

“A dragon! Slay a dragon and bring us its head! That’s your mission!”, one of his superior officers in the Order of the Knights of Twilight had announced, as his greatest and final trial: “Accomplish this and you will be dubbed a knight”.

His name was Erkahoth and he was a squire in the Knights of Twilight, there at the edge of the world, where, if the compass on maps actually existed, the needle would touch far North. The words echoed in his mind, almost as if they were trapped in his head by the massive helmet he wore, the helmet that restricted his vision and distorted every shadow in the forest, through which he now proceeded, into a nest of some mythical beast.

He had seen twenty winters, twenty-one if one took into account that the cold had started to set in for good, dropping every leaf that wasn’t on an evergreen. Long black hair fell about his shoulders, like a raven’s wings, wherever the heavy helmet and the coarse armour allowed it to be seen. Through the slits in the helmet his penetrating eyes sought out all they could see, darting to the slightest unnatural sound, even when there really was nothing actually to see. He stood tall and thin, almost skinny, but his body hunched over like a branch bends under the weight of snow, until it slides off or melts in the spring. There was a reason for the proud youth’s hunched posture, a reason why his helmet was so heavy and his armour so coarse. It wasn’t just chance that the blade in his hand dragged along the ground due to its weight, even though the squire was quite strong. Erkahoth was different from other youths his age. He was left-handed and all this scoffing at was nothing to what the world of Dargol had in wait for him and his kind, considering them ill-fated and bad-luck bearers.

They had come at dawn, after the long night of his Vigil, when he had to stay awake and meditate on his vows. They opened the great door of the hall, almost blinding him with the dawn light, standing over his kneeling form and set him his mission. Most of the senior officers had broken out in laughter, when they heard the task he had been set. Erkahoth knew that they would celebrate his defeat. But he intended to show them all how wrong they were. Even the knight Sandor, in whose charge he’d been as a squire, had shaken his head sadly, as the gates of the fort had clanged heavily shut behind his squire. Erkahoth had despaired knowing that not even Sandor believed in him, but at least he hadn’t jeered at him, like the others had.

Jeering wasn’t part and parcel of the night of the Vigil, during which a knight had to stay by himself and consider until dawn what the path he was on meant. For Erkahoth, however, things were different. Not only had he made the error of being left-handed, but he had also dared to aim high, seeking to become a full-fledged Knight right after finishing his time as a squire, something really rare as few managed to pass all the tests to reach full knighthood without failing at least once. Yet Erkahoth had risen to the challenge and now his last task awaited. Of course an entire legion couldn’t be expected to take that sort of impertinence from a lack-luck. So the night of his Vigil had turned into a seemingly endless torture, as everyone passed by his door to whisper how they would enjoy his failure. They had mocked his persistence and taken advantage of the anonymity of the walls to confess their unappeasable yearning to send the lack-luck far away. And, when dawn had come, sending his tormentors away, the smith had arrived to transform Erkahoth into the laughing-stock of the camp. A heavy helmet, to protect him from the fiery breath of the dragon. Thick-cut awkward armour, pieces that not even the horses were given to wear, in order to take the blows of a dragon’s claws and its tail. And, of course, the sword too had to be as heavy as could be, for how else could it penetrate the monster’s scales?

Erkahoth was by nature calm, experienced in quietly putting up with the irony and the teasing, until it came time to prove his worth. He would never have managed

to progress in the world, if he hadn't. But the derision had given rise to an anger which was new to him. He had to kill the dragon, to prove to those who jeered that they could never go further than mocking. He had to bring the monster's head before them, to enjoy the frozen expression on their faces. He had to do it because he was a Knight of Twilight, a guardian of the edge of the world and this was his mission. And with the dragon taking over his thoughts he turned to look back at the fort one last time, before it was hidden by the shadows of the forest that surrounded it.

