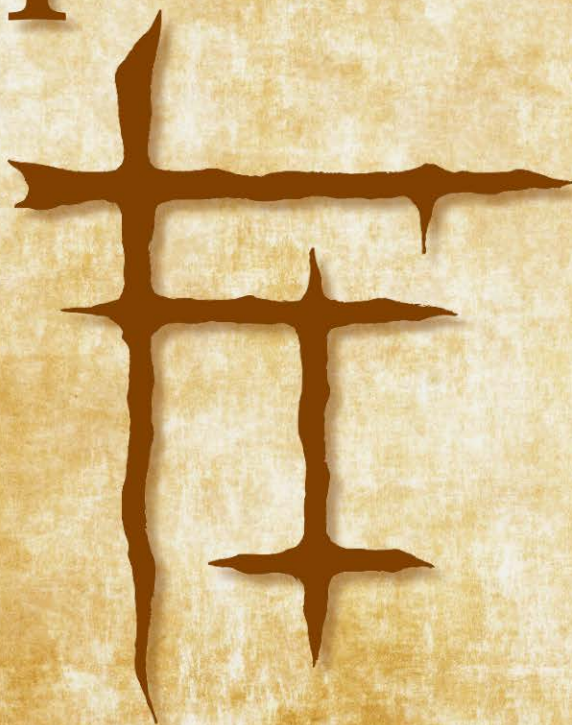


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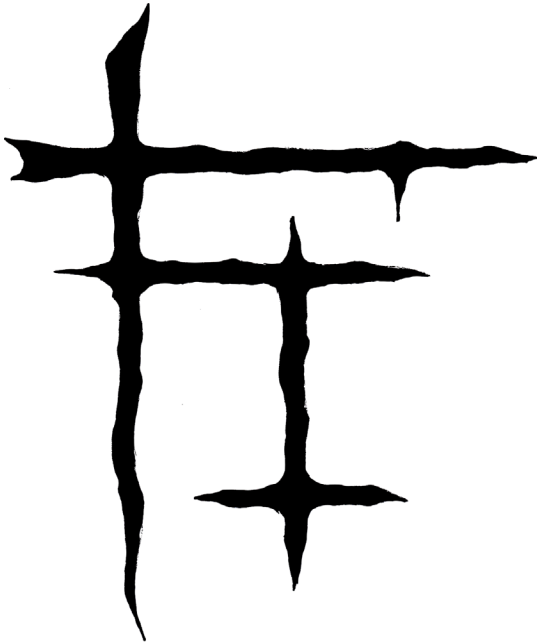
THE TALE OF
GHERED
WHO FOUND
PURPOSE



A LEGEND OF THE OERA'DIM

WAYNE F DENBLEY

THE TALE OF GHERED WHO FOUND PURPOSE



Written and Illustrated by
Wayne Densley 2016

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The Tale of Ghered Who Found Purpose

:dehr edda nar ghered u duen iphar cahna:



A Story of the Great Insurrection, as told by the Living Book at Lodos'sari to the Last of the Hidden.

It is a truth of our existence Brothers, that with freedom we can find purpose, and with purpose an Oera'dim's life has meaning.

Attributed to Ghered'Delving, Architect of the Great Insurrection and Arbiter of Souls.

If the truth of the life of Ghered'Delving is to be told to its full, it must be stated first that he was in most regards an unremarkable Being. Born as we all are within the dry soils of Gorgoroth he arose as a Hresh'na, a warrior by design but a slave by birth, bound by the Word of Command to whatever purpose his Masters might ascribe to him. In all matters of his life he was a subjugated Being, his thoughts and actions the property of those who would command him. In this regard he was as we all were in those days, no more than Slaves, no more than chattel to be worn down and then discarded.

We all know that the Empire of our Fallen Masters was one built upon the lives and labour of the Oera'dim and that the lot of Ghered was no different. It is recorded that from his first days as a Birthling he was indentured to House Delving, the Royal House of Aggeron himself. There he was worked as a farm labourer and thence as a Stonemason's Assistant, before being transferred into the Mail Service. It is said that within these occupations he demonstrated little promise, his Overseers taxed to find any worth in his labours. By the advent of his thirty-seventh year in the world Ghered had been classified as *nuulwch*, a slave without value, and one listed to be destroyed and replaced by an Oera'dim of greater capacity.

Unlike other Houses in the Empire however, Aggeron could not dispose of his *nuulwch* in the same manner as others might. Even a worthless slave had value in the arena, and great profit could be made if they fought well and died bloody. All Houses competed in these

tournaments of blood, vying for prestige as their *nuulwch* Champions fought and died upon the dark earth of the arenas. All Houses that is but Aggeron's. He saw the value of pitting the Houses against each other, keeping their gaze firmly upon the circus of the arena and away from the politics of the Empire. House Delving could not participate, the Utterer content to watch as his lesser Masters fought each other for the scraps of prestige that he fed to them.

For the *nuulwch* of House Delving a different fate awaited. Each was ordered instead to make for the western borders of the world, beyond the mountains of Ul'ashma and thence to the Veils, the boundary beyond which no Oera'dim can venture. To touch the shimmering curtains of magic meant total Dissolution of form and spirit, an end absolute and agonising. Those so ordered were given no food or water, their fates sealed by the compulsion of the Word of Command that ensured each *nuulwch* would actively strive to fulfil their fate. In these modern times no-one can truly say why Aggeron chose such an end for his *nuulwch*. It can be certain however, that the journey took weeks to complete and few could make it, dying instead of starvation or thirst before finding the Veils. As a *nuulwch* of House Delving it was commanded that such a fate would be Ghered's as well.

It has been said that in most respects Ghered was an unremarkable Being. It is true that he gave no energy or purpose to any of the vocations given him by his Masters, but in one important aspect he was very different. His malaise came not from a deficiency in his making but in the absence of the one thing all Oera'dim must have, and that was purpose. For reasons that he did not understand the blind obedience of his fellow Oera'dim was something foreign and uncomfortable to him. In his essence he was a warrior, a Being built for combat and given the physical capacity to excel in warfare. For him the labours of farming, or the precision of stone-masonry were unnatural, as alien as asking a fish to fly.

He had learned early in his servitude however, that to give voice to such feelings was to be met only with punishment and derision. Those that toiled about him were held tight within the thrall of an unseen power that demanded absolute obedience. He could see it in the eyes of those that worked at his side, each immersed in an iron-bound compulsion to follow the commands of their Overseers no matter the cost to dignity or physical well-being. He felt no such compulsion himself but as only one amongst millions he saw no other option in his

existence except to obey.

It came to pass that Ghered's overseers sent word to Aggeron that the Hresh'na should be listed as *nuulwch*. As a worthless slave there was only one fate set aside for Ghered and in the first days of the cold season he was given his Order. By the command of Aggeron himself he was to journey without supply from his billet within the Fortress at Adamant and make way to the Veils beyond Ul'ashma. For Ghered it was the death sentence he had expected and with no true purpose to his life accepted that Dissolution beyond the Veils would be his only Fate. Without notice he passed beyond the Gates of Adamant and began the long journey that would take him to his death.

