

Prologue: The Council of the Brethren

Gryal Repa turned away from his stargazing, if it could have been called that, to look once more at his desk where a charred piece of red paper lay amongst a mess of charts. Although he had hardly forgotten the contents of this message he glanced over it for a further sense of affirmation about it. Such an archaic form, such formality, so unnecessary long before this point. The young one tried too hard...sometimes...when he felt he had to try in any way.

Lord Repa,

A meeting of the Brethren has been called by Lord Marx to be convened at two-two-ten within your primary. Prepare your hall for all members' arrivals. This concerns the Archk.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Murner

The letter disintegrated as he picked it up. This was happening more and more, these releases of energy from which he had been made. At least no-one else had seemed to have noticed yet. Sighing, Gryal brought his gaze up into the mirror that stood erect at seven feet tall, a home for many a spider-like creature. Brushing the cobwebs aside he stared back at himself, examining his features for the umpteenth time. Little light was coming through the towering ornate window, but his bright blue eyes illuminated his face in the murky gloom. His bald head hadn't changed, not since its creation. Gryal raised a bony hand to the mirror; this was truly how he looked. He could have sworn that there had been someone standing behind him in the reflection, but it must have been his imagination.

Oh well, it wasn't too bad, even if he happened to look like he was dead, which in fairness by some definition he was, if he was to be pedantic about it. Being 'dead' could just mean that your beaureia energy, what makes 'you' you, inhabits a place beyond what was generally specified as 'the universe'. That's what happened to the ones who coined the term whenever they left their mortal coils. His skeletal form looked much more

ominous than he would have liked. He was getting too old for this. When he'd taken the post as overseer of the transfer of souls and researcher of the Alpha Realm he'd never thought he'd get bored. Gryal just wanted some time away from the job. He might have retired to Earth, what with their association with the backwater planet already, if he could survive there. All occupational hazards. Such downturned thoughts lingering on his mind, he pulled his black robes tighter around himself. It was time to meet with the others.

The Entities' vessel continued to drift gradually around the Rift, the neighbouring Tower still crumbling in the light of its lingering internal flames. From a blackened hangar the Chariot sped across the scene. It comprised simply of a crescent, with a thin bridge extending from the middle of the inside arc. Ripping its way through the rubble the Chariot directed itself towards its next destination: Gryal's Tower.

It was as Gryal rounded the corner that he noticed Lord Stark Vingfamyn hurrying down the corridor the other way to meet him. Stark was a portly man, so much so that he was probably taller lying down than standing up. His rag of greasy dirty-blond hair was flying everywhere as he pelted at top speed on his equally broad legs. Stark stumbled to a halt at Gryal's feet, wiping a flood of sweat from his forehead with a grimy handkerchief. Gryal inched backwards, endeavouring to remain clean for the meeting.

Looking down at the man who only about reached his torso, Gryal growled through gritted teeth, "What do you want?"

Why the Entities had made an Immortal such as this, he'd never known.

"Warren felt it necessary to send me to tell you that he's waiting in the hall."

"Well as you can see that was hardly necessary. It's not as though I'm late."

"Um..."

It so happened that Gryal's bony fingers were flexing by his sides, and spying this Stark instinctively held his tongue, the phantom sensation of harrowing chills spreading over his tensing shoulders and neck. Gryal realised after a few moments why his brother had so suddenly stiffened, why he might have slipped back into a nervous state. There was no reason at that time for such anxieties however; the Supreme Lord had neither the cause nor (more notably) the drive to do anything.

"Come along then, you wouldn't want to be the reason we're late after all."

Warren Marz could hear Gryal's footsteps for what felt like a minute before he arrived. The Waters of Lution rippled at his touch and the image dispersed. The Chariot vanished from sight, yet he knew he'd be seeing the rider soon enough. It had certainly been a while. His head whipped up as, spluttering, Stark fell onto a chair. Rubbing his neck with a muscular arm, Warren watched Gryal take his throne at the Table of the Brethren. He enclosed the Waters in his fingers and lifted it up to its blackened shelf, leaving its chipped basin to rest out of anyone else's reach.

From behind him Gryal announced, half-heartedly, “And here they are, the last of us Immortals: Lord Mordrin Murner and Lord Petti Lance. Oh, what’s that look for? I thought from your letter that this was a formal occasion?”

Not acknowledging that exchange Warren returned to the table, leaving only Petti to keep to the shadows, no-one bothering to ask why.

“Out with it then,” Gryal rasped, with more than a note of impatience in his voice. “It may indeed have been some time since we were last all in the same Tower together, but I don’t expect that to mean there’s to be an excess of pleasantries. What news do you have on the Archk?”

“Right, yes. As things stand there’s no actual change regarding the Archk’s situation. There is still nothing in our records of this ‘Puhdoure’ where it is supposedly held. Still we have been inhibited from detecting it ourselves.”

“With all due respect then,” a travel-worn Mordrin frowned, “what was the actual point of us coming all this way? You will have had a reason.”

“How astute of you. If only I could be allowed to speak uninterrupted, then I might stumble onto some real news after all.”

Mordrin, who had been ready to retort yet again, caught Warren’s stare and shut his mouth in embarrassment. If he’d had blood under his thin skin he would have blushed.

“Thank you,” Warren sighed. “We have the Watch; as we know, all we’d have to do is tip the scales of power and we’d come out on top. But given then the search for the Archk is going as it is...we may indeed have to reopen the Apocalypse after all.”

