

The background of the cover is a detailed, monochromatic illustration in shades of grey. It depicts a chaotic battle scene. In the upper left, a large dragon-like creature with a long, spined tail is visible. In the center, a warrior with large, bat-like wings and a horned helmet is shown in a dynamic pose, holding a spear. To the left, another warrior is engaged in combat with a large, scaly monster. The foreground is filled with various other figures, including a warrior on a horse in the bottom right and a large, curved blade or scythe in the bottom left. The overall atmosphere is one of intense, epic warfare.

# WARHAMMER

AGE OF SIGMAR

BROKEN REALMS

SACRIFICE

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Lord-Exorcist Zaicon summons the storm, lets it course through his body before releasing it into the surging wave of gheists, and a half-dozen of them come apart in a spray of ectoplasmic mist. The Lord-Exorcist turns and grasps Kataya by the forearm, dragging the Evocator-Prime to her feet.

‘Rise, sister. Our work is not yet done.’

Though her neck has been savagely mauled by spectral talons, Kataya does not falter for a moment; even as she rises, her stormstave whips around to smash into the face of a blade-limbed horror, blasting it backwards with a piercing shriek. That is the last of the Nighthaunt, for now – though Zaicon can hear rattling moans and clanking chains, growing louder by the moment.

‘The dungeon awakens,’ says Kataya, pressing a hand to the wound in her neck. Blood bubbles around her fingers, but does not gush freely. It is a deep cut, but not a mortal injury. ‘By now, the Great Necromancer’s servants must know what we seek.’

Kataya is a strong soul, fearless and noble – an embodiment of everything that a Hammer of Sigmar should be. Zaicon believes that one day she will rise to the highest echelons of Sacrosanct command. If she escapes this nightmare alive.

‘The Hammers of Sigmar do not fail,’ he says. Simple words, but all the reassurance that is needed.

The Evocator’s remaining comrades form around her: Alnarus the Truthteller, and the silent giant Commestus. The last remaining warriors of Zaicon’s party, each of them bloodied and exhausted, but still filled with quiet surety in their purpose here. Much has been sacrificed so that the Lord-Exorcist and this small team might make it this far.

‘Follow me,’ Zaicon says. ‘We are close.’

Advancing, they enter a vaulted chamber whose walls are covered with row after row of narrow, iron-spiked cages, each marked with Shyishan glyphs and occupied by wailing spirits who rage and thrash against their bindings to no avail. There are holes in the floor here and there, plunging pits from which emanate yet more agonising screams. This is no typical lair of the spectral dead, but a depraved city of torture and cruelty, a place where souls are flayed apart and reshaped into forms too terrible to imagine.

The Great Oubliette, it is called. A name to thrust an icy lance of dread into the heart of any mortal.

Ahead rises an immense gate, wrought not from metal or wood, but from screaming soul-stuff. Faces writhe and churn amidst its glowing surface, their baying so filled with sorrow and agony that Zaicon’s heart aches in sympathy.

Not every soul can be saved, he reminds himself. The thought does little to assuage his guilt.

Steeling his spirit, the Lord-Exorcist raises his stave high and brings it crashing down with a thunderclap that shakes the bones. A shockwave of null-magic blasts forth from the golden casket mounted atop the gleaming rod. It strikes the gate like a cleaving axe, sweeping away the churning spirits, and silencing their haunting cries.

Beyond the breached gate there is a room, strangely organic in shape, like a hollowed-out ribcage. At its centre stands a glass sarcophagus twice the height of Zaicon himself, hanging from heavy chains of rusted iron. The sarcophagus is filled with balefire, which flickers and dances across the walls, illuminating scores of arcane instruments – devices of dark necromantic purpose, whose function Zaicon neither knows nor cares to contemplate.

Within the angry flames of the sarcophagus, Zaicon can see the prize for which his warriors have sacrificed so much: a dozen crackling bolts of golden energy, crashing helplessly against the bonds of their burning prison.

‘Kinsmen,’ whispers Alnarus. ‘We have come for you.’

‘I pray we are not too late,’ says Kataya.

