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THE THREE GATE INCIDENT



Kordane's End acquired importance only after it went silent.

The system occupied the far end of a minor Avenue route, where the Crown maintained an industrial presence at considerable expense. Its belts contained rare materials associated with the instability of an Aflame Star, although the precise nature of that relationship remained confined to specialist and military research. The refinery justified the cost of the route, the rotating workforce and the small garrison assigned to protect them.

Beyond that, Kordane's End offered little reason for attention. It had no inhabited worlds, no permanent settlements outside the industrial complex and no recognised connection to the frontier beyond its own Avenue Gate. Supply ships arrived, exchanged personnel and freight, and departed by the same route. Official surveys extended some distance into the surrounding belts, then became increasingly vague as they approached regions with no immediate industrial value.

The first warning came when a scheduled ore convoy failed to emerge from the gate.

Transit control delayed the next departure while it attempted to contact the refinery. Automated requests passed into the system without response. Gate telemetry continued to register the structure, though much of the information arriving from it was incomplete or contradictory. The aperture existed, but its

systems would neither confirm their status nor accept external commands.

At first, the silence was treated as a technical failure. Remote installations lost communications, especially along minor routes where maintenance schedules were frequently stretched. Concern grew as further reports failed to arrive. The refinery missed its maintenance transmission, the garrison failed to confirm its readiness cycle, and a second convoy passed its departure window without appearing.

By the time regional command accepted that the whole system had become unreachable, Kordane's End had already been silent for several days.

The public account appeared much later under the title "The Kordane Refinery Gas Event". It described a toxic industrial release, heavy loss of life, a temporary failure of the Avenue Gate and the eventual restoration of order by Crown forces. The explanation fitted the established dangers of frontier industry. Refineries suffered containment failures. Remote systems went without assistance for long periods. A serious accident at the end of a supply line could spread through an installation before anyone elsewhere understood its scale.

The military archive preserved a different name: "The Three-Gate Incident".



Investigators discovered that Kordane's End possessed three points of access. The first was the lawful "Avenue Gate", used by official traffic and recorded on every strategic chart of the region. The second was a concealed "Black Gate", known to smugglers and corsairs who had worked the outer belts beyond the refinery's tolerated perimeter. Evidence gathered after the operation indicated the presence of a third passage, absent from Crown navigation records and unknown even to most of the system's illicit traffic.

KORDANE'S END LOOKED LIKE
A TERMINAL SYSTEM. THE
INCIDENT PROVED IT HAD
NEVER BEEN THAT SIMPLE.

The terminology surrounding this third route remains inconsistent. Surviving documents refer to an aperture, an unregistered transit event and, in a small number of technical reports, a gate manifestation. Later revisions removed several of these references. What remains establishes that something entered the system through a passage outside the Crown's recorded transit network.

This discovery changed the strategic interpretation of the incident. Kordane's End had been considered simple to isolate and equally simple to monitor. Its single recognised gate gave the Crown control over lawful movement, while the system's position at the end of the route appeared to limit the direction from which any threat could arrive. Smuggling remained a manageable concern because command regarded the Black Gate as a local criminal secret rather than part of a wider transit structure.

The third passage exposed the weakness in that assumption. Whoever entered Kordane's End had access to a geometry that the official map did not describe.

Marr Veyk appears in the surviving record during the first hours of the silence, although the sources disagree on his exact role. Some identify him as the captain of a converted hauler and leader of a small corsair group. Others describe him as a navigator who occasionally worked with independent crews. All versions agree that he knew the unofficial routes around Kordane's End and was present in the outer belt when the Avenue Gate stopped responding.

Veyk escaped through the Black Gate carrying fragments of route data, refinery logs and sensor records gathered before his departure. The material reached the "Solarian Force" through channels that were never included in the public investigation. Its origin made it unreliable, but the inconsistencies it contained were difficult to dismiss.

Several equipment shutdowns appeared to have been recorded before the loss of communication. Internal alerts continued to generate after the refinery network had supposedly ceased responding. Some files carried conflicting timestamps, while others referred to activity in sections that were listed as empty or inactive. The data offered no clear sequence of events, though it strongly suggested that the gate failure had been planned rather than caused by the refinery disaster.

The Crown had little reason to trust Veyk. His knowledge of the Black Gate nevertheless made him indispensable.

