Xagor held onto a shred of hope, they might escort him if he was lucky.

"Not a chance, if anything the blood's going to be well and truly up by now."

"But I have to get to my master's tower right away! I'm sure he'd reward you!"

"Not. A. Chance." He did the finger thing again before thoughtfully adding. "I'm sure the Aviatrix will welcome the extra meat if you fancy your chances of getting through on foot."

The Beryl Gate was misnamed really. Kharbyr mused. The tonnes of silvery metal used in its construction heavily outweighed the twisted ornamental pillars that gave it

its name. Kharbyr hung back while the servant talked to the warriors at the gate. Eventually they let the servant through, although the servant looked reluctant to go on. After a few heartbeats Kharbyr headed over to the warriors himself. Kharbyr weighed his chances against them if it came to a fight. They had rifles and that would count against them up close, but that probably wouldn't be enough to offset their numbers and protection.

"None may pass."

When the challenge came the warriors seemed wary. Had that servant said something to set them on edge? Told them he was being pursued? Kharbyr suddenly felt like a slave being pinned out for examination. He decided to take the offensive.

"Out of my way. I have important business in the Aviaries," he said.

The warriors looked at each other with theatrical surprise at his boldness. One of them spoke up.

"With who?"

Kharbyr's mind raced with possibilities. He plumped for sticking with the easiest lie.

"On behalf of the haemonculus Bellathonis. I was engaged to protect his servant."

Some subtle body language passed between the warriors at that, but Kharbyr couldn't read it. They stepped aside and one of them waved him through the gate with a mocking bow.

"Then go along inside. I'm sure you'll join him presently," the way the warrior said it implied a permanent and fatal appointment awaited them both. Kharbyr scrunched his face up sourly. There must be a hunt in progress.

Xagor shivered behind a bush and listened to the hideous calls wafting through the Aviary spires that rose on every side of him. A few moments later he saw the silhouettes of a pair of hellions slicing through the air high above. There was a hunt going on all right, and it sounded like a lively one.

Archon Malixian's fondness for flying beasts of all kinds was legendary, and on occasion he saw fit to exercise his pets. A few score of slaves would be released into the Aviaries' grounds and allowed to scatter, and then the cages would be opened to release clawed, fanged and poisoned death in a variety of winged guises. The archon's Kabal would go aloft with their master to enjoy the pain and terror of the dying slaves as the hunt proceeded. They also dealt with any prey deluded enough to try to hide or desperate enough to fight back.

He made a dash for another dark corner closer to his goal. He tried to move in short dashes. Running in the open made him conscious of being precisely the sort of tasty morsel being hunted and the cumbersome jar was starting to weigh heavily in his hands. As he caught his breath he started to worry about running into released slaves. They would be looking for the darkest corners to hide in too, and Archon Malixian liked to use healthy specimens so that his pets would get a proper workout. An inhuman shriek cut through the darkness, closer than any he'd heard so far. He was more worried still when he heard some rustling in the bushes nearby.

A few desperate slaves would ordinarily be no concern, but under the circumstances Xagor was extremely vulnerable. He couldn't defend himself while

encumbered with the jar, and any noise might attract the attention of far deadlier foes from above. Malixian's Kabal wasn't likely to recognise a stray servant of Bellathonis when their bloodlust was in full swing, and his pets wouldn't care.

Xagor was about to move again when the flap and snap of leathery wings made him freeze. A half dozen arrow-headed predators were rising in a lazy spiral from behind a building-sized cage on his left. The long dark shape of a raider craft slid smoothly after them, its crew clearly visible hanging over its open sides as they scanned the ground beneath.

Kharbyr was sweating despite himself. Each time he readied himself to sprint out of cover and take the servant unawares, the damned fool would run off ahead of him. The idea of capturing the servant had re-occurred to him but that was looking worse and worse. At this rate the mark was going to simply slip through his fingers yet again and leave him with nothing for his efforts. That was all assuming that they could both stay clear of Malixian's pets and cronies.

The distant crack of weapon fire gave him the answer. The blade was always more satisfying but Kharbyr did carry a long, elegant splinter pistol of his own. He would shoot the servant down with it and quickly search the body. The package the servant was earning might go some way towards repaying the indignities Kharbyr had suffered in the pursuit. If not, then at least vengeance would have been meted out and he could get out of here with some sense of pride intact.

