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THE WORLD IS WRITTEN IN BLOOD AND MEMORY

THE RISE OF THE SOLARKIN



Long before the name Solarkin came to describe a suit of armour, it had simply been a way of referring to those who had come from very far away.

Its origin is usually traced to the operations against the Damasca pirate fleet, carried out in one of the peripheral systems furthest removed from the regular routes of the Solarian Force. For years, those regions had depended on small local forces, adequate for patrolling trade lanes and maintaining order among scattered colonies, but incapable of confronting a naval formation of any real size. When the Damasca fleet entered the system, it seized freighters, transit stations and several passenger vessels before a coordinated response could be organised.

The pirates quickly understood the value of their captives. Thousands of civilians were distributed among different ships to complicate any attack and used as leverage against the local authorities. Destroying the fleet from outside would have been simple compared with taking it intact.

The request for assistance travelled much farther than the pirates expected.



The units dispatched by the Solarian Force appeared in military records as ****Solarian Boarding Forces****, an administrative designation for companies trained to seize ships, stations and orbital habitats.

They were troops capable of fighting under variable gravity, crossing damaged airlocks and operating for limited periods in depressurised compartments. Nothing in their organisation yet resembled the heavy infantry that would emerge years later.

To the people of the system, however, their origin mattered more than their military classification. These soldiers had crossed a considerable portion of human space from the old core worlds. In civilian transmissions and the first testimonies of freed hostages, an expression began to spread that identified them simply as the people who had come from Sol.

Sol's kin.

Solarkin.

The term appeared informally at first, with variations in spelling and pronunciation that military reports rarely bothered to record. After the first boarding actions, it began to be heard

among Solarian crews as well. It was shorter than the official designation and carried something that designation lacked: it said where those soldiers had come from and, more importantly, how they were seen by the people waiting for them.

The Damasca operations became one of the most remembered successes of the old boarding forces. The pirate ships were taken one after another, and a substantial number of hostages survived the campaign. The nickname returned with the troops, but for some time it remained only that. In official records they were still boarding companies of the Solarian Force.

The event that transformed the name came years later.

The operation began like many others. A Solarian formation was ordered to capture an enemy vessel whose strategic value made its destruction undesirable. After breaching one of the secondary access points, several infantry sections entered the inner decks and began advancing towards the control centres.

The first compartments fell quickly.

The problems began when they entered a transit zone between the service sectors and the main decks. The architecture of a ship favours the defender in ways that are difficult to reproduce on open ground. Corridors are narrow, routes predictable, and opportunities for dispersal almost nonexistent. A squad advancing through one has very little room to leave the line of fire. Every hatch can conceal another defensive position, and every junction can become another firing point.

The ship itself also imposed restrictions on the weapons used inside it.

Ammunition intended for internal security and shipboard defence had been designed to reduce penetration through bulkheads and limit damage to conduits, equipment and neighbouring compartments. These were small, low-impulse rounds suited to close-range engagements within a pressurised structure. Against Solarian combat armour, a single hit presented only a limited threat.

The unit advanced relying on that advantage.

What waited ahead was not an unusually powerful weapon, but a far greater concentration of defensive systems than expected.

Automated turrets, security positions and crew-served weapons began covering the corridors from successive positions. Each time the

soldiers eliminated one point of resistance, another waited behind it. Alternative routes were blocked or controlled, and withdrawal meant crossing exposed ground they had already fought through.

The first impacts left little more than marks on the armour plates.

Then more followed.

Armour cameras recorded long sequences of rounds striking the same surfaces again and again. The outer plates endured punishment that would have killed an unprotected soldier many times over, but the fire did not stop. Cracks began to form around mounts and joints. Optical surfaces clouded beneath repeated impacts. Some articulations deformed under accumulated damage, while flexible protection eventually failed in areas where rigid plating could never fully cover movement.

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The soldiers kept advancing because stopping meant remaining under the same fire.

The unit was destroyed slowly.

Many of the dead showed no single decisive penetration through the armour. They had been struck dozens or hundreds of times. Eventually one round found a weakened joint. Another passed through a visor already damaged by earlier hits. In some cases the armour remained largely intact around a body that had suffered the cumulative effects of impacts capable of transferring force even when they failed to penetrate.

By the time supporting forces reached the sector, the company that had begun the advance had effectively ceased to exist as an operational unit.

