

PLANTING DARK SEEDS

For centuries, the lich lords of Cryx were little more than rumors on the mainland—distant and unknowable figures allegedly governing the Nightmare Empire and possessing terrifying powers, yet never encountered directly. The nearest echoes of these beings were the iron liches that prowled the fringes of the Iron Kingdoms. Preeminent among Cryx's agents in the mortal kingdoms was Asphyxious, a being as ancient as the lich lords, one who saw himself as their equal even before he seized one of their titles for himself.

The exact nature of Asphyxious' actions during the Llaesele War is difficult to pin down, though he seems to have played an important role in securing grisly assets from the remains of its bloody battles. This had long been Cryx's way—parasitically feeding on the aftermath of carnage by gathering corpses to turn into thralls. While this behavior was typical, Cryxian activity far from coastal regions was on the rise during this conflict, to a degree that alarmed many military officers in all the involved kingdoms.

The size and composition of these Cryxian elements suggested an active army at work, one supported by helljacks, bonejacks, pistol wraiths, and malevolent banes, all signifying that this was no force hastily assembled from the recent dead. It would not be until months later, on the 10th of Goloven, that Cygnaran Scout General Bolden Rebal delivered the Hurstwallen Report to the crown. This document summarized his findings that the Scharde Invasions twenty years earlier were orchestrated to cover Cryxian landings and movements. Cryxian military assets moved into the interior with the collusion of agents and unwitting collaborators in Five Fingers, who facilitated access to the Dragon's Tongue River.

Even with this report, spies of the mainland kingdoms could not gauge the extent of Cryxian operations. It was several years later that the scope of their subterranean facilities under the Thornwood was finally revealed. This included a massive necrofactorium capable of providing Asphyxious' armies with military hardware, bypassing the need for unbroken supply lines connecting his forces to the Scharde Islands. Asphyxious had also entered into an extended alliance with a powerful cephalyx hive beneath the Thornwood, gaining access to its large tunnel network.

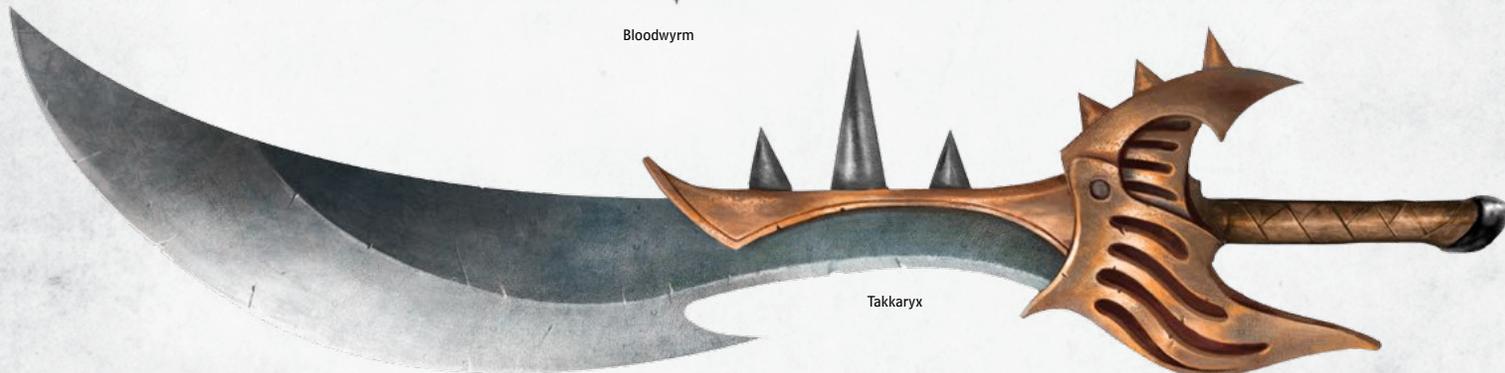
All of his accomplishments suggested Asphyxious' goals and actions were perfectly aligned with the lich lords and their master, Toruk the Dragonfather. For more than fifteen centuries he had proven his loyalty and dedication to the Nightmare Empire. It was understood that liches had their own agendas, each an immortal and immensely powerful being. It was inherent to their natures to accumulate occult lore to increase their power. Few were as driven or ambitious as Asphyxious, who seethed with resentment that his singular greatness had long been disregarded.

