

"The Reaper's Garland"

The early morning fog mixed with the dust in the air created a thin veil in the woods surrounding Fort Slate. So thin you'd barely notice its there, yet enough to feel its presence in the cool air around Lt. Grimm and his men. The woods stood close to 400 Yards from the walls of the star fort, where Kindred soldiers patrolled back and forth. "Freeze, Moore, you both get over to bravo Lance and tell them it's time to go. We and Charlie await their move." "Yessir" they quipped before skulking through the trees. "No Torreliers... half the defending force vacated... low vision... we should have this in the bag" Grimm whispered to himself, adjusting the weight of the plate carrier on his chest. "It's go time" He donned his gas mask, which gripped the frame of his face, secured the strap of his kettle helm, chambered a round of .30-06, he took a deep breath to steel his nerves, and knelt in wait.

Finally, a volley of loud pops from rifles shattered the silence of the early morning, a few of the patrolling soldiers fell, followed by loud sirens and yelling from inside the fort. Their trap was sprung. "GO! GO! GO!" Commanded Grimm, springing forth from the cool dirt within the cover of the petrified trees, pointing his rifle at the fort and letting bullets fly. With the roar and cry of hundreds of men around him, he was surrounded by his comrades who sprint past him, clad in chainmail, gas masks, and the red tunics of the Eschatos. They charged with sword and shield towards the walls of the Fort Slate. The Kindred wasted no time in riposte, bodies manifested on the fort's battlements raining Lead and arrows upon the assailants. The silence was completely gone, and Grimm's ears rang with the sound of battle. Eschatos Footmen fell mid sprint closing the gap to the fort. Rifles roared. Arrows sang. Striking man after man, tripping over bodies as they charged. A series of explosions behind Grimm prompted him to peer over his shoulder. Mortars of white phosphorus launched over his head, exploding mid-air, creating a waterfall of sparks and a screen of thick white smoke that enveloped the men below who assailed the fort's walls. They were invisible. "Now you two! Go! Go! Go!" Two men still poised in the treeline immediately roused at his command. They each grabbed an end of a long wooden crate with red text upon it reading "EXPLOSIVE" and began to haul it into the veil of smoke, fast as they could.

Grimm, the last of his ammo expended, dropped his rifle. He pulled the mace off of his hip, heater shield from his back, and followed the two men in suit. The sweet smell of morning air was gone. Each labored breath hissed as his lungs pushed air through his gas mask. Bullets caused the dirt around them to splash up like drops of water upsetting a puddle. Two arrows flew through the cloud of smoke and hit the crate almost in unison. The carriers both looked, flinching in a moment of terror, but kept moving with their purpose, undeterred. After what felt like forever they saw the wall through the smoke. A handful of men, one with an arrow stuck in his shoulder, sat under a makeshift wood and sheet metal cover in a corner of the fort's stony wall. Flaggging them down, one shouted "Here! Quickly!" That was their objective. They adjusted course, heading toward the cover. They were beginning to be worn down by the weight of the crate, but trudged on.

Grimm surged forth making for the safety of cover which they yearned for so ardently. But from behind came a sharp metallic ping. "No!" A man shouted. Grimm turned just in time to witness a carrier hit the ground limp as a doll, with a hole in the crown of his helmet. His half of the crate crashed into the dirt. The other stood desperately unable to drag the crate alone. Grimm wasted no time, sprinting back stepping around the body of the fallen Eschatos soldier. He grabbed the handle of the crate and lifted its weight "Come on move!" He urged, no time to think about the fallen man. Visibly shaken, the carrier composed himself enough to carry the crate, and they settled under the relative safety of the makeshift cover. Grimm took but a moment to catch his breath.

"crack it open" he shout, trying to be heard over the gunfire and shouting. Then a soldier started prying open the crate with the head of his axe, sending little splinters of wood flickering to the ground. The crate popped open revealing a black cylindrical bomb with yellow stripes on either end. Their sapper reached in pulling out a spool of long green fuse.

"This will give us two minutes to get away..." Said the sapper.

"Just light it!" Yelled Grimm. The sapper complied and after a few attempts of striking a flint rod the sparks surged from the wick's end giving off the aroma of burning powder. "That's it, get back! Go go go!" The whole of them began to run back into the cloud of smoke.

Running back into the gunfire they made as much distance as they could, as fast as they could. Bullets whizzed past. Grimm got low and covered his head. Seconds felt like hours. The blanket of smoke was beginning to thin and he could make out the silhouette of Kindred on the wall. They'd be able to see everyone soon. Beads of sweat felt like fire on his brow. "Come on... come on... don't fail me now" his grip tightened around the hilt of his mace. He made out the silhouette of archers on the wall pointing in their direction, lining up, notching arrows. "Heads up!" He barked, raising his shield in desperation. But just at that moment.