The subsequent report made a considerable impression within the Solarian Force because it ruled out almost every convenient explanation. The enemy had not deployed unknown technology. It had used neither specialised armour-piercing ammunition nor a weapon specifically designed to defeat Solarian protection. Most of the recovered projectiles belonged to defensive systems with limited penetration.

The unit had been destroyed by accumulation.

The study reached a simple conclusion: boarding doctrine was using soldiers protected against occasional impacts in an

environment where, under certain conditions, there was no way to avoid sustained fire. An infantryman might survive ten hits and still die to the eleventh, so long as the geometry of the corridor allowed the enemy to keep firing.

Training alone could not solve the problem.

MANY OF THE DEAD SHOWED NO SINGLE DECISIVE PENETRATION THROUGH THE ARMOUR

The first specifications for the new programme demanded far greater protection against light projectiles and fragmentation, but also a complete reconsideration of the areas traditionally left vulnerable in infantry armour. Joints, neck, visor, underarms and external connections all had to withstand prolonged exposure. The soldier would have to remain operational after taking a volume of fire that would have rendered conventional equipment useless.

The helmet was fully integrated into the armour. The wearer's face disappeared behind a sealed mask protected by independent optical systems. The new suit incorporated its own life support and was designed to keep its occupant active even after a complete loss of pressure in the surrounding compartment. Breathing, communications, sensors and thermal regulation had to continue functioning without relying on the ship being boarded.

The result was too heavy to replace conventional infantry and too expensive to equip large formations. It was never intended to do either.

Its purpose was much narrower.



It had to go where other soldiers could not advance.

During the first trials, the new force received several technical designations. None survived beyond the programme documents. Among veterans of the old boarding companies, another name had begun to circulate again, one brought back years earlier from a distant campaign.

Solarkin.

By the time the designation was formally adopted, it required little explanation. For years it had already been associated with Solarian soldiers crossing an airlock to fight inside an enemy vessel. The new programme simply turned the old nickname into a military classification.

The first operational Solarkin retained that specialisation. They were deployed to force routes through ships, stations and orbital complexes where resistance prevented conventional forces from advancing. Their armour could absorb enormous volumes of light fire, while their sealed systems allowed them to continue fighting after the atmosphere around them was gone.

In time, the Solarian Force began using them beyond the decks of a ship. The same qualities that allowed a soldier to cross a defended corridor proved equally useful when assaulting bunkers, industrial complexes, fortifications and urban positions where the enemy could concentrate large amounts of fire into a confined space.

Their role expanded. Their silhouette became familiar on fronts far removed from the naval operations for which they had first been designed.

But their construction still carries the memory of that original purpose.

Every thick plate, every protected joint and every sealed mask answers to a conclusion written after examining the ruined armour of a unit that had entered a ship convinced the weapons waiting for them could not penetrate their protection.

They were right.

None of those weapons was powerful enough.

There were simply too many of them.



TSF SOLARKIN ELITES WITH HEL RIFLES

The finest soldiers of the TSF enter the fight equipped with HEL assault rifles. Highly trained and heavily armed, the Solarkin Elites deliver accurate fire while advancing through the most dangerous combat zones.



TSF HEAVY WEAPONS

Three powerful weapon systems bring specialised firepower to the Solarian ranks: the Spitfire Cannon, the Repeating Cannon, and the devastating High-Energy Cannon. Each weapon offers a different answer to enemy infantry, armour, and fortified positions.



TSF STALKER

The armoured version of the Stalker combat walker is built to lead frontal assaults and crush stubborn resistance. Its reinforced frame allows it to advance under heavy fire, bringing the full weight of Solarian military power directly into enemy positions.

THE VAMPIRE LORDS



The armies of the Undying Legions gather through obligation. When war is called, every vampire lord is expected to contribute from his own possessions. Skeletons are raised from family crypts and old battlefields, ghouls are driven out from cellars, woods and burial grounds, household dead are armed, and whatever other creatures have accumulated beneath the authority of the estate are counted among the lord's strength.

Some arrive with several hundred bodies. Others bring considerably more. A lord who possesses land, subjects and ancient privileges is expected to place something upon the field when summoned.

Command of these contingents is usually entrusted to captains, stewards and favoured servants bound closely enough to their master that instructions can pass between them without voice or messenger.

The nature of these bonds varies between households. Some are created deliberately through blood or ritual. Others develop slowly over decades of service. The oldest retainers can understand little more than a sensation sent across the field and still know what their lord requires of them: a direction, a place, a moment to advance.

The bound servant receives his master's intention and translates it into orders that lesser creatures can obey. In this way, the vampire remains responsible for his troops while fighting far from them.