It was no coincidence that Asphyxious selected the Thornwood for his primary necrofactorium and connected subterranean facilities. His interest in this place was rooted in the buried ruins of ancient Morrdh as well as in the more recent structures erected by the Orgoth to exploit its redolent and deeply steeped necromantic energies. His deeper purpose involved finding and excavating the greatest Orgoth temple, a site with advanced soul-harvesting mechanisms he planned to use to facilitate his transformation into a god.

Even as he scavenged from the war's battlefields, Asphyxious sent agents abroad to advance his plan of apotheosis. Most of these efforts went unnoticed—but not all of them. One who began to suspect him was Skarre Ravenmane, a being possessed of keen insight into the webs of fate.



Bloodwurm



Takkaryx

LOYAL SERVANTS

*At sea near Baleglow Island,
Octesh 2nd, 605 AR*

Silshade leered over the prow of his ship where the calm ocean water reflected the face of one of the moons. As the ship neared the beachhead, millions of luminescent plankton lit up the shore in an echo of the starry night sky. The skarlock was capable of taking in the aesthetics of his surroundings but chose not to waste the intellect gifted to him on such trivialities.

Long had he considered himself his master's favored servant, but after tonight, all others would see the futility of their ceaseless jockeying for position. Even that insufferable Vociferon would realize he was unfit to polish the iron lich's armor.

Placing one clawed hand on the nearby railing, Silshade turned to gaze at the vast, empty ocean beyond the ship's stern. He watched a heavy fog rolling behind the boat's wake and briefly wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. No matter. Soon, centuries of toiling for the master would come to fruition. Asphyxious would rise to new power and so, too, would Silshade.

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Skarre Ravenmane and her raiding party came ashore less than an hour after the skarlock. The *Widower* had been following the ship for days, using a cloaking ritual and the blackship's ability to summon an unnatural fog to conceal the pursuit. Skarre had ordered her senior sea witch, Talyx, to remain aboard and maintain the enchantment for as long as possible. The Satyxis selected to accompany Skarre were sufficient to face off against the skarlock's meager retinue, but she would rather wait before making their presence known.

Her mind turned to the vision that had set her upon this voyage. She had seen a looming shadow of magnificent wings stretching across the mainland—clearly the wings of the Dragonfather—but something had been amiss. Her eye had been drawn to a region where the wings could not reach, a pulsing sickly light where the shadow pulled back as if burned. It filled her with a growing dread. In the weeks that followed, other images came to her, including a skull with a baleful green eye that she was certain represented the iron lich Asphyxious, whom she had served in years past. She did not know why he manifested now as an omen of disaster.

A very different vision had brought Skarre to Asphyxious decades earlier to inform the lich of an opportunity he was in a unique position to exploit: the birth of a sorceress with unprecedented potential. It had been on Asphyxious' orders that Skarre had attacked the coastal town of Ingrane, capturing and delivering the girl who would become Deneghra. Yet Skarre had had a falling out with the ancient undead in the aftermath of this. Instead of thanking Skarre, Asphyxious had rebuked her for failing to secure the girl's twin. Despite the fact that Cryx had benefitted from Deneghra's capture, a rift remained between the pirate queen and Asphyxious. Still, they had fought toward the same end and served the same masters—or so she had thought.

Skarre's investigation into the source of this newer vision had led her to the skarlock. Such creatures did not ordinarily stir the winds of fate, but this one was at the forefront of a storm. She felt certain he was the key to unraveling the lich's schemes.