-Boom-

The Shockwave hit Grimm's body harder than a thunderstorm. He could feel the cartilage shake in his nose, pressure in his chest, he didn't remember falling over, only looking up from the flat of his back. Debris rained from the sky with the sulfur scent of powder. And much to his glee, from the ground he could see straight through the wall into Fort Slate. As the ringing in his ears died down, Grimm heard roaring cheers from the men behind him mixed with panicked shouting coming from within. He couldn't help but smirk. Before he could even rise he saw his comrades relentlessly pushing forward into the fort. A group of Redmen with flame throwers on their back beelined into the breach in the fort's wall. Kindred swarmed the breach, in an attempt to quickly secure it, but as fast as they appeared... With the hiss of pressurized gas and the indiscriminate fury of flame, swathes of men disappeared into a wall made of fire. Their roars of courage and retaliation dissolved instantly into cries of agony. Writhing in despair they fell to the ground. Just as quickly as it was secured, Eschatos men poured into the walls of Fort Slate.

Grimm finally rose to his feet. He took just a moment to roll his shoulder and make sure nothing was broken, then he followed his men in suite to the fort. They were quickly coming up on the keep in the center, the flamethrowers punched straight through the middle of the fort while men clashed with steel around and on the walls. The roar of battle reverberated throughout all of fort slate. Red tunics kicked in doors and broke windows open. Those clad in the kindred's black and gold were boxed in and fell to the ground in all directions. Grimm shouted among the chaos, leading his men to the base of the fort's keep. He ushered most of the men back and waved over the sapper who opened up his bag, pulling out 8 sticks of dynamite.

"This is all i have. Four pounds. I'm.... Not sure it will crack this gate open..." They both paused taking in the large door barring their entry to the keep of fort slate. The gate was made of mostly wood, but it was thick and reinforced with what looked like wrought iron. Grimm shook his head before looking back at the sapper.

"We have to try. Do what you can. Stick them all to one side. On the hinges!"

The sapper gave him an unconvinced nod and got to work. Using clay he was able to plaster two sticks to each of the hinges along the span of the right door and spliced them all to a single long fuse. Grimm watched the battlefield behind them as the sapper worked. All the while arrows and sparse gunfire traded between the keep and the soldiers surrounding its base. Eschatos Men Pummeled the tower with indefatigable fervor. One Redman even kicked away a grenade thrown from the tower, laughing as he spitefully threw a rock back at the keep. Two flamethrowers poised themselves in a nook in the corridor before the gate, catching a moments breath as they waited for the gate to bust open. With wet palms they loomed. Sweat stung their eyes and their arms shook with fatigue. Their lungs burned and their muscles ached. Yet despite all of it they donned sadistic smiles underneath the veil of their gas masks, ready to torch the way forth with the same ferocity that Torrefiers bore into battle. Grimm himself found that he was grinding his teeth together, anticipating the inside of the keep, the very heart of Fort Slate; Its Hearth. This was the belly of the beast, and clearing it meant monumental victory for him, for his men, and for the Eschatos.

"I'm lit. Get clear!" The sapper shouted, as he stood to run back to an alcove in the corridor to the gate. The two retreated back behind the handful of men waiting for the gate to be blown open.

The fuse hissed for what again, felt like forever. It was impossible for Grimm to not worry the rig was a dud. But right before he peered around the corner to make sure the corridor shook with a sudden blast, that immediately set off all of the other explosives with it. Grimm turned the corridor.

"Ego fututus!" Cursed Grimm. The gate was black with soot, its metal smoked with heat from the blast. It was marred and splintered. But it still stood. The men stood awkwardly in the corridor, looking to Grimm for direction.

"Hey look!" Shouted one of the men. "Look close! The hinges are busted. I think its being held closed from the inside!"

He was absolutely right. Grimm was remiss of his composure. He put his mace on his hip, compiled his thoughts, and raised his head with renewed determination.

"Fantastic eye! You two!" He said, knife handing the Redmen with flame throwers. "Get ready. We're gonna push this gate down. The very moment its open I want fire inside! Not a second late."

"We're ready to go" They nodded, and did a fast check of their equipment. Grimm and the others positioned themselves at the door.