For an instant he caught a glimpse of an unbelievable and terrible sight. He'd always believed that the Knights' fort at the cliff edge with its tower and its walls was the greatest construction that he would ever see or that his mind could take in: isolated and unbending. But it wasn't but a small bastion compared to the fortress that had appeared as if by magic in the canyons behind it, which nobody dared to pass and where nothing had ever existed. Walls whose base could not be seen surrounded towers of black rock, that rose like lances through dark shapeless fog to the heavens while one of those, at their very heart, disappeared into the clouds. But the massive fortress wasn't empty. What appeared to be a black fog was in fact flocks of ravens, that flew from one side to the others, as if floating in the wind. Extensive scaffolding was set up against the buildings. The creatures that worked on this, appeared similar to those, who patrolled the walls, and even from the distance from which Erkahoth observed them, in no way appeared similar to Man or Elf or Dwarf. And just as suddenly as Erkahoth had glimpsed all this, it was lost from his eyes as soon as he realised what he was looking at. Not even a single breath had gone by. He turned his head back again, but once again only the Knights' fort was standing there. He walked to the edge of the cliff, but only stones filled the depths of the canyons. The sensation that he had seen something forbidden and that Someone had caught him in his gaze remained for a breath, like a lingering aftertaste in his mind. And then that too was lost. By the time the trees had once more welcomed him into their labyrinthine kingdom, not even a memory remained of that unnatural instant.

Now the fort of the Knights of Twilight lay leagues behind him and the trees' embrace grew ever tighter round Erkahoth. The sun had risen high and its rays penetrated selflessly the dry branches of the plane trees, the pine and fir needles to arrive on the ground shredded, making the forest and the tall tree trunks appear like an endless columned temple hall. Though there was little light and the wind was cold, Erkahoth could feel the sweat on his skin in his effort to stand as tall as he could under the excess burden, making his armour feel more and more like a cauldron in which he was slowly boiling, preparing him for the dragon's lungs. He proceeded with caution, fully alert and making as little noise as possible, although his armour creaked continuously, while he wondered where he could find a dragon and how he could possibly deal with it.

But vigilance wasn't enough in someone who wasn't particularly familiar with the woods and nor did his worried mind let him understand that something was wrong. His ears only heard the sounds of small animals and the twittering of birds. Between those, however, voices were hidden, whose existence Erkahoth couldn't even imagine. Whispers that differed not at all from the cries of the raven were exchanged above the branches, between the tree trunks and from amongst the roots. They plotted, without Erkahoth understanding, how they would bring him onto their paths, where it would be easy to attack him. They observed everything about him and whispered about it, hidden by the light whistling of the wind. They didn't yet draw close, as they feared his mighty sword, even though they could barely fathom how little he could actually use it. They had been told to look out for him, because he

wasn't like the others and everything had to be given great care. One of the voices proposed rushing him as he stood there, but the others shrieked like crows for it to shut up and wait quietly for the right moment. And while all this was going on, Erkahoth continued to walk unsuspecting, with only an instinctive fear trying to warn him, which he attempted to dismiss, because nothing could be more important than his mission.

As noon crept up, Erkahoth reached a clearing surrounding a spring, which called to him with its bubbling sound, to quench his thirst. He had set out early in the morning and walked without stopping at all, with thoughts of the dragon and how he would bring about its downfall as his drink. Now his mouth was dry and his body was tired, so he welcomed the small rise with its mossy stones, from which water sprang out clean, before hitting the ground, where it formed a small rill that crept like a snake through grasses, that ignored the coming winter, before disappearing into the shadows of the wood. Exhausted he leaned on his great sword and loosened the bindings of his armour, without, however, taking off even one of the heavy pieces. It is a virtue in a night to be always on guard.

However on guard one might be, however, nobody has eyes in the back of his head, nor over his head in this instance, so Erkahoth wasn't in the least aware of the raven that flew in and settled on the dry branches high above, its gaze malicious nor of the others that joined him, making the trees appear to have black leaves. Every bush or stand of leaves on the ground appeared to bloom with dark blades like accursed flowers that had blossomed before their time. And yet nothing moved, they only waited and waited, until their numbers had increased to such an extent as to give them enough courage to carry out their own orders.

The water was frozen on Erkahoth's lips, but no colder than the wind that whistled amongst the dry branches, announcing the inevitable arrival of winter. The young man raised his helmet's visor and wet down his face, which was clammy with sweat and then renewed the water in the flask he carried with him. He was ready to set off once more on his quest, when a sense of weakness from his stomach made him reconsider. He decided to linger a while more, so he gathered a few dry branches and struck the flintstones he always carried with him, in order to dine. Before he put a bite of food in his mouth, however, he clasped his hands tightly before his face and with closed eyes reminded himself of his mission, his vows and prayed that this meal wouldn't be his last, just like every knight should. For the last part of his silent prayer he should, properly speaking, have turned his head to the south, where the dead go, but he had walked so deeply into the woods that it was hard to get his bearings, and even though he was almost sure that he had walked in a straight line for the greatest part of his course. The wind started to blow harder and dark clouds covered the sun, so the shadows mixed with the patches of light and the forest was wrapped in gray. Erkahoth suddenly felt the cold run through his thick armour and he tightened it around him, as he wrapped the dark cloak of a squire around himself. His humble fire flickered, but held. For the short time he was eating he was silent. Then suddenly the wind returned, the fire flickered once more, but this time in the opposite direction and Erkahoth understood that he was in danger.