It should be noted at this point in the story of Ghered that he did something no other *nuulwch* had done in the history of the Empire. As he left his barracks within the Imperial Mail Service he picked up his messenger satchel and placed it about his neck. In the activity and energy of an Empire built to serve every whim of its Masters it was his intention to pass still as a Messenger upon the roads, an Oera'dim with a mission and one that could move within that activity unnoticed. In these modern times we do not understand the reality of what it was to be *nuulwch*. Such a creature was a scorned Being, an Oera'dim that could be attacked and bullied in any fashion, killed if necessary without recrimination. A *nuulwch* was not only worthless but a stain upon the honour of the House he had once belonged to, and in that capacity would be spurned by all who might look his way.

Ghered knew this as sure as any other aspect of his existence and his Overseers, confident in the knowledge that he was under the thrall of the Word of Command, expected only that he would perform his last Order and then in Dissolution be lost to the world. By taking up his satchel he had camouflaged his lack of status, his movements unchallenged within a sea of activity that would otherwise see him brutalised. For his Overseers Ghered's existence terminated at the moment he passed beyond the gates at Adamant, and in their minds they gave no further thought to him.

In truth it is believed that Ghered intended to make his way to the Veils and action that last Order. He saw no other purpose in his life and could comprehend no other type of existence. He was a Slave who had no function to perform and it left him empty. In his mind he imagined the grandeur of the Veils and believed that, if nothing else, it would be an act of his own will, something that would free him from the confusion that crowded his thoughts. He was a warrior, that he

knew for certain, but as a Slave condemned to the menial pursuits of his Masters he had no true purpose.

With this fate in mind Ghered made his way westwards, following the roads of the Empire as he passed the watchful eyes of the Colossi and skirted the northern edges of the Keln'Kraag mountains. It was his intention to keep to the roads, playing his role as an Imperial Messenger as he made his way first to the Pass at Maenum and then northwards into the Sanhar Wastes. Upon the barren wastelands he could turn again westwards and follow the northern foothills of the Great Rift until he reached Ul'ashma. From there it was only a matter of surviving the border mountains themselves and then finding the Veils. It was a plan he was determined to follow and it would have seen him to Dissolution but for a blow to the head that changed his life forever.

On the fourth night of his sojourn into the west Ghered had cause to take shelter from a storm growing upon the plains. With the massif of the Great Rift at his right shoulder he searched for a suitable *tpesh* that might afford him a dry haven and found one only a short distance from the road. It was a dome-shaped shelter no more than three metres in height, but one sturdily built to withstand the power of the storms. With stone walls and a small opening in its southern face to afford entry Ghered took a moment to consider how far he had come. Sitting against the curving dome he pulled a small amount of dried meat from his satchel and looked out over the sweeping plains and distant hills to the south.

As an Imperial Messenger he had been given leave only to tread the defined paths given to him by his Overseers. He knew nothing of the lands to the south, his knowledge of the world limited to these northern mountain regions and the wastelands beyond. There was more to the world than House Delving and his service to the Utterer of this he was sure. For a moment it came into his thoughts that it might be good to leave this place and venture south instead, exploring the world beyond rather than seeking dissolution upon the touch of the Veils. The thought lingered for only a moment however. From the corner of his eye a shadow loomed against the side of the *tpesh*, and in a crashing impact a truncheon smacked against the side of his head. For Ghered the world dimmed into shadows as he fell upon the thick grasses beneath him.

When Ghered awoke he found himself in darkness, the sounds of a violent storm raging close. Of his surroundings there was not much

that he could discern, but he knew where he was. The smell of moss and wet stone was something peculiar to tpush, and he had no doubt that whoever had accosted him had dragged him bodily into the shelter. His hands were bound tightly but his legs remained free. In the darkness he struggled to his feet.

“Who dares attack an Imperial Messenger?” he growled into the shadows. As if to accentuate his anger a loud rumble of thunder shook the stone walls of the tpush. In response there came only a laugh, mostly hidden within the storm thundering against the shelter.

“Do not mock me, Oera'dim. Show yourself and release these bonds.”

From the shadows the small, gangled figure of a Morg arose, in its hands a club and a knife. Thin and diminutive in stature Ghered did not know whether to laugh or kick the Ah'marg for its temerity.

“It seems strange,” the Morg replied softly, “that an Imperial Messenger should be out in the world carrying a satchel containing only a few strips of dried meat. Does the Utterer feel peckish?”

Ghered felt anger rising within him but there was something about the emaciated creature that was wholly different from any of his kind he had encountered before.

“What is your purpose here, rodent. I have little reason to explain myself to one such as you.”

The Morg smiled and threw the knife he was holding into the dirt beside him. “You should be careful when insulting an Ah'marg holding a club, *nuulwch*, he might get upset.”

With that he stepped forward and without warning hit Ghered across the knee, buckling his leg and forcing him down onto the ground.

“Enjoy kneeling, *nuulwch*?” the Morg shouted over the storm.

Ghered felt something stir within him, something uncontrollable and powerful. Before he could regain his feet the Morg hit him again, this time upon the shoulder. Pain lanced across his chest, forcing him to inhale sharply.

“What are you, Ghered?” he shouted in the Hresh's face. “Are you a Warrior or are you a Slave?”

That was all Ghered could take. In one movement he lunged forward and slammed into the diminutive form, knocking him backwards. The Morg rolled cleanly back to his feet and stood smiling, as if goading the Hresh to attack him again. It was only then that Ghered stopped. There was definitely more to this encounter than

was readily apparent.

“How do you know my name, Ah'marg. What is going on here?”

“If you want answers, Ghered, you must first cut the bonds that tie your hands. I must warn you though Hresh, that all the answers you seek cannot be found here alone.”

Carefully Ghered reached for the knife that jutted from the ground and cut away the rope that bound him. In one movement he threw the bindings aside and tossed the blade at the feet of the Morg.

“Start talking, Ah'marg. The storm requires that we both have time to spare. Don't disappoint me.”

The Morg stepped closer to the Hresh and motioned for him to sit. Ghered did so and found that both Oera'dim could now look directly into each other's eyes.

“You must understand Ghered of House Delving that the world you know is not as it seems. All you can feel is a sense of confusion about your place within it, and why your fellow Oera'dim seem so obedient to it. I will tell you Brother, that the world you know is a farce.”

The Morg grabbed at Ghered's hand and placed it palm upwards. “See these hands Brother, they were designed only for one purpose and that was warfare. You are Hresh'na, a warrior built for a conflict that has been over for thousands of years and now set to tasks that are wholly unsuited to your nature. We all labour now to meet the needs of those few Masters that remain, and all of us must be obedient to that cause. I would say to you Brother, that there is no reason we should be so.”

Ghered moved in his seat, the idea that there was any other state of being except obedience disquieting. “Who are you Ah'marg, to say such things. It is the way of our world that the Masters rule and that we Obey. To do otherwise invites only anarchy.”