"Alright men! This is it. Push! We get in and we win! push!" The gate cracked open slightly, the blasted door leaned unevenly, on the fringe of falling over. Then it closed back up. "They are pushing back! Break it down! PUSH!" They Pushed again. It opened a little farther as they slammed into the door. There was the sound of a man grunting as they fell to the floor from the inside, other voices shouting to get up. "Push! Keep Pushing!" Grimm shout "Eschatos da Gloriam!" His men Roared in response. "Eschatos da Gloriam!"

With a loud -SNAP- the damaged door gave in, falling to the ground, the other swinging wide open. Eschatos tripping as it gave to their wake. the damaged door trapped Kindred beneath as it fell. Grimm fell over on top of it. Before the time he could look up into the keep he heard the hiss of liquid shooting overhead, and the whole main chamber was filled with smoke and fire. He was so close, the heat alone nearly burned the exposed skin of his hands and neck. He shuffled back away from the heat as the two men wielding the flamethrowers dauntlessly crept forward, the reflection of the flames coruscated off the lenses of their masks and helmets. You could not see into the main chamber past the curtain of flame and smoke. you could only hear the coughing, and the screams of it's victims on the other side. They all sat and gazed in awe as two men did the work of twenty, and not one of them dared to get in their way. They swepted their jets back and forth, panning the entirety of the chamber when a loud pop pierced the pandemonium. The man on the left stopped the stream of flame, dropped to his knees, before going limp as a boned fish as if all the intent and wrath were sucked from his body. Then he fell to the floor. His counterpart, peered into the wall of fire, seeing nothing, snarling like a lion at the invisible threat. Another sharp pop preceded a spark on the fuel tank on the dead man's body and it exploded into a ball of fire and smoke as black as the void of night. Burning napalm splattered in all directions, even landing on the sleeve of Lieutenant Grim and another nearby Redman. He yelled as he smothered it with a glove. Luckily the amount of fluid was insurmountable and he was able to snuff the flame before suffering burns. the other however was not so fortunate. He danced as the gelatinous fluid melted his gambeson to his skin. He dropped and writhed. Others tried to pat him and snuff out the fire but the effort was futile as the fuel stuck to their gloves. The sapper took a thick leather blanket that was rolled up on his back and was able to suffocate the flame, but the damage was done. the man lie still before he could be rescued. Grimm finally rose to his feet gripping his shield and grabbing his mace. As the veil of fire and smoke diminished, steadily dissolving as the fuel on the black stone floor burned up

they could see through the chamber. Past the scape of charred corpses and smoldering tapestries, in the middle of five men, standing seven feet tall, was her. Clad in jet black gothic plate armor with gold trim on every edge, Eyes that glowed an incandescent purple, Black hair tied back and shaved on the sides, exposing the metal augmentations integrated in her skull like gilded silver inlays. A long, ornately decorated estoc sword in her right hand, a Smoking revolver in her left. This was a Preliator of the Kindred. The commander of fort Slate. She extended her arm, pointing her blade at Grimm in a sort of En Garde gesture and in a dark, antagonizing tone she said:

"Sed Noctem da Gloriam"

A Preliator, the psyonic warriors of Queen Noctem. Not anywhere close to the strength or power of a Torrefier, but psychological warriors capable of twisting your mind if you let them. Grimm didn't expect one to be in command of fort slate but now it all made sense why the fort was left with such little manpower. Grimm gave his mace a twirl, making sure his grip on it was solid, as he and his men started a half circle around the six Kindred defenders. It appeared neither side had any ammo left, otherwise they'd not be face to face in such a manner. The Preliator herself probably had a few shots left but not enough for all of them. She had to be saving them. She took the first step forward but just as she did~

"Hey Bitch!" The sapper shout from behind raising what looked like a smoke grenade in his hand He reeled back to throw it. Not before she raised her gun and took the shot. It exploded in his hand into a thick white cloud of phosphorus that burned and engulfed him entirely. Shrapnel must've killed him immediately as he fell back like a marionette that had its strings cut. Smoke rapidly filled the chamber, the Kindred, without masks began to choke on the cloud of phosphorus. Grimm's men surged at the opportunity, skewering them as they writhed in the smoke. The Preliator was not slain so easily. She turned and dove out the window behind her, shattering the glass as she made way, with impossible agility for one clad in plates of steel. Grimm ran to the window in pursuit Just in time to see her roll as she hit the ground a story below.