He drew his pistol and aimed it at the servant. Between the range and the gloom it was going to be a difficult shot. The servant suddenly froze as a raider hove into view, and Kharbyr inwardly cursed. The raider's crew would spot the flash of a shot for sure. Anyone on ground level was going to be prey to them and prey armed with a pistol was liable to bring the whole Kabal down to investigate. With a long-suffering sigh he drew his knife in his other hand and started creeping closer again.

A shrill whistle went up and the predator flock darted downwards. The raider shot after them, disappearing out of sight again behind the cages. Flashes licked behind the bars and the distant crackle of splinter fire reached Xagor just a moment later. Someone must be getting feisty. He almost jumped out of his skin when a shot smacked into the cage right beside him. He spun around, bobbling the jar in his surprise. There was a figure in a dark cloak not thirty paces away pointing something glittery at him. Xagor ran for his life.

The pistol cracked twice more and a splinter shrieked past, close enough to feel its passage. Xagor skidded around a corner to put something between himself and his attacker before desperately looking around. He spotted a low-bridge between two vast cages up ahead and ran for the inviting shadows to be found underneath it.

Xagor was trying to look in all directions at once, so he stumbled right over the body in the mouth of the tunnel. The jar flew out of his hands as if it had been greased and went pin-wheeling off into the darkness. His cry of despair morphed into one of terror as clawed shapes rose up and reached for him out of the shadows. His last thoughts were of surprise that mandrakes would be bold enough to conduct their own hunt in the Aviaries of Malixian the Mad.

Kharbyr had fired his pistol almost by reflex when he heard shots nearby, but he told himself that taking a snap shot was weighed against the sound of it being hidden by the other firing. Whatever dark fates were conspiring against him meant he missed his mark and only gave away his presence instead. The servant gaped at him stupidly and then took off running for his life. Kharbyr took careful aim and pulled the trigger again just as something smashed into him from behind.

Kharbyr was sent sprawling by the blow but a lifetime of experience rolled him into a ball that brought him back onto his feet in a heartbeat. Another blow, sensed more than seen, came swinging out of the darkness. He ducked under it and fired his pistol into the half-seen shape before him. It gave a surprised grunt and fell away in a hot spray of blood.

Another attacker came for him then and he realised that they were slaves, naked and armed only with whatever crude weapons they had been able to find. Contempt boiled up inside him, contempt and a spurt of fury at their temerity in attacking him. He laid open the second slave's arm from wrist to elbow and the faerun made the ugly thing scream like its arm had been dipped in molten metal. Kharbyr had the presence of mind to cut the slave's legs out from under it before it could start to run.

The slave's suffering was just too delicious and Kharbyr lingered for a moment to properly appreciate it. Its face contorted fantastically and its soul gave a little shiver as it struggled free. Kharbyr drank it all in greedily and abandoned himself to let the anguish wash away his ennui for a few precious seconds.

Composing himself, Kharbyr saw no sign of his mark nor of Malixian's hunters closing in. He hurried to the corner where the servant had disappeared. Peering cautiously around it, he saw nothing but an apparently empty lawn between several huge cages beyond. Then he spied a dark tunnel mouth between two of the cages, exactly the kind of place an idiot on the run would make for.

He smelled blood before he reached the shadows, and that made him pull up short and advance more warily. Dark shapes were moving in the tunnel something only visible as blacker silhouettes in the gloom—mandrakes. One was crouched over what was unmistakably the body of the Haemonculus' servant; more of them lurked beyond, and they had seen him just as he saw them. Kharbyr levelled his pistol and fired without hesitation. Quite apart from the fact that the mandrakes had stolen his mark, they would most likely try to take Kharbyr himself for dessert.

Kharbyr's shots failed to connect with anything substantial in the gloom. They did, however, bring one of the mandrakes out into the open to challenge him. A smoky, half-seen shape that seemed to flicker and shift constantly stepped forth. Kharbyr went after the thing with his blade. If this one could be beaten, the others might give up their kill; then he could at least search the servant's body and retrieve the package.