She staggers as she crosses the threshold. Following her, Zaicon is struck by the same wave of horror and grief, so intense that it registers as physical pain. Alnarus falls to his knees, and even the indomitable Commestus mutters a prayer to Sigmar and makes

the sign of the Comet. Only the Lord-Exorcist does not flinch; he is no stranger to agonies of the soul.

‘Sigmar’s blood,’ whispers Alnarus. ‘What has been done to them?’

‘Darker things than we can possibly imagine,’ says Kataya. ‘And these are but a few of the comrades whose souls have been claimed by Nagash. This dungeon spans a continent. By the God-King, who knows what blasphemies the Great Necromancer is wreaking in its deepest levels?’

‘How can we know they are not tainted beyond hope?’ says Commestus. ‘Can spirits so damaged as these ever be Reforged?’

‘That matters not,’ Zaicon says, filling his words with a certainty he does not feel. ‘We came here to recover our lost kin, and so we shall. They will be judged upon the Anvil of Apotheosis, not here in this foul place.’

The Lord-Exorcist steps forward, shielding himself in an orb of crackling lightning that repels the complex web of death-wards and curses of withering layered across the chamber. He rests his Redemption Stave, the staff of his office, against the icy crystal of the sarcophagus, and begins to chant a liturgy of purification. He senses the essences of his own kind, and feels the distant, flickering ember of hope stir within them. Yet the more desperately he reaches out to them, the tighter the web of agony ensnaring them becomes.

‘This device is warding by the foulest magics,’ he says. ‘We must shatter these curses, if we are to free our comrades.’

Alnarus and Kataya add their power to his own, while the giant Commestus moves to guard them – already more gheists are surging down from on high, passing clear through the walls of the fortress in search of intruders.

‘Be swift,’ says Commestus, his eyes flashing icy blue as he enters his battle-trance. His weapon crackles with storm energy, and he sets his feet to meet the spectral charge.

Zaicon grits his teeth and calls upon every iota of his power, aware that he and his comrades have only a few minutes before the entire necropolis descends upon them. The demented howls of slasher-gheists echo around the Stormcasts. Zaicon can hear the crashing boom of Commestus’ empowered weapons blasting ethereal foes apart, each blow filling the chamber with bright, white light.

‘This magic is too powerful,’ hisses Alnarus.

There is a cry from the doorway behind them, and Zaicon risks a glance backwards to see Commestus sinking to the floor, ragged spectres tearing at his throat and slashing at his belly with cruel blades. He is still alive as they begin to take him apart.

There is no time for subtlety now. Zaicon smashes his stave against the surface of the shadeglass sarcophagus, unleashing every ounce of the power within its celestium casket. The sarcophagus begins to shudder, cracks spider-webbing across its surface. With a final, shattering blast the sarcophagus explodes into fragments, and a great tongue of balefire washes across the chamber, scorching Zaicon’s flesh with its malignant touch. He ignores the pain as the lightning-spirits trapped within the crystal break for freedom, darting about the roof of the chamber like panicked birds.

‘Come, brethren,’ the Lord-Exorcist calls, raising his Redemption Stave high. ‘Your suffering is over.’

The tormented spirits are drawn to the soothing light of his stave’s casket. Descending in a flash of energy, they seek refuge within its golden doors. Zaicon mutters a word of command, and the casket is once more sealed; whether these tortured spirits can be redeemed or not, they shall at least now return to Azyr for judgement.

‘Time to leave,’ says Alnarus the Truthteller, turning to face the Nighthaunt, who have finished savaging the fallen Commestus and now spill into the chamber in their scores. Yet no sooner has he raised his sword than a black shape drops from the ceiling, grasping the Evocator in pale, spindly arms.

‘Alnarus!’ cries Kataya, but before she can come to her comrade’s aid there is a spray of bright, arterial blood. The bent-backed horror embracing Alnarus bears a torture rack across its shoulders, bedecked with instruments of rack and ruin. These flensing knives and hooked chains now sink into Alnarus’s flesh, and the warrior screams in agony as his body is torn to ribbons.

Zaicon sees another of the stooped nightmares emerge behind the Evocator-Prime, arms spread wide to grasp her. He sends

forth bolts of celestial force that blast into the creature's insubstantial form. It screeches and recedes into the shadows.