External attempts to reactivate the Avenue Gate had already failed. Reaching Kordane's End required a covert return through the pirate aperture, aboard vessels capable of passing as ordinary smuggler traffic. Force personnel were distributed among freight ships and utility craft, accompanied by engineers,

compact support equipment and weapons stripped of identifying marks. Command could not guarantee that the Black Gate would remain stable after their arrival, and Veyk's information offered no certainty about conditions inside the system.

Accounts of the crossing differ sharply. Some crews remembered an otherwise conventional transit accompanied by severe instrument loss. Others reported that their internal clocks disagreed after emergence. One engineer claimed to have received a fragment of the refinery beacon before his vessel completed passage. The statement was omitted from the original operational summary and restored during a later archive review.

The flotilla emerged close to the outer belt.

From there, Kordane's End appeared almost normal. Navigation lights continued to mark the industrial approaches. Automated hazard warnings repeated on schedule. The refinery remained powered, and several of its major processing systems were still running. No traffic moved between the installation and the belt, and the Avenue Gate showed no sign of repair activity.

The system continued to function without acknowledging the ships that had entered it.

Force command divided the operation into two groups. One moved toward the Avenue Gate to determine whether the structure could be restored. The second approached the refinery through maintenance and freight routes identified by Veyk. Both teams expected to find survivors. They also assumed that any hostile presence would be concentrated around the central industrial complex.

The gate team found the structure intact.

Its external assemblies had suffered no significant damage, and the control systems remained operational beneath the shutdown.

Power had been withdrawn from key activation mechanisms and redistributed across secondary networks, leaving the gate in a deliberate cold-start condition. Reversing the process would require resources stored elsewhere in the system and considerably more time than the Force had available.

THE PUBLIC HEARD OF A REFINERY GAS EVENT. MILITARY HISTORY KEPT ANOTHER NAME

The gate crew had died at their stations.

There were few signs of fighting inside the control section. Some operators remained secured in their seats. Others were found beside consoles, sealed doors and maintenance access points. The medical findings varied too widely to suggest a single immediate cause of death. Several crew members had shut down their own equipment before they died, though the records did not establish whether they had followed orders, attempted to contain a threat or acted under some form of interference.

The structure could eventually be restored. Without access to the refinery's energy reserves and processed materials, the work might take weeks.

Conditions inside the refinery were less orderly. Extraction lines continued moving material through the processing decks. Furnaces held their operating temperatures. Automated cranes worked above empty loading bays, and pressure systems followed routines intended for a full industrial shift. Many areas showed signs of violent disruption, yet the central machinery continued to perform its assigned functions.

Workers and garrison personnel still moved through the complex.



The soldiers who encountered them began calling them “the Hollows”. The name entered field reports before later research teams had established any classification, and it remained in use because it described the impression they left on the people who fought them. The Hollows retained portions of their former knowledge. They handled tools, operated doors, used maintenance routes and took firing positions with varying degrees of competence. Some wore pressure equipment or refinery uniforms, while others carried weapons issued to the local garrison.

Attempts at communication produced inconsistent results. A few individuals paused when addressed by name or employee designation. One lowered his weapon after hearing a refinery code, then attacked when the speaker approached. Another repeated part of a maintenance procedure while trying to force open a sealed bulkhead. The assault teams found no reliable way to determine how much awareness survived beneath these responses.

Groups of Hollows occasionally behaved with a degree of coordination that exceeded what the soldiers could observe directly. Individuals on separate decks moved at the same time, abandoned positions together or converged on areas that had not yet been breached. The Force detected no command transmissions and found no central controller inside the refinery.

Their priorities also remained difficult to interpret. Some defended machinery that appeared to have little tactical importance. Others left secure positions to pursue personnel through hazardous access corridors. Several groups gathered around processing equipment and remained there even while the assault moved past them. The pattern became more pronounced closer to the refinery’s central stores, where resistance grew more organised without adopting the logic of a conventional defence.

IF THE STARS ARE AFLAME, WE WILL MARCH BENEATH THEIR LIGHT

The Force advanced one deck at a time.

Progress was slow because the refinery itself could not be treated as expendable. A general shutdown risked explosions, structural damage and the destruction of the resources needed to reopen the Avenue Gate. Engineers followed the assault teams, isolating sections and preserving whatever equipment might still be useful. Every delay gave the Hollows more time to reposition through service shafts, processing trenches and maintenance corridors that did not appear on the standard plans.