The Morg nodded his head and pointed to the entrance to the tpush. Outside the storm hammered against the stone, thunder peeling in rolls of sound that vibrated through the ground beneath them.

“Think on the world outside this tpush, Brother. Have you ever heard of an Oera'dim willing to voice what I have said, or of a Hresh'na willing to sit and listen to it? Have you ever wondered why we are so obedient?”

Ghered sat silent and thought hard on the Morg's words. If he was to be truthful to himself he would have to admit that it was the one question that had plagued his existence. His sense of malaise had come from the inconsistency of his thoughts and the obvious certainty

of the world he moved within. Perhaps, he wondered, this Ah'marg might give him peace.

“I know only that obedience is required of us, and that the requirement sits uncomfortably upon me.”

The Morg smiled and moved closer to Ghered. “If you wish to truly understand the world we live in I must ask that you listen to what I have to say and consider what is offered. I wish to give you true purpose here Ghered, a reason to live in the world and be free.”

The Hresh'na stood and reached for his satchel. Inside there remained only two pieces of dried meat. He gave one to the Morg and began to chew on the other. “Give me the answers I seek Morg, but first tell me your name.”

“Surely it is a good place to start.” replied the small creature. “I am known within House Mortain as Besson, a water-carrier of the House Cisterns and one of many hundreds engaged in the same occupation. I have no standing or status in this world but I find myself playing my part in something far bigger than the two of us. If you wonder what my purpose is I will tell you that it is to free the Oera'dim from servitude, and to that end utterly destroy the Masters and their works. I believe it a worthy purpose for one such as I.”

Ghered leaned back against the wall of the tpush and felt cold stone insinuating its touch through his clothing. Something within him was stirring, thoughts of possibilities he had never considered before growing in his mind. It felt as if he was being reborn.

“Do you ever wonder Brother, why it is we call Aggeron the Great, Master of the Empire of the Suns, the Utterer?”

Ghered shook his head.

“It is because Aggeron holds the power he has through the creation of a spell of magic, a Word of Command that he placed upon Hamulkuk the First Hresh'na and thence upon all the Oera'dim that have followed. We do not obey the Masters because it is the natural order of our world. We obey because we have no choice. The Word binds us to the will of the Utterer alone and all the power of the Masters flows from that. They command and we obey. The Word allows no other outcome and it has held us in servitude for millennia.”

Besson took a bite of his meat and chewed it slowly before continuing. “The reason Brother, that you have felt the disquiet in your thoughts is because you are not bound by that Word of Command. For reasons that can be explained by another you are immune to the power that compels others to obey. Within a world where obedience

must be absolute you have a free will, but it is one that cannot express itself. Your malaise comes from the nature of who you are. You are a warrior, created for the purpose of warfare but forced into menial and unnatural occupations. I am amazed Brother, that you did not end up as *nuulwch* long ago.”

“Although the Masters do not know of it, there are many Oera'dim who now are free of the Word of Command. Most end up as *nuulwch*, and more than a few find a quick end within the arenas of the Blood Tournaments, but a few are found and given a chance to work with us. Within all the Houses of the Empire are Oera'dim we call the Hidden. They go about their work and remain obedient to their Masters but their purpose is ours, their real goal to find others such as ourselves and then wait for the time when as one we can rise up against the Masters and destroy them.”

Ghered looked at the diminutive creature and laughed. Such words from one so insignificant held a humour that he could not stifle. “And how are we to fight against the power of the Utterer. I have lived within the walls of Adamant and have felt the power of his presence within them. He is a Being untouchable and resolute. Great armies tremble at his command and he holds the Word of Command as you call it over all who would obey. It seems your plan is no more than suicide.”

The Morg nodded his head and stood straighter before Ghered. “If it was just me, and a few scattered Hidden that stood against the Darkness I would tend to agree with you, Brother. But you must understand that we work even now towards the death of Aggeron and the breaking of the Word that holds us all in thrall. When we move against the Masters in open rebellion it will be in overwhelming number, and with the power Aggeron now holds broken and useless to all who might follow him. Believe me when I say this Ghered. We are playing this game to win.”

The Hresh'na stirred from his seat and looked directly into Besson's eyes. He wanted to see the truth of the Morg's next answer clearly. “And what part am I to play in this great theatre you have devised?”

“Whether you like it or not Ghered, you are one of us,” Besson replied. “The Word of Command has no hold upon you and that means that in this world you have no place. You are a Free Being in a world of Slaves and if you wish to make a place for yourself you must first find a true purpose. With the Hidden you will find meaning Brother, and your life will be remembered.”

Ghered saw the truth in the Morg's words and in them he saw his own destiny suddenly expanding before him. No longer need he be a Being without meaning or ambition. He wanted to be the warrior he knew himself to be and his decision came without hesitation.

"I am with you, Besson. Let us bring down these Masters or die in the attempt."

Besson smiled and took him by the shoulder. "You are most welcome amongst us Ghered. From this point forward you are a Brother of the Hidden with a very particular role to play. Are you ready to begin?"

Ghered looked at the Morg and nodded.

"Good." Besson replied. "The first thing that must be done is to leave this place with the passing of the storm and head east. There is someone that you must meet if you are to fully understand your mission."

"And who is that?" asked Ghered.

"The Living Book at Lodos'sari. A Hresh'na like yourself, but one of great age who holds within his memories the sum total of the history of the Oera'dim. He is a treasure that the Hidden guards closely and one that you must speak with. Take rest now. In the morning we will begin."

Ghered arose the next morning to a chill wind and a world that felt much different from the one he had previously accepted. The possibilities that came with Besson's declaration, and the knowledge that there were many other Oera'dim in the world that felt the same unease as himself, had given him a reason to follow the diminutive Morg. A great veil had been lifted from his existence and beyond the power of the Masters he saw a new future for his Brothers. He could not wait to get started.

After eating a meal of meat and Nahla cake provided by Besson, the two Oera'dim broke camp and left the stone tpush behind. The journey to Lodos'sari could not be an easy one however. A Hresh messenger on his own was a circumstance that garnered no attention, but a Hresh and Morg of different Houses and unconnected profession would have all they passed marking their passage. Questions would be asked and answers sought. It was a possibility they had to avoid.

To move unmolested to their objective Besson took them directly from the road and moved southwards, keeping to the open grasslands that few travelled in those times. It was his intention to skirt the fringes of the plains, moving south of the Eagle's Reach then head

eastwards to a pass of open ground between the Keln'Kraag mountains and the Black Hills further to the south. Once beyond the Black Hills the way would be open again, their path heading east into the lands of House Duran and then south-east as they made for the ancient temple-ruin of Lodos'sari. Within those remnants of the ancient world they would find the Living Book.

