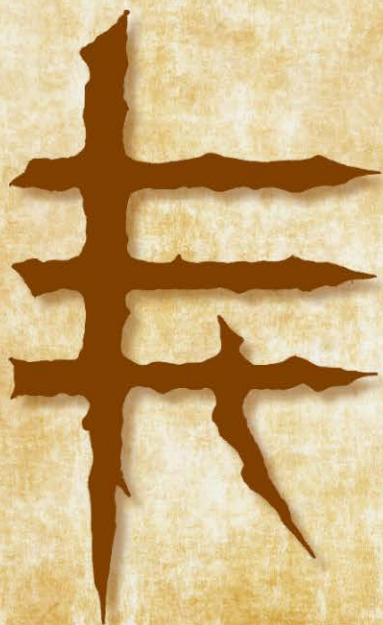


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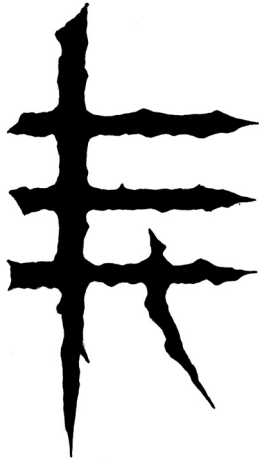
THE  
HAMMER  
AND THE  
DARKNESS



A LEGEND OF THE CERADIM

WAYNE F DEPSLEY

# THE HAMMER AND THE DARKNESS



Written and Illustrated by  
Wayne Densley 2016

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# The Hammer and the Darkness

:edda n'dehr qirion a'dehr dreyenheim:



A Story of the Ancient world as told by the Living Book at Shalamai  
to the United Congregations of the Jotun of the West

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*"It is a truth oft repeated, that the most potent weapons of tyranny reside not in the forces that can be brought to bear upon the lives of the oppressed, but in the ideas that are spread unchallenged amongst them, telling them what it is they cannot do. It is only when Tyrants stand upon the crumbling walls of their own destruction, and look out upon the multitudes that have risen against them, that they realise the only power they ever had was bluff."*

Attributed to Qirion'Delving, First Hammer of the Oera'dim  
on the eve of the battle of Nem'haleen

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"It is known by those of us that have lingered longest in this world that an Oera'dim has only one moment of free will gifted to him. It is a moment fleeting in its breadth and one just as quickly forgotten. For all of us the Word of Command is that suffocating blanket that binds us all to the will of the Being that Utters it, and whether that be the Fallen Masters of ages past, or the Mutan of the Sigh that invoke it today, it has always been the dominating power of our lives. We are slaves Brothers, but slaves only because a mere spell of magic makes us so. In our hearts we are free, and even the Word itself cannot hold us forever.

Be it known to all then, that as each of us stands upon the birthing grounds of Gorgoroth, that even as we take our first breaths, a question is given to us. It comes to us in many ways; for some it is as whispers in the air, to others a Stranger approaches and asks quietly, but always the question is the same. What do we want? Do we want freedom, or do we want slavery? And it is a question that is always answered. An Oera'dim is a free spirit, a warrior in heart and in deed,

but inevitably a victim of forces that are beyond our control. Indeed in this world we have no choice.

It is a truth Brothers, that whilst we remain within the boundaries of Gorgoroth the Word has no power, it stalks the edges of those sacred grounds, a patient assassin of free will that can afford to wait. As each of us walk out of the shadows of the great Horns it ambushes each as a predator might take its prey, and once we are taken, there is no return. For surely, we know then of the power that has laid in wait for us, binding us firmly to the will of the Utterer of the Word and leaving us with no capacity to do anything but obey. It is a vicious and relentless Master that brooks nothing but obedience, and in its thrall we can be nothing but slaves.

Such is the knowledge that we know. Although we can do little to throw off such oppression we are aware of it, we acknowledge that our fates could have been different if we had not trusted to the honour of the Mutan of the Sigh, but now it is simply history, and something that for the moment we must live with.

In ages past however, the knowledge we have of the Word of Command was not so well understood, and it is with this in mind that we come to the story of Qirion'Delving and the events that led to the Great Insurrection that brought down the Fallen Masters. Here is the story of the Hammer and the Darkness."