Once the contingents have been placed under the authority of the army's general and the opening movements are underway, their masters begin to gather behind the main line.

Here stand the finest horses, the household retainers who have no place among the common dead, and the lords themselves. Old rivals may find themselves riding stirrup to stirrup. Lords whose estates have disputed a road or stretch of woodland for a century exchange little more than a glance. Political rank still matters, but every rider present possesses blood, land and the right to stand among his peers.

These are the Vampire Knights, though in several territories another name has become increasingly common: The "Knight Lords".

The company has no fixed composition. It forms from whichever vampire lords have answered the call, bound together by custom and by a shared understanding of their place in battle.

They rarely ride with the first assault.

Skeletons take the ground that must be taken. Ghouls fill broken terrain, test difficult approaches and press into positions where their losses can be tolerated. Larger formations advance against enemy lines and absorb the violence required to establish the front.

Behind them, the Knight Lords wait.

From there they receive the general's instructions and impressions from their own bound servants. A unit has reached its position. Another is stalled. A road remains open. An enemy reserve has moved. As the first engagements settle, the field gradually becomes readable.

That is when their usefulness begins.

The Knight Lords look for a weakness that has already started to form: a flank stretched beyond its support, a formation pinned by the dead, cavalry committed into poor ground, a commander exposed too far forward, or a retreat whose collapse might carry neighbouring units with it.

When the opportunity appears, the company moves.

The general may indicate where their intervention is required, while the vampires themselves decide how the attack will be made. Their assaults often develop across the edges of the battlefield, using roads opened earlier by their servants, ground already cleared of skirmishers and gaps created by formations committed elsewhere.

By the time the enemy sees them approaching, it is usually occupied with something else.

The horses carry riders stronger and faster than ordinary men, armed from private armouries that have accumulated weapons for generations. Each vampire has fought his own wars and survived conflicts that belong to the distant history of younger kingdoms. They require little drilled uniformity once they have fixed upon the same objective.

VAMPIRE KNIGHTS

Clad in ornate armor and driven by immortal hunger, the Vampire Knights form the aristocratic elite of the Undying Legions. Their devastating charges combine martial discipline with supernatural strength.

Their task is simple: strike where the battle is already beginning to fail.

A well-timed intervention can break an exposed formation, sweep away a reserve or turn an orderly retreat into a rout. Such moments carry considerable prestige among the vampire courts. A lord who commits too early may be remembered as impatient. One who waits beyond the moment of usefulness invites a far more damaging judgement.

The celebrated charges are those that seem almost economical: a brief movement, made at precisely the right point, after which an entire section of the enemy position begins to collapse.

Arguments over these actions can last for centuries.

Every old house can name an ancestor who saw the weakness first. Every rival house can explain why the same charge succeeded only because someone else's servants had already done the difficult work.

The Knight Lords remain one of the few concentrations of the ruling class regularly exposed to open battle. Skeletons can be raised again. Ghouls can be bred, gathered or replaced. A vampire of established blood, property and influence is a more difficult loss.

Their caution is therefore accepted as part of warfare. The common dead establish the field. The general shapes it. The lords wait until their own intervention can decide something worth the risk.

By the time the vampire lords are riding, the battle has usually shown them where it is going to break.



TARKEAN AND HEDRAD

Among the Vampire Knights there are lords who maintain war mounts bred over generations, creatures selected for their speed, endurance or ferocity. Hedrad belongs to an older tradition. He died centuries ago and, except during the periods when Tarkean calls him back to war, remains in a sleep without pulse or breath.

Their bond began long before his death.

Hedrad had never been a docile creature. By the time Tarkean encountered him, the dragon was already old enough to tolerate very little company and had wounded, driven away or devoured those who had tried to claim him as a mount. Tarkean did not fare any better at first. Rather than attempting to break him, he approached Hedrad as he might another powerful lord, learning his boundaries, joining his hunts and fighting beside him long before he ever tried to ride upon his back.

Blood eventually sealed what years of familiarity had begun.

Tarkean drank from Hedrad and allowed the dragon to taste his own blood in return. It was not a rite recognised by the vampire houses, nor did it establish any form of servitude. Neither became subject to the other. Something nevertheless remained after the exchange.