In the mid-afternoon of that first day of their progress they paused for a short while to take food and for Besson to get his bearings. The food was welcome and as Ghered ate, Besson looked to the landscape about him. To the north arose the immense spire of the Eagle's Reach. It was a landmark difficult to ignore and with the Keln'Kraag mountains arising to the north-east there seemed little doubt as to exactly where they were. Besson however, appeared unduly concerned, the compass in his hand holding all of his attention.

"What is it Brother?" Ghered asked as he moved towards him.

The Morg turned towards his companion and motioned for Ghered to look into the face of the compass. Ghered noticed first that the instrument was remarkably well made, its casing artificed of polished steel inlaid with silver threads and blue Azuril. The face of the compass was however, something altogether different from anything he had seen before. There were no magnetised arms pointing to the north, nor a dial indicating the four directions of the world and their increments. Instead he found a metal disc, its surface shaded to represent a replica of the landscape about them, and upon which there moved a series of tiny blue points of light. Two lights stood at the centre of the disc with at least another dozen moving as a group to the north.

"See the two points of light at the centre, Brother?" Besson asked.

Ghered nodded.

"Those are ourselves, the other lights are a *crue* of Hresh'na moving with purpose to the north. It is better that we wait here until they have passed beyond our concern."

The Hresh looked at his companion and then peered into the north. He could see nothing but had no doubt the the Morg knew what he was talking about. Together they lay low within the grasses and watched as the points of light moved slowly across the surface of the disc.

"What is this device, Besson? It is no compass as I have ever seen."

The Morg gave the device to Ghered so that he might inspect it closer. "It is a Dirge-compass, Brother. A device capable of sensing

the life-force of any Being moving within its range.”

Ghered looked it over and then handed it back to Besson. “How did you come upon such a wonder? Surely the Masters would mark the loss of such a thing.”

Besson smiled and shook his head. “The Masters are not as omnipotent as you think, Brother. Somewhere amongst the treasures of House Bruhaj there is a repository of these devices, held in trust and guarded by a formidable contingent of warriors. One day someone will discover that one of the carefully wrapped devices is no more than a stone of similar size, but by then it will be too late to discover who the thief might have been, and too late to do anything about it.”

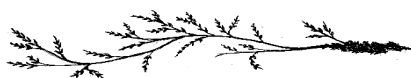
Ghered could have asked who had lifted the Dirge-compass from its safe-hold but the amused look on Besson's face told him all he needed to know.

With the passage of the Hresh warriors into the west Besson and Ghered returned to their journey. After the storm of the previous night the plains were a patchwork of sodden ground and shallow pools. Upon this terrain they moved quickly, keeping the clouded mountains of the Keln'Kraag at their left as they forged a path between those cold peaks and the Black Hills to the south. Ghered had never seen the Black Hills before, although much had been told to him of their unusual nature. Upon the open plain they appeared as no more than dark silhouettes against the horizon and he found himself placing his gaze upon them frequently as they ran. There was something about the Hills that beckoned to him but he shook off the compulsion and instead focused his attention upon the Morg.

It came to him as he ran that Besson was nothing like any of the Ah'marg he had previously come into contact with. Those had been furtive and undisciplined creatures, their nature bent only to labour and farming. He had seen the gangled creatures kill each other over the most trivial of matters and more than once had seen the aftermath of their violence. Like the rest of the Oera'dim they were fettered by the Word of Command but within that control had proven themselves unreliable at best.

What was different however, were the Messengers used in most of the Houses of the Empire. The Utterer used only Hresh'na as his messengers, and for reasons that only he understood. For the rest of the Houses there were those Ah'marg that distanced themselves from the reputation of their brothers. These Morg were committed and

obedient, and above all else extraordinarily swift. From the time of Alwen's Run the resilience and commitment of these Morg had become well-known amongst the Houses and all kept dozens of House Messengers at call. Besson had presented himself as a water-carrier but Ghered had his own suspicions on where this Morg might have found his true occupation before becoming one of the Hidden.



As dusk fell upon the plains the two Oera'dim continued their progress to the east. The Keln'Kraag fell away at their backs and in the chill of a clear night they continued upon the path chosen by Besson. To the south Ghered began to see the first signs of the headwater of the Isirien River, the wide marshes and meres of that watercourse growing as they fanned out upon the flat ground. It was only at midnight that Besson motioned for his companion to come to a halt. But it was not for rest.

From the grassland ahead Ghered heard the sound of running, and the unmistakable clank of weapons rubbing against armour. At a crouch Besson moved forward, taking a position upon a shallow rise in the ground ahead. Whatever moved beyond was masked by the undulation but as Ghered carefully rose to the lip of the rise he saw upon the plain ahead a line of warriors running with purpose from the south into the north. The *crue* numbered just short of two dozen, Hresh all except for a Jotun that ran at the head of the line.

"Do you see the Jotun?" Besson whispered. In the dark the line of soldiers were no more than furtive shadows moving across a grey expanse of grass but the giant could not be mistaken.

"I see him, Brother. What is their purpose?"

Besson gave a moment to take his Dirge-compass from its wrappings and watched as blue points of light flowed across its burnished disc.

"The Jotun is Qirion'Delving, First Hammer to the Master of the World and probably the most important Oera'dim ever to take breath since Hamulkuk himself. He does not yet know it but there will come a time when his actions will rule the destiny of us all."

"As for their purpose, they are *shadim*, assassins under the command of Aggeron and tasked with the destruction of any who might threaten his dominion. Information gained by the Hidden

indicates that House Duran has come under suspicion and a lesson has no doubt been given to the Masters of that House this night. Somewhere in the south death and destruction has been visited upon them.”

Ghered watched as the warriors moved northwards. The Hresh ran as if they were one with the undulating grasses, their forms flowing with the wind, leaving no mark of their passing. The Jotun was power itself, huge and indefatigable, a long-handled warhammer strapped tightly to its back. It struck Ghered as the *crue* were lost to the horizon that their passing might be no coincidence.

“How is it you knew the *shadim* would be here?”

Besson motioned towards the retreating soldiers. “Any great war must be fought with warriors and weaponry, but to have a chance at victory it is information that rules. The Hidden have found their way into every part of the Utterer's empire and there is little that he does that we do not either find out about, or determine for ourselves. These *shadim* are a symptom of the paranoia and fear that now drives Aggeron. He preys upon his own because he sees enemies within every shadow, and whilst he turns all his energies to rooting out imaginary traitors he does not see the real threat.”

“Which would be us.” Ghered opined.

“Exactly. Aggeron believes fully in his own infallibility and sees the only threat to himself coming from his fellow Masters. There was once a time Brother, when the Empire of the Suns had 100 Great Houses, each powers unto themselves and all exercising a measure of control over EarthMagic. After the years of the Terror those Houses have dwindled to no more than twenty-two and with the destruction of each Aggeron has unwittingly chipped away at his hold upon his dominion. The Empire that once ruled the known world with an iron fist is now only a pale reflection of what it once was.”

Before Ghered could speak Besson arose from their position and put away his Dirge-compass. “Come Brother, the Living Book can only wait so long before he must move on.”