'It is remembered that in the first glimmering of any Oera'dim's existence there is confusion and doubt. To be born between the Horns of Gorgoroth is to suddenly find consciousness from a sleep that has had no end, and it is an awakening that takes time to adjust to. We know that we are manufactured Beings, even if the nature of our creation is unknown to us, and even though we now are part of a greater Circle of Existence governed by the Three Powers of our world, we stand at first without purpose or direction.

Rising from the barren ground of that sacred place an Oera'dim does not know what it should do, and with no understanding of the world is taken by others of its own kind out beyond the boundaries of Gorgoroth, and given instruction and training into the ways of its designated Kraal. Only in time does an Oera'dim understand its purpose in the world, but always there is the sure knowledge that

above all other things it must obey.

So it was for a Jotun of the Ancient World, one who would come to be known as Qirion, or the Hammer. Strong of arm and keen of mind, he was an Oera'dim bred for the mines and the great building projects of the Trell'sara. Like many of his kind he was a giant of a Being, well-suited to a life of servitude as an engineer and as a miner of the Deep Delves that littered the empire of the Fallen Masters. Unlike others however, he was uncommonly large, made to fit another purpose but one that for many years would remain unknown to him.

From the grounds of Gorgoroth Qirion was taken to the eastern mines of the Great Rift and for many years endured the hardships of a cruel existence far below ground. Within the steaming tunnels and deep pits of the Warrens he served his Masters, searching out the precious metals that the Trell'sara coveted as additions to their unending wealth. It proved a dangerous existence but one that the young Qirion endured as he could.

As is the way of slavery his Masters gave no heed to the conditions within which the Jotun of his kind worked. Many died and many more fell to injury and the inevitable execution that came from being infirm and therefore unusable. Packed into narrow delves the Jotun worked with grinding purpose, their hard existence bordered within the dark confines of the tunnels they carved from the solid stone, and sustained only by the most meagre of rations. But in this place Qirion also learned the artifice of his trade. A Jotun was first a miner of the deep earth, and such a vocation required knowledge of stone and the techniques of its delving. Qirion proved an eager student and it took little time for him to be noticed by his Mutan overseers. In time he found himself no longer a labourer but an Engineer, in charge of hundreds of other Jotun, and so it would remain his duty for more than seventy years.

In those long years below ground Qirion gave all his effort and intellect to serving his Masters. He had no thought to any other existence for he was a Slave, and that was his place and purpose in the world. The order of their society, the foundation of everything that was done by them, or to them, was wrought on the unassailable knowledge that the Trell'sara ruled and they obeyed. It was the nature of his world and he gave no thought to any other.

It came to pass that in the seventy-fifth year of his indenture to the eastern mines a messenger ventured forth from the Fortress at Adamant, the capital of the Trell'sara. With great fanfare and process

this emissary made his way to the Warrens and took Qirion from his life below ground. The Jotun was no longer to live the remainder of his days within the confines of stone and shadow for the Utterer himself required his presence, and he had no other thought but to obey.

Without question or reason the Jotun became one of a large party of Oera'dim, travelling northwards for the Pass of Adamant. In those times the ground they passed over was not the barren lands that can be found there today. It was instead a terrain of rolling hills and thick grasses, interspersed with wide stands of forest and woodland. As was the way of the Ancient World all things grew in abundance, and for a Jotun who had spent such a long time below ground it was a revelation of life and colour. He had forgotten the beauty of the world and was told at every turn that it remained in its state due to the benevolence of the Trell'sara. With no reason to believe otherwise he made his way northwards and in time found himself within the confines of the great Fortress at Adamant.

For those who have found their way inside the Fortress there is much that can be said of its grandeur. Even in its ruin it stands high upon the Plain of Adamant, a palace of unrivalled size and cunning, but there is nothing that can erase the cruelty and the malice that once lived within its halls. For Qirion it was another wonder, placed before him like bread crumbs leading to a trap and he followed without question, his only thought the fate that might await him within those high walls.

For some time he was held in one of the fortress' towers but there came a day when he was summoned to stand before the Utterer himself. From his rooms he was taken to the highest of the towers of Adamant and ushered into a wide chamber, lavishly decorated and open at one end with a series of high arched windows. Through these he could see eastwards, his view encompassing a verdant landscape of walled estates and brilliant white palaces that spread as a patchwork to the far horizon.