It was like fighting smoke. Every cut he made only showed the mandrake to be somewhere else. Its own attacks seemed to come out of nowhere and it took every ounce of Kharbyr's skill to keep them at bay. Even then it felt uncomfortably as if he were being toyed with, and that was not a sensation Kharbyr enjoyed. He realised that the mandrake was gradually driving him toward the tunnel mouth, backing him towards where the other mandrakes were waiting in ambush.

A piercing shriek suddenly intruded into their duel and Kharbyr saved his own life by instantly diving to one side. Razor-sharp blades whickered past him not a hand's span away as a hellion shrieked by. Kharbyr rolled desperately as a second hellion swept down to take a cut at him with a hooked glaive. Sparks flew from the hellion's armour as he desperately snap-fired a barrage of splinters at it. One of the tiny slivers found a weak point and punched through.

The hellion pitched backward and its skyboard ploughed into the ground a few strides away. Kharbyr leapt for it desperately. The mandrake had disappeared but the first hellion was curving back around for another attack run. Odds were that the rest of Malixian's Kabal wouldn't be far behind.

Kharbyr clamped his feet into the skyboard's restraints and took to the air with a cry of anguish on his lips. Everything had gone wrong: all was lost and now he had to hope that he could escape with his life. At least the worthless servant was dead. He could console himself with that.

A mandrake was crouched on Xagor's chest, one razor-sharp claw resting lightly against his throat. He desperately wanted to swallow, but dared not. Shapes moved around him in the darkness and then the mandrake suddenly dropped flat on top of him. Xagor was too shocked to react, unable to believe that the mandrakes were going to abuse him on the spot. A crackle of splinter shots a moment later confused him even more. All he could think to do was to close his eyes. More shots and the ringing of blades came to his ears.

A long time seemed to pass before the weight eased from his chest with no apparent harm done. Xagor opened his eyes cautiously. The mandrake was squatting nearby watching him. It laid one long finger where its lips would be to shush him and pointed out of the tunnel mouth. Xagor craned around to look with hope rushing unbidden into his heart. The cloaked figure that had been chasing him was out there, mounting a stolen skyboard and racing away. The air was filled with the high-pitched whine of anti-grav units as Malixian's Kabal took up the chase. Xagor was saved.

Or not. Of course the mandrakes might think that it was Xagor's bodyguard that had just fled and left him to their tender ministrations. They might simply be mocking him in their weird, silent way. He looked back at the mandrake for a clue, but its shadow-skinned face was unreadable. A second mandrake seemed to coalesce out of the darkness. It was earning something in one hand that it extended towards him and Xagor tensed involuntarily. With a shock he realised that it was handing him his jar back.

The Screaming Tower had never felt more like a sanctuary. Xagor entered as quietly as he could, so as to not disturb the master—an infraction that carried its own considerable risks. The tall, lanky form of Bellathonis was bent over some consoles that spilled a profusion of wiring connected to three subjects strapped into examination frames. Bellathonis straightened and pressed a control. All three subjects simultaneously erupted in modulated howls of pain.

"What do you have for me, Xagor? The materials I wanted from the Red House, I trust?" Bellathonis said without looking around.

Xagor was taken off guard and quailed a little in spite of himself. The master was fond of modification and had recently implanted extra eyes with fully functioning optic nerves into his shoulder-blades. "All the better to watch my rivals with," he had said. The idea that the master could be looking at you when his back was turned was somehow deeply disturbing to Xagor.

"I have the jar from the Red House, master." Xagor called, "but also news of tremendous import."

That caught the master's attention in no uncertain terms. His hooked nose and sharp chin turned to Xagor and made him feel like he was back in the Aviaries being regarded as a morsel to be consumed by one of Malixian's pets.

"I'll be the judge of its import. Xagor, and if it's truly important you'd better not have tarried on your way back to me." Bellathonis' tone was jocular but the cruel glitter in his eyes told a different story.

"A Dysjunction, master. Matsilier at the Red House talks to all the clients and he told me that the crones have predicted a Dysjunction in the city. Soon!" Xagor finished in a rush.