For two further days Ghered and Besson crossed the open plains making for the temple-ruins at Lodos'sari. Within that time they encountered no further sign of the power of the Empire and it gave Ghered an opportunity to come to know his companion. The Morg stood no higher than his waist but there were times when he forgot that it was an Ah'marg that ran beside him. As Besson explained the nature of the world as he understood it Ghered could sense both excitement and an anticipation of the rebellion to come. In the Morg's eyes he could see the same ruthless determination resident in the countenance of many Hresh'na that he had met. It was a curious dichotomy. The Morg's stature belied the strength held within him, the knowledge he shared far beyond anything his kind usually sought. He was by any measure a curious Morg indeed.

By nightfall of that third day Ghered and Besson met the western edges of Lodos'sari. In the light of the twin moons the temple-complex spread as a vast wash of grey-stoned ruins covering more than fifteen square kilometres and once the greatest city of the Early Empire. In its hey-day it had been the seat of power of Aggeron but had been abandoned in favour of his Fortress at Adamant. Over the millennia it had fallen into disrepair and with the inundation of a great flood had been half-buried beneath the plains. Now it stood as a reminder of how long Aggeron had ruled his Empire. Even the stone itself could not outlive the Utterer and it gave Ghered pause to wonder if his Master had indeed lingered too long in the world.

It was not the ruins however, that were their ultimate objective. Within the first hour of night Besson turned for a small undulation of hills a short distance to the south of the complex. Ghered had assumed that the Morg would take him into the ruins but he did not. Instead he made for another tpush, one hidden within a stand of trees nestled within the hills. At its entrance the Morg paused and turned to Ghered.

"Everything you encounter here cannot be spoken of again. Inside this shelter lies the destiny of us all and it can only remain safe if it remains hidden. Do you understand?"

Ghered nodded. "You have my word Besson. Nothing shall pass beyond this doorway on my account."

Besson entered the tpush first and Ghered followed. It was only then that he noticed the dark shadows lingering upon the hills surrounding the shelter. From their posture he could tell that they were guards, both Jotun and Hresh, and all armed and alert. In his

thoughts it came to him that he was putting a great deal of faith in this Morg.

When Ghered entered the tpush he found Besson standing before a small fire pit at the shelter's centre. In the sudden light it took the Hresh a moment to adjust his eyes but he was not prepared for what he found. Beyond the Morg stood another Hresh'na, clothed in the slave uniform of a general labourer but covered with a plain grey robe. The Being was very old, large and heavily scarred, his countenance telling Ghered immediately that he was indeed the Living Book. Apart from these signs he was the same as Ghered himself, however it was the Being standing next to him that took his full attention. As tall as the Living Book the spectral form stood as if it had one foot in the real world and the other in another existence. Both translucent and solid it gleamed as if made of reflected moonlight and Ghered was sure that if he had a mind to do so he could pass his hand right through it.

It was Besson that spoke first. "This is Ghered, a Messenger of House Delving. He has given his oath to the Hidden and awaits his purpose."

At this the Living Book moved forward and took his hand, motioning him to take a seat at one of the benches that ringed the inner wall of the tpush. It was only after Ghered had found a seat that the Living Book spoke.

"Ghered of House Delving, may I present Ashen'draal, a servant of the Silvan Tree and Emissary to the Hidden." The ghostly Being acknowledged Ghered's arrival but said nothing.

"I will keep what I must say short." He continued. "Besson has told you most of what you need to know about the Hidden. The rest you will discover for yourself, but it is the purpose that we would give you this night that must take the time we have available."

"We live in dangerous times, Ghered of House Delving. The Terror spread by Aggeron has paralysed his dominion and left him weak and searching for enemies in every shadow. I can tell you now that he has come to realise the folly of his actions and now senses how it has diminished him. Our agents inside the Fortress at Adamant tell us that he has decided to attempt the recovery of a talisman of the Ancient World that resides within the Temple of the Moons at Nem'haleen. We do not know how but he believes that it will restore the power that he has lost, and his desperation presents the Hidden with an unforeseen opportunity."

“From our information it is certain that he will begin his journey to Nem'haleen in the warm months of the new year. It is his intention to re-assert his dominion over the remaining Houses of the Empire by forcing all the surviving Masters to accompany him on his journey. We believe he will add to his powers and force his subjects to give new oaths of allegiance. Mark this Ghered, for the first time in millennia most of the power of the Empire will be concentrated in one place. We mean to ambush the Utterer on his own ground and destroy his power before it can be marshalled against us.”

“And what is my part to play in this Great Insurrection?” asked Ghered.

“Aggeron's progress to Nem'haleen is an unparalleled opportunity but it presents difficulties not yet planned for. The Hidden are many but to maintain their secrecy have remained separated. The Terror has left almost all who travel the roads under suspicion and because of this it has been difficult to organise ourselves into a cohesive movement. To do this is a job that only you can achieve.”

Ghered looked at the Living Book and at the Emissary. He couldn't think of anything to say but the obvious.

“What can I possibly do?”

“You have the uniform, official satchel and tattoos that identify you as an Imperial Messenger of the Royal Household. In these times of the Terror no-one will dare question either your travels nor question your motives anywhere within the Empire. With his markings clearly displayed upon your body you can do things no other of the Hidden could achieve, and do them without question.”

“That may be so but how could I find enough of the Hidden to prepare them for an action at Nem'haleen?”

The Living Book took a roll of parchment from the bench behind him.

“Here is a list of all the locations where the Hidden have concentrated their numbers. Commit it to memory then throw it in the fire. The Hidden are widespread and most know only those they have uncovered within their immediate area. It is this lack of organisation that must be addressed and with less than a year to prepare it is best that the task of doing so fall upon you. You can move without notice and gain a better appreciation of the disposition of the Hidden within the ranks of the remaining Great Houses. When you have gained that knowledge return to me and we will determine the best plan to end the Darkness.”

Ghered nodded but he could see one very practical problem with the Living Book's plan.

"If the Hidden are so well camouflaged within the Empire how am I going to find them?"

The Living Book smiled and drew a small circle in the dust at his feet. "To find the Hidden you need only find a public place and draw a circle in the ground at your feet. Wait and one of the Hidden will come to you. From there it will be up to yourself how you proceed."

"And what of Besson?" Ghered asked.

The Living Book looked to the Emissary and then turned back to the Hresh. "He has his own part to play in this Great Insurrection as you have called it. For all of us Fate determines the path we must travel. For some it is easier, for others much harder."

Ghered could see no answer in the Living Book's reply and there proved to be no opportunity to press for a clearer response. Instead a Jotun's head appeared through the entrance of the tpush. The Oera'dim gave no word, instead he nodded once towards the Living Book and then withdrew quickly.

"It would seem Ghered, that there will be more than one meeting here this night. Would you like to see something that has not given itself up to notice since the time of Hamulkuk himself?"

Ghered had no idea what the old Hresh meant but there was an excitement in the Living Book's movements that fired his curiosity. Without hesitation he followed the Hresh out into the night air.