Katixa, Skarre's first mate, distracted the pirate queen from her musings. "It's beautiful, Cap'n. Tis a shame we don't have time for a little blood ritual. The moons look right for it."

"Maybe once we've completed our task here," she conceded. "For now, have the raiding party prepare to scout the jungle. And keep the ruckus down. Just because they don't have ears don't mean the thralls can't hear us coming."

As if sensing her captain's unease, Katixa leaned in closer to avoid being overheard by the rest of the approaching raiding party. "Aye, Cap'n. Your crew knows their duty."

At this, Skarre turned to face her first mate, the briefest moment of annoyance quickly giving way to recognition, then to a small smile. "You're right, Katixa. I leave their oversight to you."

Katixa held up a hand between her and her captain, a gesture of familiarity only earned by decades of shared bloodshed. "Don't worry, my queen. You'll make that bag o' bones spill his secrets."

Skarre smiled. "Just make sure you get me where I need to go."

Katixa returned a wolfish grin that conveyed her eagerness for violence. "Aye, Cap'n."

She turned to the gathered raiders, who now formed a circle at the base of the quarterdeck stairs. "You heard your cap'n, maggots. Into the jungle! Time to crack some skulls."

F&F INTEL: SKARLOCKS

Skarlocks are among the most intelligent of Cryxian thralls, considered among the finest products of the necromantic arts. Where lesser thralls are essentially mindless and only capable of the simplest of actions, skarlocks have sophisticated and complex minds. They are capable of deeper understanding, making cunning assessments based on observations, and executing layered conditional commands. Their minds become more nuanced over decades of performing the will of their masters, and they develop distinct personalities and mannerisms.

Despite this, skarlocks are not, in fact, self-willed, as they lack a soul, unlike certain other more advanced undead. The intelligence of a skarlock is entirely artificial. In many cases, their quirks are lingering echoes of traits once possessed by those whose bodies were used to create them. In other cases, their personalities arise from accumulated and haphazardly assembled fragments of the minds of their masters. An old skarlock may think of itself as a complete and independent being, but in all cases, each is powerless to do anything but obey those who created and control them. Any apparent agency is a self-delusion.

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The rustling of windblown leaves masked the soft tread of the raiders as they moved through the undergrowth. As Skarre's party advanced deeper into the small island, the familiar sounds of crashing ocean waves faded to give way to the humming of native insects and the cries of nocturnal birds. The tall jungle trees blocked most light, enveloping everything under their thick, twisted branches in darkness. Despite this, the veteran raiding party moved smoothly, relying on other senses to compensate for the shadows.

The resonant staccato of jungle creatures quieted until all was eerily silent. The energies of a dark ritual would have this effect on the environment. They must be getting close.

Katixa and her raiders had gone ahead to make way for her arrival, leaving Skarre alone. She heard the faint sound of whipping steel followed by something thudding to the earth. Then she heard it again, this time just beyond a nearby bush.

Skarre pushed through the foliage and came upon the mutilated corpse of a mechanithrall. A lacerator had torn apart its reanimated body, severing limbs and leaving deep gashes in its sickly flesh. Pleased with her crew's efficiency at neutralizing this sentry, Skarre continued on, every few yards coming across another destroyed mechanithrall in a macabre trail of breadcrumbs.

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Soon Skarre came upon her crew crouched and hiding at the edges of a clearing. She followed suit, kneeling next to Katixa and another senior raider. Katixa pointed toward the opposite side of the clearing.

After a few moments, Skarre saw them: a squad of armored figures moving in the brush. The dried skin pulled taut across their skulls was covered in animating runes. Bane warriors, heavily armored and more dangerous than any mechanithrall.

Using a small branch, Skarre drew an attack plan in the dirt, a simple flanking maneuver that nevertheless demanded careful timing. She gestured to each of the assembled raiders, indicating their various positions on the diagram. Then the raiders dispersed, spreading left and right along the perimeter of the clearing in two equal groups. Waiting several long breaths, Skarre locked eyes with her first mate and gave the slightest nod. The Satyxis emerged from the trees to strike.