Before these windows stood the Utterer of the Word, Dominus of the Trell'sara and one who in those days took the name Aggeron, but who we remember as the Darkness. It cannot truly be said what his natural form might have once been, for indeed he must have once had mortal form, but in the ages that had passed since his rise to power the Darkness had become a fetid amalgam of life and magic. In his majesty the Utterer stood as a creature of both flesh and spirit, a Being



corrupted by power until his body moved as both hard flesh and shadows, a roiling mist of robes and magic. Before him a Jotun could do nothing but kneel.

"Do you know who I am, Jotun?" a voice hissed out of the Darkness.

Qirion did not answer for at that time he did not know the Being's name.

"I am Aggeron, Oera'dim, Dominus of the House of Delving and Keeper of the Power that holds all before me in thrall. Do you not feel my majesty slave, and do you not tremble before it?"

Qirion raised his head and looked upon the Dominus, his shoulders labouring against an unseen force that held him firmly in place. He did not understand, but knew he had only one purpose in this world

"I see only my Master and I am ready to obey."

The Darkness moved forward and touched his neck. In that moment the grip upon him fell away and he stood, towering over the creature that would be his Master.

"Come Jotun. I have something to show you."

Moving behind the Darkness, Qirion followed him to the windows. With a single wave of his hand the landscape beyond the windows evaporated away, a white mist obscuring all beyond. It was then that a snowstorm of movement began to blow across its surface, the crystal windows forming a rapidly moving tapestry of sounds and images that Qirion could not fully comprehend. Before him there arose the white peaks of a distant mountain range, a vast massif of jagged summits encased in ice and howling winds. Upon its inhospitable heights he could see outposts, Hresh in cold-weather gear looking out upon vast plains of ice and tundra. From these heights the visions changed, the perspective of the images moving as the view swept down from the mountains and raced across unfamiliar territory. Across plains and rolling hills the images rushed like the wind, palaces and forests, running rivers and neatly tended farmlands disappearing within the frosted arches.

It was as Qirion peered into the crystal that he first saw something familiar. In a rush the Warrens came into view then dissipated as the visions turned southwards, charging through deep forests and immense white palaces and temples, all a blur of polished stone and vegetation, but always in their midst stood the multitudes of the Oera'dim, toiling in their servitude to a thousand all-powerful Masters. Quickly it came to the Jotun that what he was seeing was the sum of the Empire built in the name of the Trell'sara, and it was

mighty indeed.

"Do you understand what it is you see?" the Darkness whispered in Qirion's ear.

The Jotun nodded but did not answer. Instead he turned to the Utterer and asked a question of his own. "What is it you wish of me? What is to be my purpose?"

The Darkness threw his arm in a wide arc and the images before them disappeared, replaced instead by the less frenetic landscapes of tended gardens and gleaming palaces.

"You are valuable to me, Jotun, and I do have a purpose for you." The Darkness turned and walked towards a wide desk, his withered hand grasping an ornately carved talisman held upon a chain. Engraved, and inlaid in white stone and bronze it held a representation of two intertwined Dragons, each trying to devour the other.

Motioning the Jotun to kneel, the Darkness placed the chain about his neck. "From this day forth you are to be known in this realm as Qirion, the Hammer of my Vengeance, the Destroyer of all who might plot upon my destruction."

The Darkness took the Jotun by the throat and looked into his eyes. He could see nothing but obedience and it pleased him.

"In this world I am Life and Death my Hammer. It is through me that all that can be done is done, and it is in my name that the Empire we have built grows stronger. There are those who would see it otherwise and I will not brook conspiracy or treachery. You will be the instrument of their destruction, and my bodyguard when all who might stand against me have been destroyed. Do this and the rewards of your obedience will be great."

Qirion stood and looked to his new Master. He needed no reward for it was his purpose to serve.

"Show me what it is I must do and it shall be done."



In the months that followed Qirion gained instruction in the ways of an Assassin and Bodyguard. He learned quickly that he was one of many Shadim who enforced the will of the Darkness in all things, and just as he had been an apt pupil in the depths of the Warrens, so he was in his new duty. Training proved brutal but the ways of violence

awakened a shard of memory in the Jotun, an instinctual feel for combat that felt familiar. It was a sense of something else within him that gave a hint to another side of his existence, and he excelled in its application.