The wind that had been blowing into his face changed direction and now carried with it the heavy scent of those who had lingered for so long, without good intent. It was the scent of the hunters and he was the hunted. Beyond the smell of sweat, a scent of iron and blood now came in the breath of the wind, mixed with the stench of many birds that had gathered together. His instinctive reaction was to turn back and run. His feet were ready to carry him, when his mind focused back on the

teachings of these past years and calm came to him like dawn after night. He quietly took off his helmet so he could hear better and without indicating that he had apprehended a thing, stole glimpses around himself with small simple movements. He could only see a tiny bit - his enemy was far from incapable - but he didn't lose his calm. A knight doesn't panic. He evaluates the situation and adapts accordingly. Knight Sandor had taught him well. And of course, if you're hunting dragon, any other threat tends to pale before it.

He slowly lowered his helmet, as if he wanted to wash his face and with small hidden movements he stuffed it with the bandages he carried with him, so that it sat better on his head and put it back on again. Then he reached for his sword. The blade, although too long and heavy for his left arm, was well sharpened and shone with a dangerous pale light even in the gray woods that winter's noon. It wasn't a bad weapon. He raised it in both hands and held it before his eyes over the flames. When they had found him as a child, before they discovered he was left-handed, the Knights of Twilight had told him that it was important that, even though he couldn't remember his parents, he had a name of his own. Names had power. He turned to his sword.

"You were the instrument of my humiliation and I sought to transform you into a stepping stone to become a Knight. But now my life is in danger and I seek your help. They say that names have power. I am Erkahoth and I am left-handed. Whatever glory is written for you is half in my arm. Serve me, despite this. You are Arhanien, the Cold Black Steel, because I see ice in your heart and black blood running down you. You are my sword."

There, at the edge of the world, there is little to be heard of magicians and even less is ever perceived. It is a place where everyone survives on the strength and the wits they possess. So when, suddenly, Erkahoth felt Arhanien become light, become one with his arm, as he reflected his gaze and the fire in his blade, it wasn't the product of some spell or magic trick. Because now the sword had a name and names had power.

He had to move fast now. The principles of his training echoed, like bells, in his mind. When dealing with an enemy that is more numerous, where you stood would also decide the outcome of the fight. He dragged himself slowly backwards as he lowered his helmet's visor. His back touched the mossy rocks behind him and he remained there, where his back was protected. And then he waited. He could hear his breath, sounding like a low rasp through the slits in his helmet. Everything was motionless. And then came a crow from above. Erkahoth felt an instinctive fear. Ravens brought bad luck. He raised his head to where he had heard the crow and felt his heart stop. The trees looked as if they bore dense black blooms, emanating malice and with red flaming coals for eyes. A raven was bad luck and more ravens were worse luck, but Erkahoth couldn't grasp what the intentions of the flock above him could be. He swallowed dryly and tightened his hands around Arhanien's hilt.

Suddenly a raven separated from the seated flock and with a wild crow started cutting high circles above his head. Soon there were two, then five and then so many they seemed like a black cloud of feathers, claws and beaks, circling Erkahoth. Patience, he thought, I must maintain my position. The ravens were now so numerous that the air around him appeared to blur and he was wreathed by the stench of corpses. Round and round him they flew, waiting for the moment to pounce, while they weighed him with their bright red eyes.

The first raven that finally managed to gather its courage to charge the iron-bound knight found its breast impaled by Arhanien's blade. Black ran its blood on the sword, as the sword's master had said would happen only a few short moments

before, a baptism more true than any ceremony or word. Erkahoth flicked his sword downwards, flinging the corpse to the ground without pity. He'd never heard of ravens attacking somebody in the area. But the battle was now joined and how and why were luxuries that only the victor would enjoy.

Seeing one of their own fall, the ravens grew wild and started to charge Erkahoth in no order and from all directions, leaving him hardly able to move. His heavy armour meant that their beaks and their claws could hardly harm him, but soon Erkahoth was struggling to stay on his feet, as the weight and number of attacks slowly brought him to his knees. When a bird came too close he didn't hesitate to cut it down with Arhanien, but they were so many and he didn't have a shield to push them back, so he soon found himself on the ground. He submitted patiently to their craws, that echoed in a cursed cacophony in his ears, until the ravens drew back exhausted, as they couldn't hurt him directly and he could rise once more to his feet.