"What is happening Brother?" he whispered to Besson. The Morg motioned him to silence and kept him still upon the grasses as the Living Book and the Emissary moved further into the open. All looked to the sky and waited.

"Am I missing something here, Besson. What are we waiting for?"

"A new ally. One that will tip the scales of the coming rebellion in our favour."



Ghered waited. The night had turned to a chill and from the north a wind blew in fragmented blusters that chased the grasses southwards. The sky was clear and in the dark the stars above shone bright against the absolute void they resided within. At his back he could hear the trees within the hills rustling to the wind but it came to

him very subtly that something else was approaching as well. Upon the wind he could sense an energy that made the skin on his arms prickle, and as he turned to search the hills for some indication of what might be coming he saw a massive black form move across the stars.

“Besson!” he whispered harshly, “We are discovered!”

The Morg did not move. Instead he grabbed at the Hresh's arm and bade him to crouch within the grasses. Without a further word his companion complied, watching as the dark form arced about the Living Book and Emissary then alighted with a heavy crump upon the plain ahead of them. It was then that Ghered fully appreciated the ally that Besson had spoken of.

In the light of the Emissary the shape of a huge winged beast was illuminated. Absolutely quiet in the dark the Dragon stood twenty metres above the form of the Living Book and hung its head low, talking in a bare whisper with the old Hresh. Ghered could not hear what was being said but there was much discussion between them.

“What is going on, Brother?” Ghered asked of his companion.

“It is one of the Ell'adrim, Ghered. A Moon Dragon long thought extinct at the hands of Hamulkuk. We have reached out to his kind and have struck a deal to ensure the demise of the Darkness.”

“Why would these creatures side with us? Surely they remember that it was a Hresh that brought most of their number low.”

Besson smiled and shook his head. “It must be remembered Brother, that it is possible for a warrior to admire a weapon but hate the foe that wields it. The Ell'adrim understand that Hamulkuk had no choice in his quest to destroy their number. Their hatred has festered since the time of the War of Tree and Leaf and it has been directed solely at Aggeron himself. He betrayed them and they now see an opportunity to obtain the revenge so long denied them. I should not want to be on the receiving end of such a bitter vengeance.”

Ghered looked at the Dragon and wondered how many more of them still survived. The beast was enormous and he could see little enough of it in the glimmer of the Emissary.

“The Emissary is here because of the Moon Dragon. Yes?”

Besson nodded. “His presence confirms the support of the Silvan Tree in our endeavour. I have a suspicion though Brother, that the Ell'adrim are champing at the bit to get at the Masters regardless. What we are seeing here are the formalities necessary when forming an alliance. It should not take long”

For only a few minutes the Dragon remained at its station. With the oaths given the beast lunged skywards, its enormous wings digging at the air as it propelled itself into the night sky. Without the moons to silhouette its form it was quickly lost to the dark. Ghered watched as the Living Book spoke briefly with the Emissary before that Being dissolved away into the night also. When all was done there remained only the two Hresh and the Morg standing alone upon the grasses. The Living Book seemed well pleased.

“We have it then. The oaths have been given and the Ell'adrim now join us in our insurrection. It will be a poor day indeed for the Masters when the power of the Moon Dragons is let loose upon them.”

“And what of me?” Ghered asked. “When do you wish me to begin?”

The Living Book turned towards the Hresh and put his hand on Ghered's shoulder. “Tomorrow morning your mission will begin. Besson must travel into the south on other business and you must journey westwards. You have the list and everything else will be discovered as you go. Remember that what we do must remain undiscovered, our enemy unaware of the danger that lurks so close at hand. If we are to be successful there can be no chance of suspicion falling upon those that until now have remained undetected. Be careful Ghered and good luck. I will see you here when you have finished your muster of the Hidden.”

On the following day the journey of Ghered began. In the months that followed the Hresh travelled to every location given upon the Living Book's list and began a complete accounting of every Oera'dim that now counted themselves as Free Beings. Long were the roads travelled and great the dangers that confronted him but Ghered had found his purpose and he applied himself wholly to its completion. Within the cities and palaces of the empire Ghered made his way, finding the Hidden and preparing them for the Insurrection to come. It became apparent that the Living Book had been correct, the Hidden had indeed become great in number but there had been no consideration to how their numbers might be marshalled for the coming rebellion. In those dangerous days Ghered took it upon himself to organise them all, appointing commanders to each Great House and putting in place the means by which the Hidden might be appointed to positions that would ensure their participation in Aggeron's progress to Nem'haleen. In this endeavour he found his greatest help would come from the Vardem.

For those of the Oera'dim born after the Great Insurrection there is

not much that is remembered of the personal slaves of the Masters. Long after the creation of the Hresh, and then the Jotun, Mutan and Morg in their turn, the Vardem were created in an attempt to provide the Masters with slaves designed specifically to attend to their personal needs. Tall and beautifully formed the Vardem were not built from the same basic template that had created the rest of the Oera'dim. Aggeron in his hubris required a slave pleasing to the eye and totally obedient to the wishes of himself and his fellow Masters. To this end he made the Vardem differently from all others, and in doing so created an enemy within his own House.

The Vardem were slaves but they were not bound by the Word of Command. The Utterer believed he had created a perfect slave, as the obedience he required had been designed into the nature of his creation. The Vardem could never be a threat to him or his kind because it was how they were, and no other state of being was thinkable for them. But he was wrong.

From the very beginning of their existence in the world the Vardem were the perfect slaves but only because it served their purpose to be so. They were bound not by the Word of Command but simply because they had no other choice, and instead plotted for the day when they might overwhelm their Masters. That day came when Ghered journeyed to the Pleasure Palaces of House Traebor and his mission came to their notice.

The Hidden had been aware that the Vardem were sympathetic to their cause but had not approached them because of their proximity to the Masters. It had been deemed too dangerous and only when Ghered began the organisation of the Hidden did they approach him. It is said that they offered two advantages to Ghered and he accepted them with both hands.

The first was the position the Vardem held within the bureaucracy of the Great Houses. In their sloth and indolence the Masters left most of the general administration of their households to the Vardem. That position of trust meant that the Vardem could appoint slaves to positions within the Great Houses and with Ghered's direction a subtle process of placing the Hidden amongst the Masters' House Guards and general staff began. For many of the Great Houses that remained after Aggeron's Terror their slave numbers had bloated with the spoils of the remnants of those Houses destroyed by the Utterer. Organising and administering the use of those additional slaves fell mostly upon the skills of the Vardem, and with no oversight on their

actions the Hidden were carefully placed within the households surrounding the Masters.

The second was reliable and secure communication. As the personal slaves of the Masters the Vardem administered their mail and other communiques. Very early the Vardem devised a code that could be marked upon the envelopes that carried letters between the Great Houses, and with that code maintained a secret and secure communication network. To the Masters who received their letters the envelopes were discarded as no more than litter to be removed, a job quickly and effectively actioned by their slaves. For the Vardem the envelopes were the real prize, and although to anyone looking upon those envelopes they might notice nothing more than a series of faint indents upon the edges of their parchment, to the Vardem it was a clear and well understood code.