Moving in the night hours he and his fellow Shadim would find those of the Masters who opposed the power of the Utterer, and in those dark moments would kill them all, Master and Servant alike, removing them from the world without sound or evidence of their passing. It was a task that Qirion found to his liking, although one without honour.

It came to pass that a reign of terror descended upon not only the Oera'dim, but the Masters themselves. All that Aggeron saw as threats to his power were mercilessly put down no matter their position, and in time it became clear that the Darkness had succumbed to the inevitable malady of all Tyrants, a murderous paranoia.

At Aggeron's command the Shadim prosecuted their deadly work with a cold efficiency that left the world labouring in a breathless fear, and in his time the Utterer came to look upon Qirion in particular as a trusted servant, one who could be counted upon for the most bloody of assassinations. In this climate of distrust and violence there came a day when the Darkness took his faithful Jotun aside and gave him his most dangerous task.

"In the world there is no other that I have trusted more than my Apprentice, and now I find myself overcome with suspicion." The Darkness took Qirion by the shoulder and guided him to a long mirror. It was a device that the Jotun had not seen before and in its clear reflection he saw himself and the lesser figure of the Utterer.

"Here," he said quietly, "is the Oracle that shows me all that I rely upon to suppress my enemies. Its council has never failed me and now it tells me that my Apprentice works to remove me from this world. This is something that cannot be allowed."

Qirion knew of the Utterer's Apprentice and of the vast estates that had been gifted to him by Aggeron. He looked to his Master and bowed.

"Your command is mine to obey," he answered, his purpose clear.

It was in the dark of night that the Hammer and a select number of Shadim left the halls of Adamant and made their way upon the wide avenues that connected the palaces of the Trell'sara with their capital.

Long was the way, but under the light of silvered moons the assassins ran, making eastwards to the shores of the Shan River. It was there that they found the estate of Hallad of House Mortain, Apprentice to the Utterer of the Word, and a battle that would prove unforeseen.

In the quiet of the early morning Qirion sent his assassins into the shimmering complex of buildings and halls looking for their target. What they found instead were armed Hresh in their hundreds, laying in wait for the Hammer and his Shadim. Somehow forewarned of the attack the Apprentice had prepared a defence, although he could not know that resistance would be a futile gesture. From the shadows that surrounded the central square the quiet assassins were rushed by a multitude of warriors, dressed in black and armed for combat. Such was the surprise of the assault that many of the Shadim fell before their training brought them together in a defensible position at the edges of the great courtyard. It was a fight that few would emerge from alive.

For all the years of the Terror Qirion had never found himself confronted by armed Oera'dim. The nature of their servitude did not allow them to bear arms within the confines of the homes of the Masters, and indeed in the years of his service he had spilt the blood of only the Masters themselves and those servants who might give testimony to the attack. To be confronted with an armed resistance was a circumstance unexpected, and it unlocked something within him that would leave him forever changed.

In the courtyard of Hallad'Mortain the warriors pressed forward, the assassins caught between two advancing lines of armed Hresh. With nowhere to go Qirion ordered his Shadim to fight and in those few minutes of bloody confrontation all the Hresh were slain, the Apprentice himself killed at the hands of the Hammer. Of the Shadim only a few remained, but in the aftermath Qirion looked over the battlefield and fell to one knee, his own wounds draining his life onto the polished stone cobbles.

In that moment of quiet Qirion gave himself over to the pain that spread from deep gashes in his legs and side. The Hresh who had attacked them were no labourers or servants, they were warriors and as they had spent their lives for their Master he had seen something in their eyes that he could recognise if not understand. In those few moments they were free, their purpose not to serve because they must, but because they wanted to. The violence had unlocked something within them all and it felt as pure and as unrestrained as madness.

Breathing heavily Qirion sent the remaining Shadim into the halls of the palace, their task to kill all the servants that might remain within. No further resistance was met and with dawn breaking in the east the assassins retired, leaving nothing behind but the bodies of their enemies. It was a battle that confused the Hammer, and it would not be the last.

Upon his return to Adamant Qirion gave full account of the battle at the palace of Hallad'Mortain. The Utterer listened, his visage changing to a great rage as he grew to understand what had transpired. Qirion did not understand the nature of his anger but it gave his Master a new impetus, one which brought even greater terror to their world.