Six Satyxis cut down half as many bane warriors in seconds. Another half-dozen raiders engaged the remaining banes. The mere proximity of these void-born warriors sapped the vitality of the living, but by working together to exploit their opponents' defenses, the Satyxis maintained the upper hand.

With the success of the initial assault, Skarre stood back with Katixa and a few hand-chosen raiders to await the next step in the conflict. Skarre had commanded banes in battle before. They were cunning and ruthless, but death had robbed them of the solidarity and kinship needed to fight with passion.

The last remaining bane warriors pulled back into the brush, only to immediately give way to a full unit of bane knights marching in tandem, polearms and shields held ready while their spectral forms passed insubstantially through the jungle foliage. Following them was another full squad of warriors, a dark standard held aloft next to the bane in command of both units.

Without prompting, the forward raiders pulled back, while from out of the trees on both sides of the enemy the remaining Satyxis sprang forth, flanking the oncoming banes from two directions. Skarre and her retinue joined the central raiders, and with a gesture of her cutlass Takkaryx, the pirate queen ordered everyone forward. They joined the battle in earnest.

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Slaying the already-dead did not provide the same thrill as murdering the living. Skarre reminded herself that their purpose had the highest stakes, not only because of the dire consequences she sensed beneath her vision but because interfering with Asphyxious was perilous. She could risk neither Silshade fleeing nor his destruction before she learned his purpose. As a skarlock, he could communicate with his master even at a great distance, potentially alerting the lich of the pirate queen's interference.

So, instead of unleashing a wild torrent of arcane power, Skarre relied on her skill with the blade. She made an upward thrust, driving Takkaryx's steel tip through the bane knight's skull. She yanked her blade free in time to parry a second bane's shield, preventing it from fracturing her jaw. The same bane attempted an arcing strike with its lance, but Skarre stepped in to smash her great horns into the warrior's breastplate, buckling its armor and toppling it off its feet. A casual flick of Takkaryx separated its skull from the rest of its body.

To her left, a large group of banes moved to engage her but were met by Katixa and her warriors. Each of Skarre's forces held a blood razor, a long and wickedly curved ceremonial dagger empowered by blood magic. Katixa held the distinction of being able to wield a blood razor in each hand, a feat beyond most. Two banes converged on her with heavy axes, forcing her to contort to dodge their blows, stepping between them as they swung. She plunged a blade up into the skull of each bane then turned to face two more bearing down. Her blood razors were now charged with the powers of death, and they blurred as she struck. The banes' skulls shattered like pottery; their armored bodies collapsed to the ground.

Hurrying now, Skarre unsheathed her dagger Bloodwurm. She cut deep gashes on her palm, and harnessed the power of her spilled blood to increase her strength and that of several of those around her before heading straight at the remaining foes. In moments, she had dispatched four banes single-handedly, eventually coming upon their officer. With an upward swing, she cleft the bane in half from its right hip to its left pauldron in a single devastating stroke.

For a moment, silence returned. Even their labored breathing was muffled. Then the gathered raiders moved into the jungle toward their true quarry once more.



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Silshade's clawed hands quivered with anticipation as he placed the opened soul cage onto the dais. It took a few moments for the energies contained within the soul cage, submerged and untapped for centuries, to reawaken. Despite his perfect implementation of his master's calculations, at times like these Silshade always felt a glimmer of anxiety. After a moment's pause, he addressed one of the five bane warriors surrounding the dais in a loose circle.

"You there, the one with the scratched armor," he said.

Two nearby banes turned to face each other, their exposed skulls incapable of demonstrating their confusion.

"Not you. *You*. The one with the tarnished chest plate and no self-respect," Silshade said.