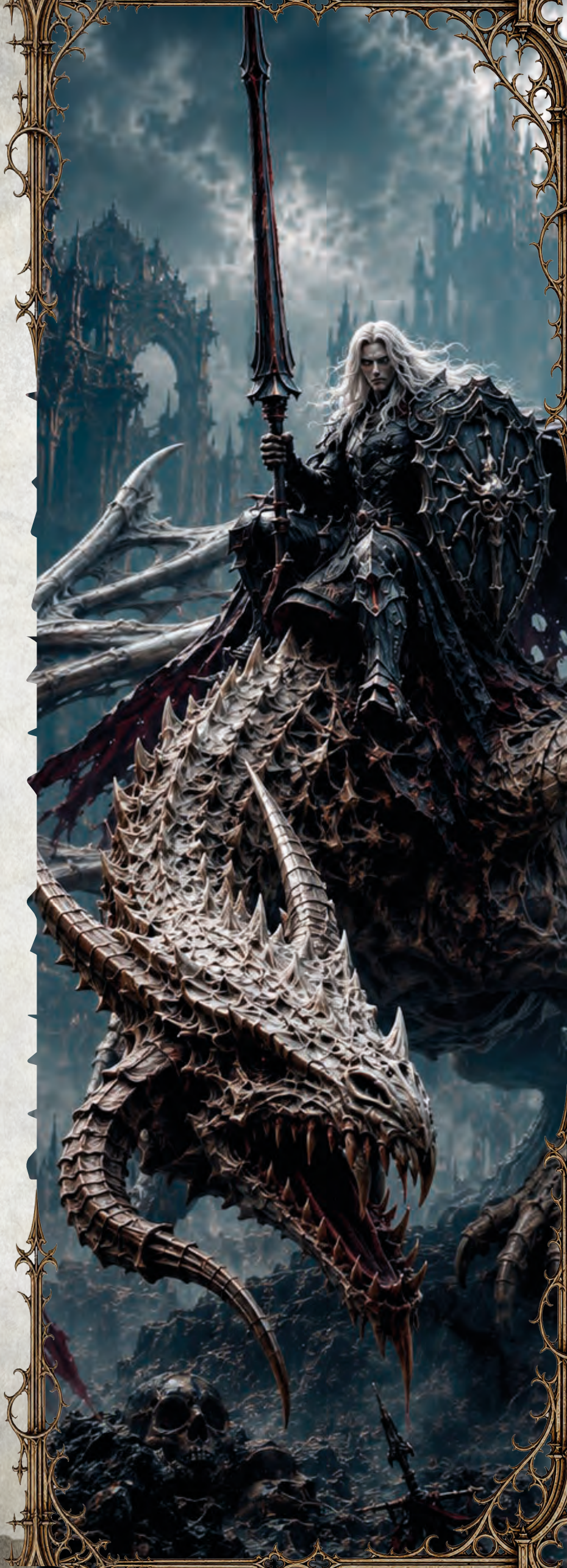
Tarkean could sense Hedrad even across considerable distances, while the dragon often seemed aware of his rider's approach before he could see him. In battle their coordination went beyond training. Tarkean gradually learned to recognise Hedrad's hunger, pain and excitement as sensations separate from his own.

They fought together for decades.

Hedrad's death should have ended the bond.

His body was carried back to Tarkean's lands and placed within a chamber large enough to hold him. Tarkean refused to have him burned, dismembered or divided into relics. The blood they had shared remained within the dragon, and with it came an unexpected consequence. Hedrad's flesh dried and his wounds remained visible, but decay made little further progress.

Tarkean's blood had protected him from much of the corruption that follows death.



It had not been enough to pass on the vampire's immortality. Hedrad remained dead, preserved somewhere between a corpse and the creature he had once been.

The bond, however, had survived.

Tarkean could still feel him.

Years later, when war demanded what Hedrad had once been capable of, Tarkean decided to discover how much of that connection remained. He opened his own flesh over the dragon and allowed his blood to enter Hedrad's mouth and the old wounds across his body. The change came slowly.

Dry vessels filled again. Hardened muscles recovered their tension. The heart gave a single contraction, then another. Blood spread through tissue that had not moved for years, restoring enough strength for the dead body to function once more.

Eventually, Hedrad opened his eyes.

He had not returned to ordinary life. Neither had he become an empty carcass driven by necromancy. Tarkean had reopened the old bond between them, and while that connection remained fed, Hedrad could breathe, think, fly and fight.

Tarkean has repeated the process whenever war has required his mount.

Hedrad may remain at rest for years or even decades. When the time comes, Tarkean restores the connection and brings the dragon's enormous body back into motion. Waking him demands a considerable amount of blood. Keeping him awake demands far more.