He stood up to their next attack, legs braced apart and with Arhanien, now a part of himself, sitting in his left hand, ready to wreak havoc. And the blade did indeed spread black death in its path. It carved arcs in the air, stabbing one moment and retreating the next, throwing one raven after another to the ground, filling the clean brook with blood and broken feathers. Erkahoth felt the intensity of his first real battle run through him but refused to surrender to it, because a small voice within him told him that the instant he tired would bring his end, irrespective of the armour he wore. He had to keep his strength and find a way to vanquish them, because instead of getting fewer, the raven attacks came in increasing and more brutal waves.

Moving in circles round the small mound, tearing wings and flesh asunder with Arhanien, Erkahoth noticed that the accursed birds were forced to lessen their attacks, when he approached the fire, because despite their terrible rage, when it came down to it there were animals and centuries-old instincts couldn't be set aside so simply. Without losing an instant he lunged down and raised in his right hand some dry branches, that were burning bright and hot. The ravens in their fury didn't notice for an instant that their prey had a new and terrible weapon to hand. So when a fat raven pounced on Erkahoth claws extended and beak at the ready to strike, the novice knight didn't waste his time and pushed the burning branches at him. The flames flared along the bird's black feathers in an instant and, crazed by the pain and the knowledge of what was coming, it started to crawl louder flying hither and thither and threatening to transmit the fire on other crows that fell on it. The birds tried desperately now to avoid their kin and Erkahoth seized the opportunity to hit even more ravens with the burning branches. The air filled with the stench of burning feathers and charred flesh and soon the crows were forced to retreat, particularly when they saw their fallen comrades flapping on the ground, unable to avoid a flaming death. The flock finally disappeared into the shadows of the trees, leaving behind only the storm clouds approaching, to darken the sky.

For a moment Erkahoth remained motionless, panting, with his blade black with blood in his left hand and the flaming branches in the other creaking in between the death rattles of the ravens on the ground. His breath was heavy and he was slow to realise his victory. When finally, his mind allowed the thought that he had survived his first battle to pierce through the haze, he couldn't help but raise Arhanien high and yell full of heat:

"Get lost you vile creatures! Get lost, because Arhanien and the flames will hunt you down again, if you dare to return!"

But Erkahoth's joy was short-lived. The clouds above him soon drowned out his enthusiasm, crushing his heart with dark shadows. He'd known before that it

wasn't just the ravens that lurked, but that something far more terrible awaited to attack, weighing him throughout the time the ravens tried to break him. For an instant, not knowing whether he was optimistic or pessimistic, Erkahoth thought that perhaps the dragon he sought was the one lurking in the shadows, but some instinct within him refuted that idea. The first bolt of lightning had to fall for Erkahoth to perceive what he was facing.

In an instant the forest was lit bright, shadows disappeared and shapes were rendered sharply, denuded of hiding places and illusions. The faces he saw maintained only the vaguest of human forms. Their features were monstrous, with jaws that held far more teeth than they had room for; gazes dark under heavy brows; and pointed ears that stood out amongst the muddy red masses that appeared like hair. The lightning struck off the blades, axes and other terrible weapons they held in their hands. In that instant Erkahoth realised that these creatures were not like the ravens. There was no fire or trick that could fool them. He didn't even know what these monsters were, that had risen like images from a nightmare before his eyes. Instinctively he turned his head to perceive that the sharp blades and the malevolent glances were awaiting in every direction tightening the circle around him with each breath.

He was trapped, beyond a doubt, or a hope. His left hand still clutched Arhanien, but now the sword appeared to regain its old weight, as Erkahoth panted, exhausted. He knew that this time it was all over. There was no way he could hold his own against these creatures, because, even if he were more skilled, thirty of them would certainly overcome one single man in him. For a moment he felt a sense of defeat calling his name. But he had to slay a dragon. And, even if he didn't make it, he had to prove to those that found his body that he had been worthy of such a feat. They would find him on a mountain of the corpses of his enemies, if his time had truly come. The dark thoughts were banished like fog before the wind and the young knight, a warrior now, braced his feet on the ground and raised his chest. Arhanien was lifted high, as if he sought to rend the heavens with his blade and his master shouted:

"I don't fear you! Whoever you are, I will crush you, like the mountain crushes the wind. Here I stand and here I may fall. But your death shall be my glory. So come!"