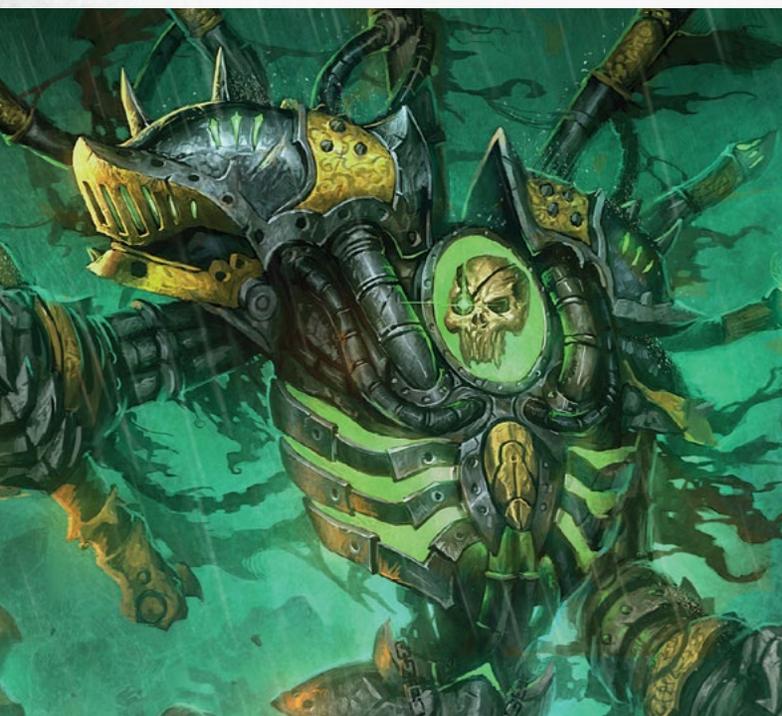
A third bane, wearing rough-shod plate mail, stood awkwardly at attention.

"Yes, you. A little to the right."

As the bane moved into position, the obsidian stone at the center of the dais came to life. A bright green glow emanated from beneath, moving up the ten-foot-tall pillar at the center. Near the top, a horrific stone face with an exposed tongue glowed with the same energy. The sickening glow then slowly subsided. Energy still hummed in the stones beneath the skarlock.

"Success!" he hissed.

Silshade concentrated on his connection to his master. The baleful green energy emanating from Silshade's eyes and mouth shifted into a violet hue.



The image of Iron Lich Asphyxious took form in his mind, but he could perceive little of his master's surroundings. The space seemed empty but for a shadow nearby. The warwitch Deneghra, no doubt. One more witness to Silshade's glory, he mused.

"Master, it is I, your humble servant," Silshade said.

"Ah, yes. Silshade. I trust your mission to the resonance site proved a success?" the iron lich asked.

"Yes, Master. We arrived at the island less than three hours ago and immediately set to the task. Just as with all three previous sites, the Orgoth structure on this island reacted once it was fed soul energy."

"One moment, Silshade." Asphyxious became blurry, difficult to see and hear. The skarlock waited, trying to restrain his impatience. Soon the iron lich's image returned to the skarlock's mind. "Vociferon has verified your findings. It appears the soul you fed to the Orgoth cairn has transferred to my location."

Vociferon, that wretched cur. No, not even he could ruin this day.

"You have done well," Asphyxious said. "This success pleases your master. Return to the Thornwood at once."

"Thank you, Master. I cannot tell you what it means to me to hear you say those words—" Silshade began, but before he could continue, his connection to Asphyxious ended, and the skarlock's skullfire reverted back to its normal green.

Silshade turned to his banes, only to find they inexplicably lay collapsed as a heap of discarded bones and armor plates.

The skarlock saw he was surrounded by several Satyxis.

"What is the meaning of this?" Silshade snarled.

"Look, Cap'n," said one of the pirates; she was holding a pair of large, ornate daggers. "We saved you one."

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Skarre stepped past her crew and took a moment to regard the skarlock. Its armor was more ornate than many of its kind, and even its bearing belied its greater presence and will. But even as the skarlock began to spew self-righteous invectives, her eyes went to the dais behind it.