Stark found his voice at last, “Where is this going?”

“The Mancynn.”

These two words put the room in a thoughtful silence. Of course the Mancynn was integral to their plan, but they hadn’t needed to specifically think about him in a while. He was still young. The rest of the cause for silence might have come from the identity of the speaker however. It was not Warren who had spoken this time. It was Petti.

“Correct,” Warren confirmed.

“So now we’re having this boy, pretty sure he’s a boy at the allotted time, take over his planet?” queried Stark.

Mordrin shrugged, “That’s how it was going to have to be anyway given our schedule.”

“You know that’s not what it is,” cried Gryal. “We may have been preparing for it just in case but I still maintain that such drastic violence can no longer be our best option. When Khaonat tried we were still aligned with the Entities and they still brought down upon him vile punishment, so imagine what would happen if our plans failed with us actively opposed?”

“And from that we have been able to operate more covertly amongst them. Plus you must have faith.”

“They will still likely act as has been predicted. You surely agree today that they need to be dealt with.” Petti then ground his mismatched jaws together, contemplating the

other presented objection, “As for the Mancynn, considering what he can do should his age really make for an issue? In fact shouldn’t it be an asset, increasing his malleability?”

“Or how obstinate he’ll be,” Mordrin countered.

Stark was still not convinced, and for that matter not perfectly on the right page yet, “What has that got to do with the Archk?”

“As I have been suggesting, if we don’t find it soon we may have to follow up on our contingency plan. I realise that up until now, quite contrary to my character, I have been against that particular strategy, but now I am prepared to consider it. That being said, if anyone gains any further information on the whereabouts of the Archk, I urge them to come forwards.”

Warren’s tone had them all settling back down in their places, all apart from Gryal. Even before he’d entered the room he’d felt off, as though a sly snake-like recess had been awakened in his mind, and now it had got to the point where he could almost see something as a result. Images were swimming in front of him, an experience he had not had before.

“Sand,” he murmured.

“Pardon?”

“I don’t know. I just have this feeling that some desert is important somehow.”

Eying his brother shrewdly, Warren asked, “Are you sure you’re still fit to be leading this? You have been at it for a very long time. If you need me to take over...”

“I’m fine.”

“Hmm...Very well.” Warren shifted to address the group as a whole again, “Petti, you’d better take care of Chaos, find out where he’s got to. We don’t want him ruining things...again. I believe his location has been isolated by the Braknaghs at a time near where we might engage the Mancynn. The rest of us should stick to what our stratagem would assign us. We can be, and will be, victorious.”

The four who’d been seated stood to leave, meanwhile Petti crept out into the light, somewhat bow-legged while upright, bringing himself to the side of Warren’s chair.

“How can we know they won’t use the wand against us?”

“Don’t worry, brother, the weapon is secure.”

Gryal nevertheless continued to feel as if there was something else that needed to be said. He knew they had to go to this desert, wherever it was, but he couldn’t be sure why.

Still in the process of getting to his feet, Stark muttered perhaps not as quietly as he might have thought, “Was that really worth gathering for?”

“I considered it best to see you all acknowledge the news in person.”

All of a sudden the doors to the chamber slammed open and a woman, tall, with short neat black hair, dazzling yellow eyes, subtly-protruding fangs and jade skin strutted into the hall. She surveyed the room with a sharp movement of her head, taking in the minute differences since last she had been in such a place. The shock of her arrival had many of the Lords stunned into momentary silence.

“I can take you to where you need to go, dear.” Her voice was sweet, golden, but with a hint of someone who will look you in the eye and tell a lie without a care.

Gryal stepped forwards, “You are no longer associated with this organisation. You have never been an Immortal. You have nothing of benefit, Mierdi. Get back on your Chariot.”

To this she merely laughed, “But I know the enemy. You’ll need my help defeating humanity.”

It was Warren’s turn to chuckle hoarsely, “Our goals are more complex than you think. I’m glad to see that during your failure you didn’t get a glimpse of our intentions. Anyway, we wouldn’t need your help, no matter the stratagem.”

“And how have things improved since the last time you were actually involved with our operations?” Gryal joined in. “Can you actually control your Jackal now, or at the very least have you learnt not to pry into matters that do not strictly concern you?”

“You honestly don’t know, do you? They’ve destroyed an Adsindrarian. Right after I finished talking to him as well. And I thought it was your job to know what goes on down there.”

The shaking in Stark’s voice gave him out to be the only one of the group shocked by this news, “No they haven’t.”

“Oh yes they have, just over three and a half thousand years from this Tower, from their perspective. My, you really have stopped paying attention to the changes, and to a glitch so fundamental as well...”

Gryal grinned (well, tried to grin more; he was a skeleton, a skull is always grinning), “Then the other Adsindrarians will be angrier than usual, and who are they going to take their anger out towards? Let’s go.”

The Brethren Lords walked out past her into the inky-black corridor beyond. She wasn’t worth forcing out of their facility. Gryal was last in line. On passing he spared a glance in Mierdi’s direction. In a flash, she clasped hold of his wrist.

“Do you want to know where it is you’re thinking of?” she hissed.

Gryal felt a prickling sensation at the back of his sockets. He stared at her unfocusedly for second, but was quickly wrenching his yellow eyes away from her.

“Yes mistress.”