Some of them continued moving after injuries that should have incapacitated them. Others showed no visible damage despite the collapse of the areas around them. The soldiers reported wide differences in speed, aggression and coordination, with no clear relationship to the uniforms they wore or the sections in which they were found.

At several points, the resistance appeared to be guiding the assault toward particular routes. Positions were abandoned shortly before they could be surrounded. Open passages led into confined processing areas, while apparently useful approaches ended at machinery operating beyond normal safety limits. The reports never established whether this behaviour reflected planning, instinct



or the remnants of refinery routines distorted by whatever had affected the population.

Marr Veyk remained with the refinery team through most of the advance.

His knowledge proved essential. He identified service corridors, bypassed sealed cargo systems and led the engineers toward reserves stored beneath the main processing levels. Some of the passages he used were absent from the refinery plans carried by the Force. Veyk attributed them to older smuggling routes, though members of the assault team later questioned that explanation. Their reports described structures that appeared to predate the industrial complex built around them.

The accessible archive contains no record of a formal investigation into those claims.

Once the central stores had been secured, the engineers began transferring industrial power cells, replacement assemblies and processed materials to the Avenue Gate. The restart procedure had been designed to unfold over weeks. Under battlefield conditions, it was compressed into a few days.

The first activation sequence produced unexpected results. Systems came online in the wrong order, and diagnostic routines returned information associated with components that were not installed at Kordane's End. For several minutes, the gate registered an active connection without displaying a destination. The readings ended before the engineers could determine whether the connection had been genuine or the product of corrupted instrumentation.

A later attempt established a stable Avenue route.

Heavier reinforcements entered the system soon afterward. The remaining decks were cleared, sealed or placed under research quarantine. Surviving Hollows were contained where possible and destroyed where containment failed. The refinery returned to limited operation under military authority, and the Crown announced that Kordane's End had been secured.

The deeper investigation introduced another name into the archive: "The Kordane Helix".

Research teams concluded that the refinery population had been altered by an experimental genetic vector. The surviving material gives no definitive origin for it. Investigators considered the possibility of deliberate release, contamination during an unauthorised industrial process and introduction by whatever had entered through the third passage. None of these theories accounted for every stage of the incident.

Samples taken from different decks showed variations that did not correspond cleanly to location or presumed exposure time. Biological warnings in some files appeared to predate the gate

shutdown, while other records placed the first contamination after communication had already failed. The retained skills of the Hollows also varied in ways that resisted a simple pattern. Some preserved detailed technical habits while losing basic recognition. Others showed coordinated responses without retaining any obvious trace of individual purpose.

The mechanism remained restricted, and the archive never resolved how the vector had spread through the installation so quickly. The relationship between the Helix and the unidentified third route was treated as probable in some reports and merely possible in others.

For the commanders who entered Kordane's End, the uncertainty changed little about the operation itself. They had found a system isolated through deliberate action, a gate disabled by people who understood its internal architecture and a refinery population transformed into a hostile force capable of partial coordination. They had also confirmed that the system could be reached through a transit route absent from every official chart available to regional command.

After Kordane's End, other frontier incidents were reviewed. Lost convoys, damaged route records, unexplained gate failures and previously sealed military actions received new attention. Some proved unrelated. A number of cases were transferred to restricted archives, and several disappeared from ordinary records after the review.

The importance of the Three-Gate Incident lies in the assumptions it overturned. Crown strategy depended on the belief that distance, isolation and transit access could be read from the official map. Kordane's End revealed gaps in that map large enough for an unknown force to enter a supposedly terminal system, disable its lawful route and alter its population before regional command understood that an attack had taken place.

The public explanation restored a measure of order. It gave the dead a familiar cause, reduced the gate failure to part of the industrial disaster and allowed the refinery to return to service without forcing a wider reckoning.

The military archive remained less certain. It preserved the Black Gate, the disputed third aperture, the Kordane Helix and a sequence of events that still refused to align.

Kordane's End is one file from that wider conflict, and it remains an instructive one. The system vanished from communication while its machinery continued to run. A corsair returned through a route the Crown did not control. An unknown passage appeared in the record, then began to disappear from it.

Whatever entered Kordane's End left behind enough evidence to change the way the frontier was read, and too little to reveal where it had come from.