Within the turmoil of the age Qirion rose to the position of First Hammer, and with his new status was granted control over a new power the Utterer wished to exert upon his enemies. Gone were the covert executions of the Shadim. Now came a vast army of Hresh warriors, trained and equipped for war and extermination. In his madness the Utterer could see nothing but enemies, his fellow Trell'sara no more than scheming Beings intent on his demise. With his Army of the March he had a weapon that he could unleash upon any who he disfavoured and he did not hesitate in wielding it.

So began the Reign of Darkness, a time in which the enemies of Aggeron were crushed, their great works destroyed in a frenzy of death and blind paranoia. At the head of the Army of the March Qirion rode as General, all that he had learned in the long years of his service to the Darkness now applied in a war that ground mercilessly and unrelenting across the face of the Empire. When it was done only a few dozen of the Masters remained, for in their own manner some had turned against their fellows and betrayed them. For their loyalty they were allowed to live and as time passed once again grew to garnish great power. The damage however, had been done, the reign of the Trell'sara now fatally weakened.

Although it is understood in these modern times that EarthMagic is something that can be applied though never truly controlled, the Utterer in his arrogance came to forget that his command of its power was also limited. The magic that he harnessed was only available to him because he was one of the Trell'sara, Beings given life to serve the Powers of the World, who then betrayed them and took the boon of EarthMagic as their own. It was the Trell'sara as a group who had the bounty of EarthMagic bestowed upon them, and as each of them died

their hold on its great energy weakened. When only a few remained there was little of their former power that remained also. In the world of the Masters it came to pass that the balance of EarthMagic shifted and the Masters themselves were unaware of it.

This however, was no concern of Qirion, nor of those that served the remaining Trell'sara. For them the world remained one where they served those who ruled, and with no concept of the Word of Command remained in thrall to the Utterer and his few remaining allies. For many years the world remained at peace, Qirion maintaining command of an Army that had no enemies left to fight, but to which the Utterer gave great reward and privilege.

It came to pass that in the fifty-first year of Qirion's service to the Darkness that the Utterer of the Word decided he would make a journey to the temple-fortress of Nem'haleen, an outpost on the edges of the northern fringes of the Great Rift. It was within this redoubt that it was said there could be found a most valuable talisman, and Aggeron had decided that he should re-acquaint himself with its power. Perhaps he had come to realise that his powers had weakened, it cannot be known for sure, but it was with the entire host of his army, and the combined supplicants of his Imperial Court that he rode out of Adamant and made his way westwards.

Such was the size of his entourage that it is remembered it took six days for its number to pass through the valley of Maenum and enter the wastelands of the Sanhar beyond. Many weeks passed as the Utterer made his way into the west and it was only as the combined multitude found its way onto the fields of the Shattereen that their Master bade them stop and make a permanent camp. As the vast host settled their number upon the desiccated earth of the Shattereen it became known that the Utterer would make his way alone into the temple at Nem'haleen, his purpose in doing so a secret shared with no-one else. His solitary journey would begin on the morning to come. All of his court prepared, as did Qirion.

As First Hammer to the Master of the World, Qirion was both bringer of retribution and bodyguard. As the great host about him organised itself he went about the task of ensuring the safety and security of the Utterer and those of his allies that had made the journey with him. In this wide plain of broken rock and steep hills could be found all the power of the Trell'sara as it manifested itself physically in the world, and no doubt included a few enemies as well.

With his Shadim, Qirion began the task of setting guards and

checkpoints, and placing the other Masters apart from his own. If the Darkness were to remain safe he would need to keep all the Masters at a reasonable, yet polite distance. The duties of his office kept him busy until the small hours of the morning, and only when he knew that his Master was safe did he take up a position at the door of Aggeron's pavilion. It was his intention that he should wait there on guard until the sunrise.

What came next can be attested to myself personally for I witnessed it as a young Shadim under Qirion's command. It may have passed some seven millennia ago but it remains in my memory as founded as a stone wall, and even as it is recounted now it gives me pause to wonder at it.