"Look out! Kill her! Stop that woman! Kill the Preliator!" Grimm spat from the broken window. Down in the fort she was again surrounded by the Eschatos who were razing the rest of fort slate. a few men turned their heads to the commands of Lieutenant Grimm. A nearby flamethrower turned toward her and raised his the nozzle at her. She gunned him down before he had the chance. Two men rushed her, swords poised. She sidestepped and parried their attacks with ease, dancing between them as she fought. She kicked one over, baring strength greater than that of a mere man, and skewered the other with her blade. The long steel blade cut straight through his mail and his gambeson like paper. He gripped the blade impaled in his chest as his lungs filled rapidly with his own blood, coughing desperately for air before she ripped it out and he curled up on the ground. Her fight was drawing the attention of more and more Redmen who began to encircle her. But things started to become weird. An Eschatos rifleman and a footman who stood together on the battlements took notice to the commotion in the courtyard below them. The rifleman locked eyes with the Preliator, and with steely conviction put her in the crosshair of his rifle's iron sights. The muzzle of his rifle spat a ball of fire as is

sent the bullet downrange, the echo of the rifle reverberated off the black stone of Fort Slate's Walls like the sound of thunder. It grazed the her spaulder enough to send sparks, but not enough to even stagger her. But then as he chambered another round the footman at his side, with a panicked look, yelled and swung his sword in a wild arc, cutting the rifleman's chest beneath the arm. The footman's face went white, dropping his sword he applied pressure to the wound that he just inflicted on his own comrade. He stammered.

"I'm sorry! I don't know what happened! I swore you were one of them! I'm sorry! I.. I don't know.. I..."

In another part of the courtyard three more footmen were barreling towards the Preliator. She veered her head towards them, purple irises glowing slightly more intense than they had been. In a similar show of discord the man in front spun around, swinging his mace towards his fellow Redmen, hitting the closer of the two breaking his hand. Other Eschatos soldiers around her were spinning and swinging their weapons in panicked confusion, as if they thought there were some kindred soldier right behind them, only to turn and find their own brothers in arms.

"Ego fututus!" Grimm cursed again. He turned to the dozen men still with him. "You all clear this keep! do what ever it takes. I'm going out there to lend aid!" A sergeant in a sallet helm gave him a nod, and ushered the rest of the soldiers to a stairwell, ascending further into the keep of fort slate. Grimm turned back to the corridor past the smashed gate and began to run. "You won't escape me again..."

He navigated his way around the keep, to the far side, through Eschatos men who still fought in the buildings and on the walls of Fort Slate, grinding the will of the few kindred survivors who persisted, into submission. He wrapped around the corner of what must've been the mess hall, finally into the courtyard, before the main gate of the fort where she fought. On the ground around her were the bodies of more than men already. Beads of sweat left trails of moisture on her face. Eschatos surrounded her shaking in their boots, Afraid to get anywhere near her, or each other... Grimm removed his helm and tore his mask from his face, taking his first unimpeded breath of air since the beginning.

"She is scared of you! Form up! Get together! We're alone in this fort! Its us and her!" He tried to steel their resolve. "Don't trust your minds! Concentrate on her! Don't look back and stand together!"

"Be silent naive!" She hissed, raising her revolver towards Grimm and firing directly at him. Before he could flinch he felt like a gorilla punched his chest, ripping the air from his lungs, and knocking him to the ground. Through hazy eyes and labored breath he looked down at his chest. He felt around his plate carrier with his hands until he felt his fingers burn on something hot, lodged in his vest. It caught her bullet. Nonetheless his chest throbbed as if someone hit him full force with a mace. He couldn't see or feel through his vest or the padded gambeson beneath, but he knew the impact must've broken his ribcage. As Grimm coughed and gasping for air as he sat back up, looking towards the massive black iron gate she stood before. His vision slowly came back into focus, doubles of the Preliator mending back into one. She tilted

her head upon seeing him rise from the ground. "Still alive?" She mocked, raising her arm again til Grimm could see directly down the hot steel barrel of her revolver. He desperately raised his arms before his face, and turned his head away instinctively. Though the flesh and bone of his arms could do nothing against a slug of lead traveling hundreds of feet a second.

-Bang-

"Gaahh!"

Grimm felt nothing. Like nothing changed. Like nothing happened. He opened his eyes, peeking between his to where she stood. She was reeling in pain. He lowered his arms to get a better look. He watched her spin to the side to punch the head of a Redman who wield an axe. Her gun lie in the dirt beneath her, the hand that held it was covered in blood.

Grimm summoned the remainder of his strength to rise to his feet, grasping his chest, and as loud as his lungs would allow he grimaced:

"Bring her down!"