THE SOLARIAN FORCE



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NEVERDUSK EMPIRE

THE BLADES OF THE LONG SUNSET

By late afternoon, the western battery had fired until the ground beneath its wheels was black with powder.

The guns stood on a low ridge overlooking the road to Neverdusk. Behind them, the Imperial army was withdrawing in long, exhausted columns: wounded men, broken regiments, supply wagons and the remnants of three provincial levies. The road was narrow, and there was no other passage through the surrounding marshland. If the enemy reached the ridge before the retreat was complete, the army would be trapped against the water.

The Greatblades had been ordered to hold the battery. They had arrived before noon, eighty-two swordsmen under a captain whose armour still

bore the dents of the morning's fighting. Since then, they had driven back three assaults. Their bright sleeves were dark with mud and blood, and the grass before the guns had been trampled into a broad field of broken pikes.

The fourth attack had cost them almost half their number. Now the enemy had withdrawn beyond the reach of the cannon, gathering beneath a line of torn banners. Their drums had fallen silent. For the first time in hours, the ridge was quiet enough for the men to hear the groan of the gun carriages and the laboured breathing of the wounded.

To the west, the sun hung low over Neverdusk.

It had touched the horizon some time before, yet the light remained. A long red glow stretched

ARMED WITH MASSIVE
TWO-HANDED SWORDS, THE
GREATBLADES ARE ELITE SHOCK
TROOPS TRAINED TO BREAK
ENEMY FORMATIONS APART

across the marshes, catching on breastplates, sword edges and pools of standing water.

One of the younger soldiers looked towards it. "Will they stop when darkness comes?" The captain followed his gaze. Beyond the ridge, the enemy ranks were already beginning to move. "Not here," he said. "The sun does not set over Neverdusk."

A drum sounded in the distance. Then another. The captain lowered his visor. "Back to your places." The Greatblades formed between the guns.

They could no longer make a continuous line. Instead, they gathered in small groups around each piece, using the wheels and earthworks to narrow the approaches. The surviving artillery crews loaded with whatever remained: round shot, broken chain and, when the proper charges ran out, bags filled with nails and fragments of iron.

The first enemy ranks came through the smoke at a run. The battery fired. For a moment, the ridge disappeared behind flame and dirt. When the smoke cleared, the attackers were still coming. They reached the earthworks in scattered knots, climbing over the bodies of the men ahead of them. The Greatblades met them among the guns.

There was little room for the full sweep of their weapons. They fought with shortened grips, driving the points forward beneath shields and striking with the heavy guards when the press became too close. One swordsman braced his blade across the spokes of a cannon wheel and

held three men there until an artilleryman fired a pistol over his shoulder. Another lost his sword beneath the bodies and continued with a rammer taken from the ground.

The fighting moved back and forth across the battery. A gun changed hands twice before its crew dragged it upright again. The captain was seen near the centre, then at the northern earthwork, then beside the road, gathering men wherever the enemy threatened to break through.

NOT HERE. THE SUN DOES NOT SET OVER NEVERDUSK

Behind them, the retreat continued.

The last provincial regiment passed beneath the ridge shortly after the fifth assault began. Its soldiers could see the Greatblades above them, reduced to scattered figures in the red light. Some raised their weapons in salute as they marched. Others kept their eyes on the road. By then, only three guns were still firing.

The enemy came again without waiting for the drums. They had learned where the line was weakest and pressed towards the southern emplacement, where fewer than a dozen Greatblades remained. The defenders yielded a few steps, drawing the attackers between two overturned carriages.



The captain gave the order. The nearest gun fired directly into the breach. The blast threw men from the ridge and set fire to the dry grass around the emplacement. Flames spread beneath the wheels and climbed the torn canvas of an ammunition cart. The Greatblades fought in the firelight until the surviving attackers withdrew. No sixth assault followed.

The enemy stood beyond the smoke, close enough to see the handful of swordsmen still holding the ridge. They could also see the road behind them, now empty. The Imperial army had escaped.

A mounted courier arrived from the east with orders to abandon the guns and withdraw. He found twenty-one Greatblades still standing. Several could no longer carry their swords. The captain listened to the message, looked once towards the enemy, and ordered the remaining powder put to the touchholes.



The western battery was destroyed before they left. They carried their wounded down the road as the guns burned behind them. The enemy did not pursue.

In the years that followed, the company was rebuilt around the survivors of the ridge. New soldiers inherited the great swords of the fallen, along with the right to wear a band of sunset red across their sleeves. The scorched remains of the battery standard were fixed to a new pole and carried at the head of the formation.