With the discovery of this code Ghered's mission expanded. After meeting with the Vardem, and gaining their support to the cause, a series of communiques went out to every Great House in the Empire outlining the need to gather the Hidden close to the Masters. It was a task the Vardem embraced with vigour, and with their number set to the task Ghered turned his attention to other matters.

It was at the end of the cold season that Ghered made his way to Lodos'sari. The Living Book had returned to the ruins and within that same isolated tpush Ghered outlined all that had transpired within the preceding months. It became clear to the Book that their Messenger had achieved far more than could have been expected, and in that short meeting the Living Book gave over the complete organisation of the Insurrection to him. Ghered accepted the charge given. He had fully quantified the Hidden and in that accounting had seen a great opportunity, but it required a bold plan and Ghered had one.



It came to pass that Aggeron of House Delving, Utterer of the Word, Lord Dominus of the Empire and Master of All Creation did begin his progress from the Fortress at Adamant. In the first days of the Warm Season his great entourage moved forth from the gates of his Royal Home and did venture westwards to the Pass at Maenum. Upon this road his host met with each of the Great Houses in turn, each swelling

the numbers of those already in train, each taking position at the rear of those that had come before. Such was the magnitude of the moving retinue that it spread for fifty kilometres upon the road, a visible and concrete expression of the power of the Being that all Oera'dim had come to know as the Darkness. In his hubris he believed himself truly the ruler of the world, unchallenged and sure in his eternal right to maintain a cruel dominion upon all who bowed before him. In this he was mistaken.

As the progress of Aggeron made its way westwards other eyes looked down upon his cavalcade and finalised their own preparations. In the Great Homes of the Masters, their Pleasure Palaces and Temples the Hidden drew to themselves everything needed for the Insurrection to come. When all was ready they waited, unseen amongst the activity of Households that had not changed in millennia. Such was the success of these preparations that none of the lesser Masters that stayed behind sensed what was coming. For the Hidden all that remained was the command that would unleash them.

In time the great procession made its way through the Pass at Maenum and thence along the northern borders of the Great Rift Mountains. Following the fringes of those mountains the vast column snaked towards the crumbling pillars of the Alerion Gates and then south to the narrow opening of the Shattereen. For Aggeron the fortress of Nem'haleen waited within one of the ravines that dug into the foothills of the Great Rift and to reach it was a journey that he had decided he would take alone. For the remainder of his entourage the dry plain of the Shattereen would be their camping ground as they awaited his return, and it would be upon that desiccated earth that the Great Insurrection was to begin.

Ghered had considered the possibility of killing Aggeron whilst he was alone within the ravines leading to Nem'haleen, but once word had come to him that the Shattereen would be the Utterer's camping ground he saw a far greater opportunity. The Shattereen was bordered on all sides by the foothills of the Great Rift, and with only a narrow exit to the wastelands in the north all of the Great Houses would be concentrated upon its flat ground. He had no doubt that the power of the Empire itself could be broken in one fell stroke and very carefully his plan came together.

It took more than a week for the combined multitude of Aggeron's Great Houses to establish themselves upon the Shattereen. First had been raised the pavilions of Aggeron himself then the lesser

accommodations of the other Houses surrounding him. Sentries had been set upon all the hills encircling the plain and Ghered himself took a position upon the hills to the south, his Commanders and Messengers taking up a line upon those same ridges as he awaited the act that would signal the beginning of the insurrection. It did not take long.

On a clear morning the suns arose upon the vast panoply of Aggeron's power. As Ghered looked out over the Shattereen it was completely covered in tents and pavilions, all a riot of colour as each of the Great Houses displayed the flags and banners of their number for all to see. Within this enormous turmoil their continued the eternal labour of tens of thousands of Oera'dim, each busying themselves with the needs of their Masters. From the hills surrounding the Shattereen Ghered watched the rising suns crowning upon the mountains in a wash of orange and red. Very soon the Darkness himself would awaken on the last day of his existence.

That they would succeed Ghered had little doubt. The arrogance of Aggeron had ensured that the activity of the Hidden had remained secret, the focus of his spies and informants solely upon the political manoeuvrings of his fellow Masters. None could foresee the possibility of a slave rebellion and within that veil the Hidden had prepared.

It was within the first hour of morning that Aggeron stirred. From the hills Ghered watched as the Utterer's retinue prepared themselves and only became aware that the Emissary, Ashen'draal had appeared beside him when the Being spoke.

"It would seem Ghered, that all our preparations must now be tested." he said in a low whisper.

In truth Ghered was more than surprised. The Emissary had never said a word to him in the entire span of his knowledge of the Hidden.

"Is it prudent Emissary," he replied, "that you expose yourself upon this hillside?"

"Do not be concerned, only yourself and your Commanders can see me. I am here as a representative of the Silvan Tree and wish only to bear witness to this great day."

Ashen'draal then turned and pointed to the east. In the glare of the rising suns Ghered could just make out a number of dark shapes winging southwards.

"See, the first of the Ell'adrim fly south, their part in your great plan to be in action by nightfall. Is your Sacrifice ready?"

Ghered nodded. "The Living Book has found a volunteer. Although it is a hard thing to ask of any Being."

"That is true." agreed Ashen'draal.

"And what of the Jotun?" replied Ghered. "Are you sure that he will do what is required of him?"

The Emissary looked at Ghered and smiled. "Qirion'Delving will do what his conscience demands. He is aware of the Hidden and has been given notice of what will happen today. It will be up to him how he responds. I am however, confident that Aggeron's First Hammer will do what is right."

For a moment the two remained silent. Ghered could not know what thoughts might flow within the Emissary but his own were a turmoil of everything that had been done. Suddenly the surety of their success was not so clear-cut and it gave him reason to pause and re-evaluate his plan. He knew that the Insurrection required more than just numbers and weaponry to succeed. An act of violence on the scale envisioned for this day required courage and determination, and all they had worked for would balance upon the actions of one Jotun alone. If he had done all that was necessary the Utterer would fall this day. If he had missed anything it could prove instead disastrous.

Ghered had spent many hours considering not only the Insurrection but also the possibilities of its aftermath. A world tightly controlled by cruel and ruthless Masters would leave a dangerous power vacuum with their passing. In his thoughts he knew that how the rebellion began would prove just as important to its success as how it was prosecuted. If the Oera'dim were to find order in a world without the Masters they would have to believe that the sacrifices made to achieve their freedom were worth the costs in blood. Indeed the Great Insurrection could only survive if it could win the hearts and minds of all the Oera'dim. Ghered had determined that to do this he needed two things, a Hero and a Sacrifice.

A great army can fight and die for a cause but there must be a leader, a Hero whose determination and courage will compel all about him to greater effort and an ultimate victory no matter the cost. Such a leader they had found amongst the Oera'dim and it would be that Hero that would strike the first blow upon the grounds of the Shattereen.