As Qirion stood guard at the entrance to the Darkness' pavilion a faint light grew into the air before the Jotun. At first it seemed no more than a spark from a campfire, an ember carried by the wind as it flickered and glowed. From this spark however a glimmer appeared, a soft glow of moonlight that grew and brightened, its form expanding until there came a Being of Light, a Spirit that settled on translucent feet before Qirion. Strange as it was, there was no cry of alarm or frantic defence of the Darkness' residence. Instead the camp remained silent, only Qirion and myself watching as the spirit gained form and substance. In the dark hour before dawn it spoke.

"Qirion." it said quietly.

The Jotun did not move and could not speak. The spirit spoke in his place instead.

"Loyal Jotun, I am Ashen'draal, a Caer'dahl in service to the Silvan Tree and Emissary here in her place. You need not speak for I require only that you listen."

"Look about you Jotun. What you see here is the power of one who has caused great damage and greater imbalance in this world. You have served him well, and it is to your credit that you have remained loyal to Aggeron in the years of your servitude, but I ask you a question Qirion, why?"

The Jotun struggled against the power that held him though it was unbreakable.

"Look and see clearly Qirion, servant to Aggeron of the House of Delving. Do you not wonder at why the world is as it is? Do you think that there is some natural order to their Mastery and your Servitude? I will tell you Jotun that there is nothing here that belongs. You believe the Trell'sara are born to rule and that your place is as their slave.

Well I will tell you that this is not so. The Masters rule because they have glamourised you. They have artficed a spell that holds you all in their thrall for they know your true nature, and it fills them with fear. If the spell were to be broken the Oera'dim would sweep them away and that is the true nature of this world. Without the Word of Command they would have no place here and that is the hard truth of their existence."

"I will tell you Jotun that your Master is a Usurper, a Stealer of gifts that should never have been granted, and a Betrayer of the Powers that hold true mastery in this world. It is from them that I give this message and it is one that should not be lightly ignored."

It was only then that Qirion broke free of the great energy that bound him but he did not move. Since the attack on the palace of Hallad'Mortain he had found insistent questions plaguing his thoughts and decided that here he might find answers.

"What you say may well be so Spirit," he replied, "but the power of the Masters is absolute. Whether we wish freedom or not seems irrelevant, for they hold the reins and we are nothing more than their beasts of burden."

The Caer'dahl remained silent for a moment then moved closer into the face of the Jotun.

"But is that so, Qirion? Have you wondered why it might be that no Oera'dim servant has ever raised a hand against any of the Masters, and yet you and your Shadim have killed many? I will tell you it is because the Darkness has played a risky game, one that has set in motion the elements of his own destruction."

"The reason that you are an Assassin is because the Word of Command that holds all Oera'dim to the will of the Masters has not been placed upon you. Look at your arm and the tattoos of your House. Within these markings is a sigil that holds the power of the Word at bay. You serve your Master not because you are compelled to, but because you believe it is your place, and I will tell you that it is not."

"You are not the first Shadi ever to serve the Darkness. Over the ageless years of their dominion of this world many Oera'dim have been exempted from the power of the Word, their loyalty tested in other ways before the Utterer would take them and use them for his purposes. For you it was seventy five years in the mines, always being examined for any sign of disloyalty. It was no accident that you were selected as Hammer to the Darkness. He built you for the purpose but



could use you only after you proved yourself worthy of his trust."

Qirion took hold of his warhammer and moved to step into the entrance to the pavilion, blocking any path the Spirit may have taken inside. "Again I say that this may be so, but what can one Oera'dim do before the face of such power?"

"Ah Jotun, now you ask the one question that has the potential to change the world. I will tell you in answer that you are not alone, in fact you are but one of many."

The Hammer took a step back and shook his head. "I do not believe you."

To this Ashen'draal grew in stature, the Being's brilliance increasing as it once again bound Qirion into immobility.

"I will tell you Qirion that your Master may have power but his knowledge of the world is not absolute. What your Master has never known is that every Oera'dim born into the world is an immortal soul, held in the living world by a spark of EarthMagic that cannot be destroyed. Oera'dim may have died in the service of the Trel'sara but they have never been removed from the Circle of Existence. Each returns when called into a new body, and a new purpose, but always the spark of their existence is immutable. And so it has been for the Shadim. Thousands have died but all have returned to service in one form or another, and unknown to the Darkness all have remained immune to the Word of Command. Many have realised that the true nature of their existence is to be free and many have found each other, binding themselves to a cause that is unthinkable to others. They wait unseen, all they need is the Word of Command to be broken and they will lead the Oera'dim out of servitude. What they are waiting for is you."