Official records gave the engagement several names. Most were soon forgotten. Among the soldiers of Neverdusk, the company became known simply as the Blades of the Long Sunset.

And whenever their captain calls them to order before battle, the answer remains the same. Back to your places.



UNDYING LEGIONS

ALITH, WIDOW OF THE HOLLOW COURT

*Merkiades spared his daughter.
She has spent centuries preparing an answer.*



The palace of Alith still keeps its ancient hours. At dusk, lamps are lit behind the high windows, servants cross the galleries in dark livery, and musicians take their places above the great hall. The banners of a forgotten house hang beneath vaulted ceilings, and those who arrive at the iron gates are received according to customs that vanished from the living world generations ago. They are announced by name, relieved of their weapons and conducted into the palace according to their rank.

Alith waits at the end of the audience chamber beneath the arms of her dead household. A golden chalice rests in one hand, while the chair beside her remains empty. The illusion is usually flawless during the first moments of an audience. Only those who remain too long begin to notice the damp beneath the perfume, or the way a servant's shadow fails to match the elegant figure casting it. A polished wall may become broken stone for the space of a heartbeat, and the music occasionally falters beneath the sound of nails scraping behind the panelling.

Alith sees these failures as clearly as her guests. She knows that the servants moving through her halls are ghouls, stooped and ravenous creatures dressed in the remembered forms of chamberlains, footmen and ladies-in-waiting. The musicians no longer understand the instruments placed in their hands, and the banquets are little more than scent, colour and borrowed memory laid over empty plates. Much of the palace has no roof, and rain gathers in chambers that appear warm beneath chandeliers.

The illusion exists because Alith commands it to exist.

Her court was not always hollow, and she has no intention of allowing its final appearance to be determined by decay.

Long before the present Undying Legions gathered beneath their banners, Alith was the daughter of Merkiades, a sorcerer whose name carried weight among kings and scholars alike. He instructed princes in the keeping of wards, sealed treaties with rites older than their bloodlines

and was received in courts where lesser magicians were made to wait outside.

Alith inherited much of his talent. Under his direction she learned the discipline of illusion, the binding of spirits and the patient construction of spells intended to survive their maker. Merkiades expected her to continue his work and spoke often of the libraries she would inherit, the rulers who would seek her counsel and the reputation their family would preserve through her.

Then she met Harald.

He was already a vampire lord when he entered the lands governed by Merkiades. His house was old, wealthy and feared, though not yet counted among the great powers of the night. Later accounts described him as a corrupter who ensnared the sorcerer's daughter through glamour and blood, but those accounts were written by men who had served her father.

Alith always told another version. She chose Harald, his court and his name. In time, she also chose the blood that ended her mortal life. Her transformation was neither secret nor forced upon an unwilling victim; she entered it with full knowledge of what she would

lose and what she believed she would gain.

Merkiades never accepted that choice. To him, his daughter's consent was merely another consequence of Harald's influence. Alith could not truly have desired undeath, and so the desire itself became proof of the depth of her corruption. Every defence she made of Harald counted against him, while every refusal to return confirmed that she no longer understood her own captivity.

For several years, father and daughter remained divided by letters, emissaries and locked gates. Harald's lands expanded, and his marriage to Alith joined his bloodline to her sorcery, drawing several lesser houses into their service. Their palace filled with retainers who expected the dynasty to endure for centuries.

Merkiades watched it grow and prepared his answer carefully. Old enemies of Harald received weapons and counsel. Mortal rulers who feared the vampire court found their rivalries quietly settled. Wards protecting Harald's borders failed at chosen moments, while roads thought impassable opened before the sorcerer's soldiers. By the time the first army entered the domain, several of Harald's vassals had already abandoned him.

Harald rode out before the enemy could reach the palace. The battle ended near nightfall, with his household guard scattered, his standard taken and his body left among the dead. The men who found him believed he had survived by the narrowest margin. His armour had been cut open and there were wounds across his chest and throat, yet none seemed beyond the power of vampiric blood to mend.

They did not know that Merkiades had allowed him to be recovered.

Harald was carried back to the palace before dawn. Alith met the bearers in the lower hall and ordered the doors closed behind them. Physicians were summoned, but their work revealed nothing. The flesh around Harald's wounds had darkened, and his strength continued to fail despite the blood given to him.