A dead horse requires relatively little to keep moving. Even some of the larger creatures employed by the Undying Legions can be sustained with modest quantities of blood or sorcery. Hedrad exists on another scale. Every beat of his wings drives a vast weight of muscle through the air. His heart must continue pumping. His lungs must fill. Damage suffered in flight or battle must be sustained and repaired while he remains active.

The strength required for all of this comes, ultimately, from Tarkean.

Before a campaign his household prepares reserves for Hedrad's awakening. Prisoners, animals and sealed vessels of blood accompany his retinue. These supplies are usually sufficient at first. Once Hedrad has been flying and fighting for several hours, the cost begins to rise rapidly.

The dragon feeds through his rider.

Blood Tarkean consumes is drawn into the bond almost as quickly as he can replace it. His thirst returns far sooner than it normally would and grows to a degree few vampires ever experience. After several hours of fighting, enough blood to sustain Tarkean for days may barely keep the two of them active.

His discipline begins to suffer as a result.

Like other Vampire Knights, Tarkean rarely commits himself at the opening of a battle. He waits for the lines to form, watches the movement of reserves and looks for the point where a sudden attack can decide the engagement. Hedrad remains away from the main fighting while lesser troops carry out the work assigned to them.



Once the dragon takes flight, Tarkean's margin for patience begins to narrow.

At first he chooses his targets carefully. He strikes exposed flanks, destroys positions blocking the advance and attacks formations whose loss may unbalance the enemy line. Each climb, each attack and every wound suffered by Hedrad increases the amount of blood passing through the bond.



Eventually the need becomes difficult to ignore. Survivors of Hedrad's attacks become an immediate source of sustenance. Tarkean lands among the wounded, feeds, and mounts again. Retreating troops may draw him farther from the main battle than he originally intended if the thirst has grown severe enough. Those who have campaigned beside him more than once learn to recognise when Hedrad has remained awake for too long.

There is another part of the bond that Tarkean has never fully understood.

When he rides Hedrad, he can feel the dragon's hunger.

He does not know whether it is simply an echo of the blood they exchanged centuries ago or something deeper that continues to pass between them. At times, while Tarkean feeds, he senses a satisfaction that does not seem entirely his own. Hedrad has also been known to turn towards the wounded before receiving any command from his rider.

This uncertainty has contributed greatly to their reputation among the other vampire lords. Some consider it unwise to keep Hedrad active beyond a single battle unless circumstances demand it. The danger lies less in the dragon himself than in what prolonged contact does to Tarkean. With every passing hour the thirst grows stronger, and the distinction between the impulses of rider and mount becomes harder to judge.

When the campaign is over, Tarkean takes Hedrad back to his chamber.

There he begins to close the bond.

The flow of blood between them is reduced gradually. Hedrad's pulse slows, tension leaves his muscles and his breathing becomes shallow. His awareness recedes before his body finally becomes still.

Tarkean never allows the process to continue until Hedrad begins to starve.

By the time the connection is fully closed, the dragon is already asleep.

His body remains preserved in silence until he is needed again. A year may pass. Fifty may pass. Hedrad has little sense of the difference. The years between battles exist outside his awareness.

Tarkean remains awake through all of them.

And when war calls for Hedrad again, he opens his flesh, lets the blood flow, and waits for the first heartbeat.



ASTARII DYNASTY

CHENWANG AND XINGWAN

TWINS OF THE HEAVENS

For years, Chenwang and Xingwan had fought as they had done almost everything since childhood: close to one another. Neither held a high position in the Astarii hierarchy. They were line officers, responsible for warriors they knew by name and for stretches of the front small enough that an order could still be given by voice. Their reputation came from a succession of campaigns in which neither had known defeat.

They had learned to fight together long before either was given command. Each knew the other's habits: how long Chenwang would hold before yielding ground, how Xingwan judged a distance before moving, the small changes in formation that usually preceded a decision. In battle they rarely needed to look for one another. As long as they remained within the same front, each had a fair sense of where the other stood and what would come next.

Their commanders learned to make use of this. The twins could be given different duties and placed with separate companies, but they were usually kept within the same formation, close enough to intervene if the battle began to turn. Among those who had served beside them, a belief took hold that one twin was difficult to catch unprepared while the other remained nearby.

The campaign against the Chaos tribes was the first time this arrangement was broken.

The enemy was advancing along two neighbouring routes, and the Astarii command divided its forces to contain both. Neither enemy column appeared



large enough to justify concentrating the entire army against it, and the two positions were close enough to seem part of the same front. Chenwang was assigned to one force. Xingwan marched with the other.