The helmet suddenly felt heavy on his head and limited his vision. Without a second thought he threw it to the ground and lo! his black hair blew proudly in the wind of the storm, getting wet under the first heavy drops of rain and his black eyes looked proud and unyielding at the enemy that surrounded him with such fierce brightness that the creatures stood for an instant as if they cowered. But their leader appeared to consider the warrior's proud stance and uncowed words as a challenge and with a roar charged against him. In the next moment the creatures fell on Erkahoth.

The first blows were quickly exchanged and Erkahoth put thoughts behind him, leaving instinct to lead and the experience of his training to take its place. The first creature to come before him fell dead with its neck cut, only for another to take its place. In the mean time Erkahoth parried a blow from his side and turned instantly to pierce the creature behind him. His enemies were not brilliant fighters, but their constant attacks didn't give him time to take a breath. He was slow to perceive, therefore, that the creatures weren't attempting to hit his weak spots, but to limit his movements and take him prisoner.

When a hand was extended and hooked over his biceps, Erkahoth turned and struck, leaving the cut-off member still clinging to him. The creatures, however, instead of giving up started to intensify their efforts. They charged again and again all together, attempting to disarm him or to grab his feet and hands and Erkahoth was forced every so often to retreat to where the pressure was less, leaving cut limbs on the ground and more hanging from him. The storm was now beating down with the wind singing its own song above that of the battle and the rain turning the ground to mud, which made Erkahoth's struggle even harder. His boots sank in the mud and his footing became unstable, as he was forced increasingly to retreat over slippery ground. Whenever he was cornered, however, he gritted his teeth and with a wild cry he would charge again into the heart of the battle, refusing to surrender. More and more monsters appeared from amongst the shadows, to fall into the slaughter, finally forcing Erkahoth to stop, for an instant, and take a breath, as his arm grew heavy from the broken appendages he had upon him.

The creatures didn't need a second chance. The blade of a spear struck Erkahoth and he bent over in pain. The monsters fell on him like vultures onto a corpse. Hands far stronger than his own grabbed Arhanien and forcibly removed the armour from his body. They left him only with his shirt and trews. When he attempted to resist, the handle of a weapon or some other blunt instrument would hit him in the belly and the chest, throwing him down. Soon he was tied hand and foot and the leader of the creatures gave the order for them to leave for who-knew-where. Despite the pain and the bruising that covered his entire body, Erkahoth was grateful for his good luck - they hadn't killed him, although he trembled at the thought of what might await him. He knew for sure that these creature didn't have anything good in mind for him and that he would surely suffer at their hands, if they took him to their lair. And then the horde started out on a wild, unstoppable march, dragging the warrior with it in the ground and Erkahoth could little distinguish his good luck from bad.

He had no idea what these monsters were and the gargling and muffled sounds they made in their throats, as they addressed each other, gave him no clue. They appeared to understand what he said though every time he threatened them, because they looked at him as if he'd said something very funny. They stood like men did, though they were taller and more muscled, while their arms were quite a bit longer than his own and no less capable. Their skin was dark and wrinkled in many places. It was their eyes, however, that caused cold shudders to climb up his spine and stopped his gaze to linger on them. They were red as blood, with no iris, and it was impossible to understand what they were looking at, unless they actually turned their heads in that direction. But soon observing the enemy became a luxury.

The monsters started to jog through rougher terrain in the forest. The mud that Erkahoth had been dragged in for so long gave way to rockier ground, with thorny bushes making the going harder. Of course his captors didn't really mind all this, but rocks tore into Erkahoth's back, bruising and injuring his torso, while thorns tore his face and hands, whenever the monsters pulled him through the bushes. Pain soon turned into torture and his jaw became numb from clenching. He tried to look up but only the shapes of the monsters filled his field of vision. The dragon was lost from his mind as more immediate threats took over his thoughts. Soon any rational train of thought was gone and as his head struck a large rock he lost his senses and the darkness was almost welcome.

Erkahoth didn't know how long it was, before he started to perceive the material world once more. Until his eyes became less blurred, everything was vague around him except the pain in his head, which was far worse than any he had ever felt

before. He hurt so much that he thought he was slowly losing his reason. Instinctively he sought to rest his head, but this proved impossible to do. His limbs felt impossible to move, rendering any motion unattainable. A moment later he realised that he was tied. As the outlines around him started to clear, Erkahoth came to the conclusion that he was tied, standing against the trunk of a dried-out tree. He turned his head to the side, to see where he was, but the pain caused by thick ropes that cut into his skin made him collapse, exhausted. With his senses returning he could perceive the dozens of wounds on his body caused by being dragged along by the monsters that ached like they were dug in with flaming plows. Mud, stones and all sorts of dirt had gathered on the wounds so each felt as if it were a living thing. He took a deep breath and looked up. Through the branches he could see the sky dressed like Erkahoth, wearing the ragged clouds of the storm that had now passed. The wind had fallen and with it had come night and an icy cold.