Qirion stepped back and shook his head. "I am First Hammer to the Master of the World. I have no other duty."

The Caer'dahl paused and then turned to the vast spread of the encampment that covered the dry ground of the Shattereen.

"Look about you Qirion, do you not see the multitude that labours unto death for the pleasures and the vices of your so-called Utterer. All should be free, and some know it to be so. All they require is for you to act, for you are the key to the freedom of all Oera'dim."

"And what is it that you would have me do, Spirit?" the Jotun whispered. "How can I, or any number of us, stand before the power of the Masters?"

Ashen'draal took Qirion by the shoulder, a glowing hand resting

lightly upon his armoured breastplate. "Tomorrow a water-carrier by the name of Besson is going to attempt to assassinate Aggeron. It will be at a time when you will be standing close to the Darkness. All you need do, Qirion, First Hammer of House Delving, is make a choice. Do you wish to remain a Slave, or do you wish to become a Warrior in command of his own free-will. The choice is yours."

As the Spirit's words faded so did the apparition, the gleaming light of its existence disappearing into the black gloom of the night. For a moment Qirion stood rigid, his body still held by the overwhelming power of the Emissary and its message. In the encroaching darkness he realised he had much to think on, and little time to do it.



The morning came as a wash of colour that spread quickly along the steep hills that bordered the Shattereen. With the rising of the suns the camp came to life, but in the endless work and labour of its multitude Qirion remained aloof, his thoughts only on the encounter of the night before.

It was true that he served his Master because it was his duty, and it was a duty that he accepted as a part of the natural order of his world. Only at the fight to kill Hallad'Mortain had he felt something else, the battle breathing into him a fire that had proven difficult to ignore as he pursued the mundane hours of his existence. In his essence he knew that he was a warrior, but a true warrior was not a betrayer. It was a turmoil within which he could not find peace, and it gnawed at his conscience as he gathered together the small unit of Shadim that would escort the Darkness to the gates of Nem'haleen.

The only thing he knew for sure was that an Oera'dim by the name of Besson would attempt violence against his Master. Decades of service told him that he could not let it succeed, but also he did not know what the Spirit expected him to do. He had been told that he had a choice, he just didn't know what it might be.

It came to pass that in the first hour after sunrise the Utterer made way from his pavilion and began the long journey into the ravines that edged the southern borders of the Shattereen. To find his way however, he needed to traverse the wide spread of his encampment and in the moving throng of its host the Darkness parted his subjects as a mighty ship might plough through a swelling sea. In the midst of

the dust and activity Qirion and his Shadim watched the crowd, keeping all at a distance from their Master.

When the attack came it emerged from the crowding melee as a blur of shadow and movement. From between a wall of standing Jotun emerged the diminutive form of a Morg, a water-carrier and the lowest of the servants of the Masters. Equipped with a small dagger the Morg raced for the Darkness and struck out at him with his blade. It was an assault that could not succeed, the Shadim too well trained, the Morg too small to be a true threat. With one large arm a Hresh at the Utterer's side threw the would-be assassin to the ground and held him by the throat, awaiting his Master's pleasure.

The Utterer stood for a moment, surprised by the attempt on his life. Never in his existence had a Slave raised a hand against him and it took him aback, but only for a moment. Ordering the Hresh Shadi to let the Morg go, the Utterer raised his hands and murmured into the dry winds. In a swirling rush the Morg was raised into the air as a ball of blue energy began to envelope the small creature. Quickly the power grew tight about the body of the assassin and in its constriction the Morg began to contort in pain.

"Let it be known to all that disobedience only has one outcome, and that is death!" shouted the Darkness as he manipulated the power that held the Morg. Carefully he began to pull apart the hapless creature and before the screams and blood of its agonies the Darkness smirked with satisfaction. "What do you say Morg?" the Darkness asked. "What are your last words?"

The Morg looked at the Master but turned its head instead towards Qirion.

In a faltering voice it croaked out its last breaths. "I would say that my name is Besson, and I am a Free Being in this world. What are you?"