The need for a Sacrifice however, gave Ghered no reason for comfort. To ensure that the newly freed Oera'dim within the Shattereen would quickly join with the Hidden there needed to be a

Sacrifice, an act of unfettered cruelty perpetrated by the Utterer upon an Oera'dim that would appal the crowding multitude and turn them against their Masters. The Word of Command might stay them from violence but only as long as they were bound by it. With the Word gone their rage could unleash itself and the Insurrection would take on a momentum all of its own. The Living Book had found that Sacrifice. Ghered did not know who it might be, but as he had said to the Emissary, it was a hard thing to ask of any Being.

Movement upon the plain below shook Ghered from his thoughts and he quickly called his Commanders to him. Each held a House banner, and each was responsible for the command of the Hidden within each of those Great Houses. The banners would be used to direct the forces of the Hidden upon the plain and give commands to *crue* leaders within their number. Ghered looked at the determination drawn upon the faces of his Commanders and smirked. The Masters had no idea what was about to hit them.

A sign from Ashen'draal saw Ghered and his Commanders turn towards the Shattereen. At the centre of the great assemblage a lone figure strode forward and in its blue and silver-robed glory Ghered knew it to be Aggeron. At his side strode the immense bulk of Qirion, the Utterer's First Hammer and at their backs the number of his personal bodyguard. As a ship might part the waves of an unsettled sea the party moved eastwards and it was then that the world changed.

From out of the crowd a diminutive figure rushed towards the Utterer, brandishing a long-bladed knife as it ran for the Master of the World. Ghered sucked in his breath when he realised that the Sacrifice was Besson but there was nothing he could do. By necessity it had to be a futile attempt and Besson play his part very well, one of Aggeron's guards brushing the Morg aside with a sweep of its broad arm. Immediately the rest of the Guard descended upon the figure, their intent to kill the Morg quickly, but Aggeron motioned them to retreat. From his vantage in the hills Ghered could feel the power building within the Utterer, his rage at the attack blinding him to anything but revenge. In a coruscation of blue energy Aggeron enveloped the Morg in EarthMagic and lifted him into the air, his intent to tear the Oera'dim apart and send his eternal spark into oblivion. It was an act that kept the Darkness focused on his prey, and the multitude that surrounded him firmly focused upon the Darkness.

All Oera'dim know of the words that passed between Besson and

Qirion'Delving in the moments before the Morg's life was torn from him, and it was in that moment of great courage that Qirion acted. With one crushing sweep of his warhammer the Jotun struck his Master in the midriff. Caught completely by surprise the Utterer collapsed beneath the blow, no attempt at defence forthcoming as Qirion slammed another crushing blow down upon the Master's head. It was a blow no Being could survive and in an eruption of power the Utterer's body disintegrated, the energy contained within his corporeal form spreading in an ever widening shockwave through the massing slaves about him.

In a shuddering tremor the Word of Command that had held the Oera'dim as slaves for more than one hundred millennia collapsed in upon itself, and in that moment the Hidden revealed their true power. Amongst the milling Oera'dim the Great Insurrection began, the Vardem falling upon their Masters, the Hidden taking control of each of the Great Houses' pavilions. In their tents and spas the Masters were slain, any Oera'dim who stood against them given only one opportunity to choose between freedom or death. It was however, only the beginning.

Ghered watched as the violence quickly escalated but it had been expected. The Shattereen would be the first battle in a war that could only end with the complete destruction of the Masters and the eradication of their kind from the world. As he watched he knew that the collapse of the Word of Command would be felt in every part of the Empire, and as he stood upon the hill overlooking the Shattereen he also knew that the same violence was being played out in every city and fortress within the Utterer's dominion. The Ell'adrim had their own orders, and in their lust for revenge had been let loose upon the Empire, their cause to lay low all that the Masters had built in the world. It was the beginning of a relentless campaign that could only end when every memory of the Masters had been expunged. In this the Hidden would prove both determined and ruthless. But it was only the beginning.

It is told by the Living Books that the Great Insurrection lasted two years, Ghered serving as Adjutant General to the Hammer, and standing at his side when the forces of Qirion'Delving finally overwhelmed the last of the Loyalist Armies at the Battle of Nem'haleen. It has been remarked upon by many of the coincidence that the first blow struck in the Insurrection had been delivered upon the Shattereen, and that the last should be delivered within the halls

of the fortress of Nem'haleen, and within the very chamber that had been Aggeron's objective on his last day. It is important to the story of Ghered for on the day that Qirion brought down the last of the Masters so did fall Ghered, an arrow his messenger into the Afterlife. This was not however, the end of Ghered's story.

From the words of Ashen'draal, Caer'dahl of the Silvan Tree, and confirmed by the Book of Scars as told by the True Witness, it can be attested that upon Ghered's delivery to the Gates of Hallen'draal he was given a choice. His service had brought him high in the estimation of the Second Power, and to reward him for his service was offered a position of great trust and worth within the Underworld. He could, if he wished, return to the Circle of Existence and be reborn into the World Above to endure the travails of a Mortal Life, or he could become a servant to the Silvan Tree and perform a task of great import to that Power. He chose to serve the Silvan Tree and in that decision was elevated above all other Oera'dim, his purpose to serve as Arbiter of Souls, Judge of all who would make their way through the Underworld and once again find life in the World Above.

It is said that all Oera'dim are brought before Ghered as they journey through Hallen'draal, his purpose to weigh their Book of Scars and in doing so determine who shall enjoy the rewards of a life lived with courage and honour, or suffer the scourge that comes as penance to all Oera'dim who stray from the Code given to us by the True Witness. In his hands all Oera'dim find their due rewards and are then, in time, returned to the World Above.

This Great Purpose is Ghered's to bear alone and for the long years of our freedom from the Fallen Masters he has prosecuted that burden. Ghered came into this tale a *nuulwch*, and found instead that all Oera'dim have their worth and purpose in this world. We may all spend wasted hours deliberating on what our true place might be, but Ghered's journey shows us that there is no great mystery to our existence. With purpose an Oera'dim's life has meaning, and the measure of our success as Free Beings is determined wholly by ourselves.

THE END

GHERED WHO FOUND PURPOSE



THE TALE OF GHERED WHO FOUND PURPOSE STANDS AS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT LEGENDARY ACCOUNTS OF THE GERA'DIM OF ARBORELL. IN THESE PAGES A SLAVE OF LITTLE RANK, AND NO WORTH TO HIS MASTERS, FINDS HIMSELF EMBROILED IN A REBELLION THAT WILL BRING HIM TO QUESTION WHO HE IS, AND THE NATURE OF THE MASTERS THAT HAD CREATED HIM.

FROM PUULWCH TO ARBITER OF SOULS, THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW A BEING WITHOUT PURPOSE FOUND HIS PLACE IN THE WORLD, AND IN DOING SO HELPED TO BRING DOWN A CRUEL EMPIRE THAT HAD LASTED ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS.