The ruins of some destroyed village were all around. He must have come through here on one of his patrols, but the ruins were still smoking and had no stories to tell about their condition, hiding both name and location. One thing was certain. There wasn't a single human soul all around. Signs of the battle were everywhere, with dozens of bodies piled up here and there. None of the proper honours had been accorded the dead, and now they had become a meal to insects and carrion-eaters. Erkahoth felt dizzy at this disgusting sight, but soon the remains of this senseless slaughter faded before the unholy trophy that stood where the defenders had taken their last stance. The monsters that had attacked him, there was no doubt of it, had taken the head of a man, possibly the village leader, and had impaled it on a lance, marking it with a symbol that Erkahoth couldn't recognise. The novice knight perceived with horror that the villagers' weapons were rakes, pitchforks and sickles. They hadn't had a chance of winning. The eyes of the dead, full of despair and horror, were the clearest testament to this.

For a short while Erkahoth's mind refused to think beyond the destruction that surrounded him. But thought and reason are made in such a way that they allow man to escape from the horror, choosing survival as the greatest need. He couldn't stay there. His captors could return at any moment and they certainly hadn't kept him alive in order to tend his wounds. He had to escape as soon as possible. He looked around, trying to ignore the bodies, but could see no trace of Arhanien. Only one of the monsters could be seen and that was lying on the ground, abandoned to its traces, possibly believing that his prisoner didn't have a chance of escaping. Feverishly Erkahoth sought to find ways in which he could get away without making any noise.

He tried to rub his bonds on the dry wood of the tree trunk, in order to fray them and cut through them, but the ropes were too thick and he only managed to injure his wrists, making the pain he was in even worse. He clenched his teeth and started to move his hands, alternating between them and hoping to slip one out of the bonds, but his hands weren't thin enough to escape the ropes. He started to despair, when he felt a cut on his leg. The blade in his boot was still there. The monster appeared not to have noticed it. Slowly, tortuously, he started to stretch, pulling his leg up, in order to grasp his one slim hope of salvation. His wounds felt as though they were on fire from his efforts, as Erkahoth sought to stretch his entire body while tied up. He clenched his teeth, trying not to make the slightest noise, but the pain was so great that his eyes would tear up and his vision grew blurred. Each tortured movement made his bonds incrementally looser, not enough to slip out of but just enough to reach the small weapon in his boot. His fingers touched the hilt.

Suddenly all thought was wiped out of Erkahoth's mind. A penetrating pain, stronger than any other started in his left side, paralysing his entire body. This time he couldn't hold back. His head was thrown back and his scream pierced the deathly quiet that lay over the place. He lowered his eyes to his side to see the hilt of a knife penetrating his side. The monster had awakened and with what appeared to be a smile on its face, turned the knife in his wound. The pain almost drove Erkahoth mad. Without understanding what he did, he grabbed his own blade and in a movement cut the bonds that held his hand and stabbed the monster in the throat. It was the monster's turn to howl and collapse on the ground with black blood flowing from its throat. There was little satisfaction for Erkahoth, however, as a moment later all his thoughts were scattered like dust in the wind and he was left hanging from his bonds, with his chest barely moving.

This time it wasn't darkness that wrapped around him but a storm of vague images that alternated so quickly that Erkahoth was hard put to perceive where his own thoughts were in amongst them, where reality ended and imagination started. He was in a world given over to flames with armies of monsters slaying and looting all that lay before them. Villagers were killed without mercy. Women and children fell to their blades. Nobody could stand before this tide of death. And in destruction the sky darkened with a shadow whose like had not covered Dargol before in living memory and a dragon with black and red scales erased every trace of existence with its fiery breath. Erkahoth was at the same time in the epicentre of the destruction, while also an impartial observer. He felt he was on fire, but he didn't know if the flames of his dreams or the wounds of reality were to blame. Darkness wrapped around him. Shortly before everything turned dark, he felt his body fall and hands gather him up. An old man's face passed before his eyes in a blurred image and then all was gone.