With no ordinary treatment proving effective, Alith

turned to the oldest rite of Harald's house. The Rite of Renewal was used when one of their kind had suffered injuries that the body could no longer overcome alone. Two vampires exchanged blood, lending strength to the weaker until the wounded flesh began to restore itself. It had saved members of Harald's bloodline before, and Alith had no reason to believe that this time would be different.

She opened her veins to him, and Harald drank first. For a brief time, his breathing steadied and colour returned to his face. He found enough strength to place one hand over hers, and those waiting beyond the chamber heard movement within and believed the danger had passed.

When Alith bent over him and drank in return, the malediction hidden in his blood completed itself.

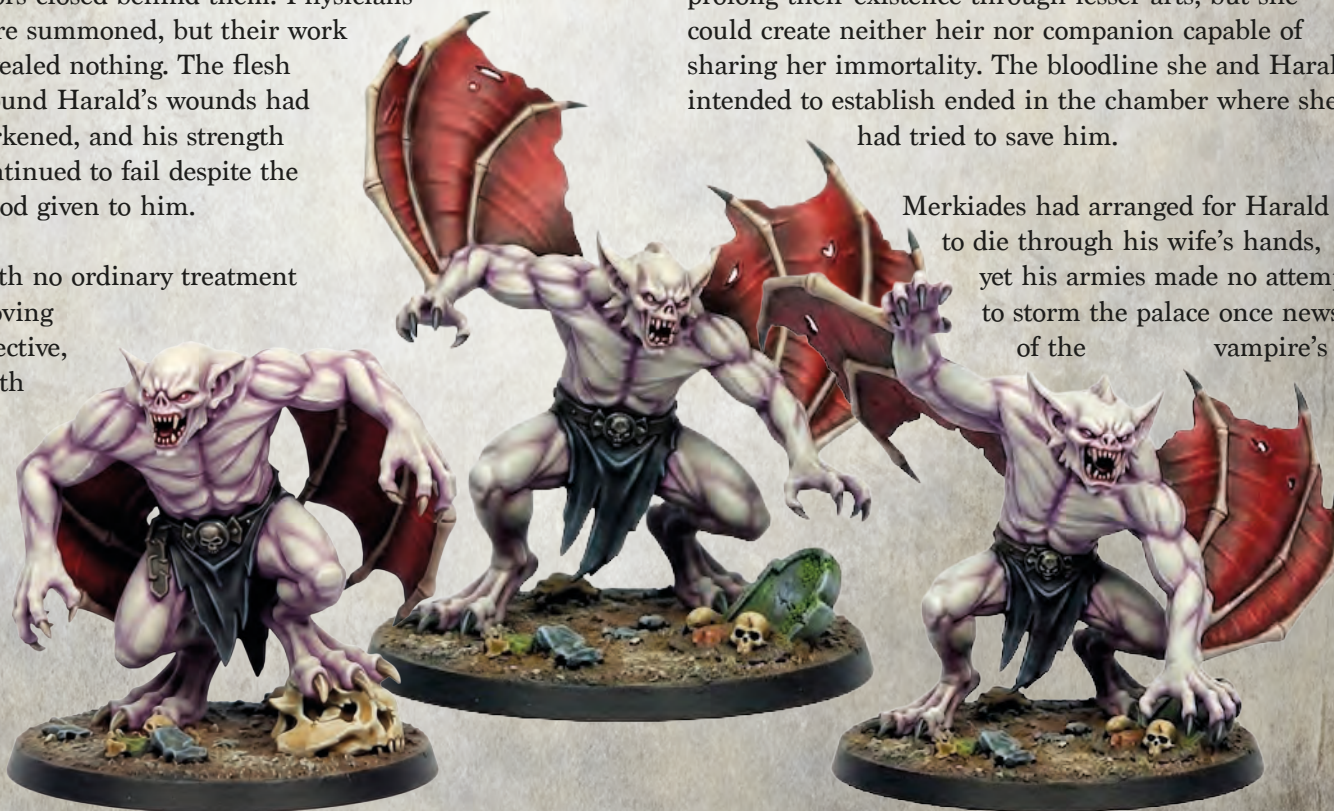
Merkiades had constructed the curse to remain dormant while Harald lay upon the battlefield. It had resisted every examination in the palace and revealed nothing while Alith prepared the rite. Only when the tainted blood entered her body did the spell awaken and seek the place for which it had been written.