For the first time since they had begun fighting, several miles of ground and two enemy armies stood between them.

Both battles began within hours of each other.

Both went badly.

On Xingwan's front, the Astarii held for much of the day before the pressure became too great. One unit gave way on the flank, another withdrew to avoid being cut off, and soon the whole formation was falling back. By the time the order to retreat came, much of the force could still be saved, but the ground was already lost.

During the withdrawal, Xingwan looked towards the other battlefield.

Beyond the ridges she could make out smoke, movement among the standards, and changes in the line that she knew too well. She could not see Chenwang, nor even clearly identify the formation in which he was fighting, but the pattern was enough.

His battle was worse.

In later years some claimed that she had felt it. Others remembered that Xingwan had spent half her life learning to read her brother's decisions from little more than the movement of troops at a distance. She never showed much interest in deciding which explanation people preferred.

She left the retreat and began running towards the other battle.

On foot, she would never reach him in time.

One of the barbarian riders harrying the Astarii rear came too close. Xingwan waited for the charge, avoided the first blow, and dragged him from the saddle. She seized the reins, mounted, and rode east.

It was the first time Astarii soldiers saw her enter battle on horseback.

By the time she reached the second front, Chenwang's formation was close to collapse. The Astarii had already lost much of the field, and several units were trying to break away from the enemy. The centre was still trapped in close

fighting. Chenwang remained there with the survivors of his command, holding long enough for the rest of the army to withdraw.

The warlord leading the Chaos host had come forward to break the position himself.

With his warriors around him, he had forced his way into the centre of the Astarii line. The formation could not withstand much more. Once it broke, the barbarians would have a clear path towards the withdrawing troops.

Xingwan came in from behind them.

*Bound by blood and celestial destiny,
Chenwang and Xingwan fight as one. Their
movements flow with perfect harmony,
combining martial grace, speed, and the
mysterious power of the heavens in a striking
new addition to the Astarii Dynasty.*

She had crossed the confusion between the two battles, passing scattered troops, fugitives, and enemy bands moving towards the fighting. The stolen horse had covered in minutes a distance that would have made any attempt on foot useless. She found Chenwang where she expected him to be: at the point where the line was still holding after most of the field had already been given up.

She saw the warlord cutting his way through the Astarii and turned the horse towards him.

He was facing the line and never saw her approach from the rear. Xingwan drove through the press of his own warriors and struck before he could turn. The blow threw him down in front of his men and took him out of the fight.

For a few moments, the barbarian advance lost its rhythm.

The warriors closest to their lord turned back. Those behind them slowed. Conflicting orders spread through the ranks, and the pressure against the Astarii centre weakened just enough.

Chenwang ordered the withdrawal.

The survivors pulled away in good enough order to deny the barbarians an immediate pursuit. By the time the enemy recovered, much of the Astarii force had already escaped.

Both battles had been lost.

The enemy held the ground, the casualties were heavy, and the campaign continued under far worse conditions than expected. Even so, many of those who returned did so because Chenwang had held the centre a little longer, and because Xingwan had created the few moments needed to pull it free.

In their next battle, the twins fought together again.

Xingwan rode.

From that point onward she kept a mount and began adapting to horseback the instincts she had learned on foot. Chenwang remained where he had always been most effective, among the line troops, close to the centre and to the places that had to be held. Xingwan moved around that fixed point, riding the flanks, watching the shape of the battle and keeping a route open towards her brother's position.

It changed the way they fought together.

Before, their strength had depended on proximity. They needed to remain within the same part of the line, close enough to read one another and close enough to intervene. From the saddle, Xingwan could range much farther without losing the ability to reach Chenwang when the field shifted.

In time she became an exceptional rider. Those who had been present during that campaign still remembered how it had begun: with an enemy horse and a distance she needed to cross before it was too late.

From then on, Chenwang and Xingwan could receive separate orders, fight at opposite ends of a formation, or spend long stretches without seeing one another. Xingwan always kept track of where her brother was and how long it would take to reach him.

Stories soon grew around them.

Some Astarii soldiers swore that Xingwan knew when Chenwang was in danger even before a signal reached her. Others said Chenwang would hold ground longer than any other officer because he knew that, while his sister was still somewhere on the field, a rider might yet appear through the dust and enemy ranks.

The twins never did much to encourage such stories.

They simply never fought far enough apart again to disprove them.



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