The men around her surged forth with a roar. She strained as she danced again, struggling harder as they fought back. The Eschatos stuttered in fear as they assailed her, but did not turn on each other as they had before. She cut one's arm, and another's leg, snarling at them in riposte, but with fervorous determination they pressured her into defense. Her breath became heavy. Her eyes shone like fire and she bore her teeth like a wolf. She began to bleed from the nose as her mind strained. Sparks flew as a man struck her cuirass with his mace, marring its decadent black paint. She whipped her arm around knocking him backwards. Dirt kicked up as he thud against the ground. Another drove his sword forth, impaling the back of her leg through the chink of her armor. With a cry she folded to the ground, and the Eschatos jumped her. One man restraining each arm, Holding her down.

Grimm stumbled forward towards her. Looking around the fort, everything seemed to have slowed down. Bodies of Eschatos and kindred were strewn all over the fort. But only those wearing red cloth of the Eschatos stood. He stopped before her, locking eyes. She gave a sharp look and her eyes flared. He suddenly felt dizzy like his mind was in a haze. Through the corner of his eye Grimm could see a Kindred soldier with their sword raised at him. He jolted back and veered over, but he calmed as soon as he saw, it was just one of his own men, standing in the midst. He looked back to her.

"You're that desperate are you? It's over. The fort is ours." He berated. "You lost" She stared at him. One bloodshot eye. A trail of blood from her nose to her chin. her face drenched in sweat and dirt. And she smiled. She gave Grimm a distorted, wretched smile unbecoming of a beaten woman who knelt in the dirt, and began to laugh.

"You bugs... You miserable dregs! You think you won? You think this is over?" Her voice was shrill as it was unhinged. "Death is coming for you all Eschatos! Memento mori you pissants! The Grimm Reaper will take you! You're all already dead! Dead men walking! You're all

going to die here! Your blood, my tithe to Queen Noctem! Pur ignem purgaris!" She continued to yell, seemingly to everyone in the fort rather than directly to Grimm, cackling like a madwoman the entire time. She yelled as if Queen Noctem herself could hear her cries. Grimm looked over at the Redman by his side and held out his hand. The soldier, understanding, handed Grimm his mace. He took the mace in hand and took a step toward her. "You won't leave here alive! You hear me? These walls are the lining of your casket! I AM YOUR PALLBEARER!" She laughed. Grimm's face contorted with disgust. Without a word, he raised the mace in the air and swung. With a loud, wet crack, the men let go, and she fell to the ground.

The Eschatos inside the fort began to cheer, raising their fists and their weapons in the air as they revered themselves. Seemingly their plan was a success. They cleared out Fort Slate and now everything inside was property of the Eschatos. But Grimm's mind was not at ease. He'd been unnerved by everything the Preliator shouted to the heavens. Her words began swimming in his mind as if she was still attempting to manipulate him. Why would she speak in such a manner? Why would she say that? He was uneasy.

Something smacked into the heavy iron gate making the ground shake throughout the fort. Someone within yelled "Earthquake!" But Grimm knew better. The gate was dented, bulging inward as if explosives went off on the other side. Bending the reinforcing drawbar that held it shut.

"Kindred reinforcements! Form up at the gate!" Some Eschatos Sergeant shouted from the ranks. Nearby Redmen surged to the gate, a flamethrower, a couple of riflemen, and about a score of footmen formed up surrounding the heavy iron entry to Fort Slate. But Grimm's face turned white. He began to tremble. His grip failed him, dropping the mace, and he fell to his knees. "Lieutenant! Get up! They are about to come through!" Every one of the Preliator's words rang in his head like church bells. It all made sense to him. The reaper was coming she claimed. He whispered to himself:

"It's over..."

With the sound of something hammering against steel like the sound of thunder, the gate blew open, the gargantuan metal doors blasting off its hinges inward. But not from an explosion. Through a thin film of kicked up dust a single figure emerged. Standing ten feet tall, with a build like bull. Clad in armor plate black as night with dim green lights inlaid on every limb. Wielding an axe too large for a man to lift. A helm like a bascinet except for tempered glass over the eyes and respiratory filters over the face. Bandoliers of grenades slung over its breastplate like garlands. The demonic effigy stepped forward stopping before the body of the Preliator. The eye slits of the otherwise featureless helm, looked upon her body and then around the rest of the fort.

"Hmm... I'm late... It looks like you Redmen killed everyone already..." He had a low, guttural, voice that sounded like rocks scraping glass. Shrill like the cry of a zirconisk drowning in water. He found Grimm keeling among them and locked eyes with the Lieutenant. "That just

means i don't have to hold back! Hahahah! Death Incarnate!" His laugh was deep and throaty as it was horrible and contorted. "Ohhh yes! Old Dullahan gets to have some fun today..."

Two Redmen immediately dropped their weapons, turned, and ran. The Sergeant turned to the fort and yelled the one word that every Eschatos feared most to hear.

"TORREFIER!"