"A Dysjunction, eh? Oh, how very interesting. Our lovely crones have read the fates and seen that our little abode of the damned is due for a shake up. It must be all over the city by now." The last was sharp; Xagor wondered how much Bellathonis already knew.

"I came straight back, master! I didn't even wait for a guard. I was pursued, there was a Talos and a-a hunt..." It all sounded like an increasingly weak string of excuses to Xagor's soon-to-be-modified ears.

"Yes, yes." Bellathonis waved away his excuses. "But here you are, so the mandrakes I sent looking for you obviously did their job."

Xagor gawped. He had never heard the master talk of employing mandrakes before. Bellathonis elegantly plucked the jar from his nerveless hands.

"Don't look so surprised. I knew there was a hunt in the Aviaries and it seemed likely that you would go that way with the 'news' you were so desperate to bring to me."

"You already knew, master?" A crushing weight descended on Xagor as Bellathonis let the moment stretch out. The Haemonculus eventually gave him a chilling smile.

"Only suspected, oh faithful servant. Certain factions have been making preparations and it seemed likely that you would hear something at the Red House. Well done; this is very important news. A Dysjunction will change all the old alliances and rivalries beyond recognition, something which has long been overdue. I've only witnessed three in my considerable lifespan and they all made for very interesting times, let me tell you." Bellathonis continued as he unsealed the lid of the jar. "Yes, you've done well by bringing this to my attention so promptly, Xagor. I do believe you've earned yourself a reward. Extra pineal gland, perhaps?"

Bellathonis dipped a long-fingered hand into the jar, but what emerged looked suspiciously like a dripping, shrunken head to Xagor. Bellathonis held it by snaky black locks and tutted as he wiped slime from the face of the thing.

"Master, I don't understand."

“Allow me to introduce you. Xagor, this is Angevere; Angevere this is Xagor.”

Bellathonis held the head out for Xagor to see. The face was pinched and lined. The eyes and lips were crudely sutured shut but Xagor could see that they were still moving, the face contorting.

“Angevere the crone,” Bellathonis murmured as he connected the head to one of the consoles he’d been working on as Xagor entered. “Now come over here and when I nod to you, twist this dial half a turn to the right and then back again.”

Xagor’s heart swelled with pride. He was being asked to assist! Just him and the master, working together like old comrades. The other servants would be incandescent with jealousy. Bellathonis pushed a final needle into the neck stump of Angevere and nodded to Xagor, who twisted the dial with gusto. A triple scream burst from the three subjects again, this time curiously intermingled as if they cried out with one voice. As Xagor twisted the dial back to its start position the three subjects spoke for the first time.

“*What have you done to me?*” they said together.

“Made you my guest, you dreadful old monster,” Bellathonis cackled with radiant self-satisfaction. “For the duration of the Dysfunction at least, or perhaps longer if you misbehave. We can while away the time delightfully with these three fresh subjects I’ve connected you to.”

Bellathonis’ nod was almost imperceptible but Xagor was drinking in every moment and he caught it. He twisted the dial clinically and was rewarded by another chorus of screams and a faint smile from the master.

“What do you want?” the three voices gasped.

“Ah, the correct question—and there’s nothing so precious in any discussion. We’ll talk about the future and what you know about it in due course, Angevere.”

“*There will be consequences,*” the voices said.

“Desperate times mean desperate measures, witch. If I’m right, it won’t matter soon,” Bellathonis said with an air of finality. He turned to his servant with a look of apparently genuine concern. “Poor Xagor, you look exhausted. There’s a young man out in the vestibule waiting to see me, ask him to step in here and then go straight to your quarters. Get some rest; we’re going to be very busy later.”

“They tore my face!” the young man shouted.

“So they did. Dear me, I should take a look at that,” said Bellathonis. “Take a seat.”

“Damn right you’ll fix it! I was about your business and I demand some kind of recompense for this farce.”

“Of course, getting this injury does mean that you got outwitted by birds, doesn’t it?” Bellathonis remarked as he selected something long and sharp from a tray. “And my business, as I recall, was receipt of a package that got here with precious little help from you—apart from the Talos, of course.”

“I—”

“Hush now, Kharbyr, and let’s see what we can do with that face.”

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