The Darkness laughed but the words hit Qirion as if he had been struck with his own warhammer. The diminutive Morg had given his life, knowing the certainty of his death in the futile attack against the Darkness. But it was the attack itself that moved Qirion. The Morg proved the existence of the Hidden, those that knew the true nature of themselves and that they were prepared to die for their cause. In that moment Qirion made his choice.

As the Darkness concentrated on tearing the Morg apart Qirion swung his hammer. Before any of the other Shadim could react the huge weapon slammed into the side of Aggeron, crumpling the Master

and throwing him to the ground. Without pause the hammer swung again, this time descending with all the power of a Jotun's strength upon the hooded skull of the Utterer. It was a blow that no creature could survive. It was then that the world changed.

In a detonation of unrestrained energy the power of Aggeron exploded outwards, the malice and the fury of his existence expended in one violent shockwave that laid low all who stood near. All but for Qirion. Standing against the buffeting energies he remained on his feet and as the energy dissipated into the hills about them he waited.

Like a heavy burden being lifted from the shoulders of the world the Word of Command tremored and then fell away, the absolute certainty of a life of servitude now something that could be questioned, and Qirion could see no turning back.

"Here me Brothers!" he yelled to the milling crowds of Oera'dim. "The Master is dead and we are free. It is now our time to rule!"

In a movement like the tide on a beach the assembled host of the Oera'dim drew back then found purpose. From the anonymity of the crowd many Oera'dim came forward; Jotun of House Delving, and of the Oldemai and the Amdahl, and the Hresh of House Denmar, rallying their Houses to rebellion. Qirion had lit the fire and now the Hidden Ones would scour the world of everything that had held them low.

From the great tents of Aggeron's allies there came a rising turmoil. The hand-servants of the Trell'sara, the Vardim, turned upon their masters and tore them to pieces with their bare hands, taking from them the talisman's of their power and stopping any from raising an alarm. Within the teeming host of the Oera'dim there came a tide of violence, any who stood before the mobilising ranks of the Army of the March swept away as Qirion took command. The Great Insurrection had began.

From the barren grounds of the Shattereen the rebellion spread like wildfire. Before the Army of the March the world would once again tremble, but this time it would be turned against the remaining Trell'sara who had not been invited to sojourn with the Darkness to Nem'haleen. These Masters still held control of their slaves for they had some power of their own, but it was not the Word of Command, and in their own time they also fell beneath the unstoppable force of the March. All that had been built by the Fallen Masters would be removed, nothing left to remind the Oera'dim of the servitude they had endured at their hands.

It would come to pass that only one Master would remain, his forces trapped within the walls of the very temple that had been the focus of the Darkness' final journey. At Nem'haleen Eruman'Bruhaj, the last of the Trell'sara would fall, and with his demise the reign of the Fallen Masters would end. In blood and violence the world had become the domain of the Oera'dim and Qirion'Delving stood as First Hammer of it all.

It is a truth Brothers, that freedom can prove an elusive companion. As we stand here in the midst of this great Congregation, servants now to the Mutan of the Sigh, we know of its fickle nature. Once again we must serve, our lives in thrall to an Utterer who has stolen power that is not his to wield. I say that they should fear us Brothers, for we serve only because the Word compels us. There will come a day when the essence of Qirion'Delving's existence shall return to us, and when it does we will be ready."

THE END

# THE HAMMER AND THE DARKNESS



FOR ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS THE RULE OF AGGERON THE GREAT PRESSED HARD UPON THE BACKS OF HIS SLAVES, THE OERA'DIM. A CREATURE OF GREAT POWER AND UNLIMITED CRUELTY, HE DOMINATED HIS WORLD AND BUILT AN EMPIRE OF THE SUNS THAT SAW ALL BOWED BEFORE HIM. SURE OF HIS MANIFEST AUTHORITY AGGERON RULED, BUT UNKNOWN TO HIMSELF A REBELLION LAY FESTERING, GROWING IN THE SHADOWS AND WAITING FOR A LEADER BRAVE ENOUGH TO LIGHT THE FUSE.

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE RISE OF THAT LEADER, KNOWN TO ALL OERA'DIM AS THE HAMMER AND THE DOWNFALL OF AGGERON, LAST EMPEROR OF THE TREL'SARA AND FOREVER REMEMBERED BY HIS SLAVES AS THE DARKNESS.