Harald understood before she did. He tried to turn his face away and pulled weakly at her wrist, but the rite had already joined them. Alith felt the curse pass into her, not as a poison moves through flesh, but as a command finding its appointed place.

Harald died before sunrise, and Alith remained beside him until the lamps burned out. She retained her strength, her sorcery and every faculty granted by the vampire blood. Age would not reach her, hunger would sustain her and wounds would continue to close as they had before. The curse had taken only her power to create another vampire.

No mortal given Alith's blood would ever rise as her equal. She might feed upon them, enthrall them or prolong their existence through lesser arts, but she could create neither heir nor companion capable of sharing her immortality. The bloodline she and Harald intended to establish ended in the chamber where she had tried to save him.

Merkiades had arranged for Harald to die through his wife's hands, yet his armies made no attempt to storm the palace once news of the vampire's



death reached him. No executioner was sent to claim Alith, and the forces surrounding the estate began to withdraw.

Some believed Merkiades had achieved everything he intended. Others said he lacked the resolve to look upon his daughter after what he had done. In his surviving correspondence, he described Alith as rescued from Harald's design, though not yet restored. He believed that isolation would eventually loosen the hold of vampirism and that, given enough time, she would return to him and submit to whatever cure he had prepared.

Alith never did.

At first, she devoted herself to defeating the curse. Mortals were selected with care and brought into the palace. The rites were repeated according to the oldest records of Harald's house, then modified through Alith's own study. Some candidates died during the transformation. Others awoke without memory or reason, driven by a hunger too crude to govern. A few retained enough of themselves to recognise Alith, follow simple commands and imitate habits remembered from life.

None became vampires. These failures formed the first generation of ghouls in her household, though for many years she continued to regard each new attempt as a possible exception.

The palace emptied while she worked. Noble allies attached themselves to stronger courts, mortal servants aged and died, roofs collapsed and the gardens grew wild. Alith remained as the world outside accepted that Harald's dynasty had come to an end.

When the great hall became too ruined to receive visitors, she rebuilt it with illusion. The work spread gradually through the palace. Broken columns resumed their former shape, rotten hangings recovered their colour and ghouls wore the faces of servants who had been dead for centuries. The musicians returned to the gallery, and the court assembled beneath the banners of a house that no longer appeared in any living register.

One seat remained empty beside Alith, although on certain nights Harald appears to occupy it. Guests have seen him dressed in the armour of his final portrait, listening while petitions are read before the throne. He speaks rarely and never touches the cup placed near his

hand. Some regard him as an image drawn from Alith's memory, while others believe she recovered some fragment of his spirit and has not yet found the means to restore it fully. She has never offered an explanation.

Alith has shown greater openness in preserving the memory of Merkiades, though not in the manner her father might have hoped. His letters lie in the archives beneath the palace beside the journals of his pupils, fragments of his spellwork and records concerning the families that protected him after the war. She has followed these lines patiently, watching his allies die, their children inherit and their descendants forget why certain doors were never to be opened.

From time to time, one of those doors opens. A monument to Merkiades is found empty inside despite showing no sign of entry. A school founded in his name burns after its masters receive an invitation bearing Alith's seal. A scholar disappears together with every page he had written on the sorcerer's final years. These incidents are separated by decades, and no living investigator has connected all of them.

Alith has never been interested in haste. Ending her father's bloodline would bring little satisfaction, since she is its last surviving branch. His death, if death has already claimed him, would be an equally inadequate answer to what passed between them.

The contents of her archives suggest that she intends something else. She is gathering the scattered parts of Merkiades' work, learning the structure of his magic and tracing the fragments of himself he concealed against mortality. One manuscript describes a name capable of calling him from beyond the grave. Another refers to a vessel in which memory may survive after the soul has departed. Both passages bear annotations in Alith's hand.

Merkiades believed that death was too merciful a punishment for Harald and that solitude would eventually return his daughter to him. He built his vengeance around that certainty, and Alith has had centuries to study the methods by which he carried it out.

The Hollow Court remains in splendour, its lamps lit each dusk and its servants restored to their appointed places. The empty chair beside Alith still waits beneath the banners, while somewhere in the sealed chambers below, preparations continue for another guest.



ONE SIN FOR SEVEN KINGDOMS

STARS AFLAME



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