But another of the spectral torturers drifts down from above, then another. They are aglow with deathly power, an aura of cruel hatred that sends rimefrost crackling across the stones beneath Zaicon's feet and over the surface of his armour. The spirit-horde circles above the two remaining Stormcasts, driven to a frenzy by the power of the spectral champions.

What is left of Alnarus is hurled to the floor, armour and skin peeled away. As the Evocator's body strikes the ground it transforms into a sparkling bolt of lightning that crashes and bounces from the walls, unable to break free and race for the heavens. It is joined by Commestus's essence – neither can escape the fell wards that surround this place.

'This cannot all be for nothing,' says Kataya.

The Nighthaunt draw in.

Zaicon closes his eyes. He feels the aetheric current building within him, a soothing fire that burns away all doubt and fear. Such power. The might of the heavenly storm is a force of both purification and destruction, capable of overwhelming even the strongest soul if not channelled with caution.

The Lord-Exorcist abandons that caution now.

He lets the lightning pour from him in a gushing torrent. It spills from his eyes, from his mouth, from the tips of his fingers. The shockwave of energy bursts across the chamber, hurling the spectral dead before it. The lesser wraiths judder and shriek as the magic of the heavens unmakes them. Even the necromantic aura of the four ghostly torturers is dimmed by Zaicon's glorious light, and the hunched fiends recoil in fury.

Zaicon knows that even though the God-King is with him, he cannot maintain this onslaught indefinitely. Already his skin is beginning to blister, and his eyes burn. There is but one chance now to fulfil his duty. Once final sacrifice to be made. The casket of his Redemption Stave opens once more. Heeding its calls, the lightning-spirits of Commestus and Alnarus cease their panicked flight and make for the sanctuary of its magical cache.

'Kataya,' gasps the Lord-Exorcist. The Evocator-Prime appears before him. He can see in her eyes and the grim set of her jaw that she knows what he will ask.

'Take my staff,' he tells her. 'I can buy you only a little time. Be swift, Evocator-Prime, and do not look back.'

'My Lord—'

'There is no time for doubt,' he gasps. Even to Zaicon, his words sound distant. Weak.

Even as the lighting continues to spill from him, the Lord-Exorcist holds out his stave of office to the Evocator-Prime. She drops her own stormstave, and accepts his offering.

'Run.'

And she does. He knew that at this decisive moment, she would not fail him. He sees her charge through the reeling storm of gheists, her tempest blade slicing through those that attempt to bar her path. She disappears from sight. Zaicon knows that this is no certain sign of her escape, for the Great Oubliette is vast and filled with horrors, and the Nighthaunt now know there are trespassers in their midst. He holds as long as he can, buying her all the time that he can manage.

Finally, unable to maintain his cascade of magic any longer, Zaicon sags to his knees. No sooner has the lightning ceased than the nightmares once more creep forth from the shadows. The four hunch-backed wraiths circle the exhausted Lord-Exorcist, brandishing their flesh-ripping blades.

'A dozen souls for mine,' Zaicon says, each word a trial. 'A fair trade. One day my brethren will come for the rest, and we will tear this abomination down stone by stone.'

The spectral torturers advance. Zaicon sees his own helm reflected in the sheen of their weapons. There is a grotesque rattling sound. The Lord-Exorcist realises that it must be the wraiths' cruel laughter, and feels a momentary pang of unease – why are they

not enraged by the spirits that have been ripped from their clutches? Yet Zaicon is too drained to interrogate the thought further. All he can do now is place his trust in almighty Sigmar, who has never failed him.

He closes his eyes. The blades descend.

Agony. White-hot and all-consuming. Blades sliding and tearing beneath his skin, sinking into his eyes. Zaicon knows that this is only the physical torment, and the worst will come when they begin to flay his very soul.

Yet it is only pain. Pain can be endured. Failure cannot. And as his body is seized and lifted into the air, and heavy manacles of iron close about his limbs, Lord-Exorcist Zaicon knows with blessed certainty that he has done all that his God-King asked of him.

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