At once, her vision of the dark wings of the Dragonfather spreading across Immoren came rushing back. No. Not the wings of Toruk, rightful God of Caen. These wings weren't *casting* shadow—they were *of* shadow. They weren't diminished or driven back by the peculiar green glow at the center but instead sought to surround and enclose it.

New images arose in her mind. She witnessed a temple of ancient design rising from the broken earth, holding within it an even older source of power. A gathering of armies battled at the foot of this great edifice, each death causing the shadows to multiply around them. Next, she saw a warrior's silhouette that was as red as blood and wearing a crown of ravens' feathers.

It plunged a broken sword into an albino lion's breast. The imagery was strange, but she could sense the meaning beneath the symbols. It suggested a ritual of great power, a convergence of energies that would change fate. Above them all, Asphyxious.

As she came to, Skarre turned to face the skarlock. She placed her gauntleted hand around its throat and slammed it against one of the pillars on the outer dais.

"You will not stop him, Ravenmane. His power is absolute," it rasped at her in a dry and arrogant voice.

"Tell me, skarlock—what does he plan to do with all those souls?" Her voice was filled with barely restrained fury. "How does this serve the Dragonfather?"

The skarlock looked directly at the pirate queen, its blazing eyes conveying its pride and condescension. "Fool. All the souls of Urcaen will belong to Asphyxious. As for Toruk, how can the father of wyrms stand against the new god of death?"

Without hesitation, Skarre bashed its skull into the cold obsidian, shattering its head into little more than dust.

The gathered Satyxis stood silently, waiting for their captain and queen. It was Katixa who broke the silence. "Cap'n?"

Skarre Ravenmane turned back to her crew, her features hard set against the dangers they were about to face. "Back to the ship. We sail to save Cryx from itself."

Katixa stepped forward to stand next to her queen, a fearsome smile spreading across her face. "Do you think they'll give us a heroes' parade in Blackwater?"

AFTERMATH: SKARRE'S WARNING

The clandestine journey of the *Widower* and Skarre's discovery after investigating Silshade's actions on Asphyxious' behalf set in motion a complex and escalating chain of events that led to a massive shake-up in the upper strata of Cryxian leadership. The first of these was sparked by Skarre bringing her discovery to Lich Lord Daeamortus, one of the thirteen rulers of the Nightmare Empire.

Daeamortus was also ostensibly Asphyxious' superior. He and Terminus had been the two lich lords responsible for the Scharde Invasions, which had landed substantial assets on the mainland, actions in which Asphyxious took a key role as the iron lich in charge of establishing the new mainland bases. Asphyxious served as the most highly placed and prominent of Daeamortus' subordinates. This meant that his potentially treasonous actions would be that lich lord's responsibility.

Without Skarre's vision and the choices she made, Asphyxious might well have succeeded in his goal. The shape of Cryx—and perhaps Immoren itself—would have been very different. Even with her interference, Asphyxious proved to be cunning and adaptive. He would soon rise to considerable power, if not in the manner he had originally planned.

THE TRAITOR WITHIN

The capture of Merywyn by Kommandant Gurvaldt Irusk would mark the end of the Llaeese War and a singular triumph for Khador. The siege of the capital had been protracted and tense, but the final assault was executed efficiently. The Llaeese defenders, though courageous and fierce, proved incapable of preventing an incursion once their Cygnaran allies withdrew from the city.

Khador had committed to a simultaneous three-pronged assault that effectively scattered and divided the city's defenders. The speed with which Winter Guard and Iron Fang pikemen seized the city's major roads and advanced on the wealthiest districts eroded any will to resist among those governing nobles who had retreated to their estates. By the 12th of Rowen, Prime Minister Deyar Glabryn quickly offered the complete surrender of the Llaeese government, and many of his peers joined in the chorus, promising to cooperate and lay down their arms.

What some forgot in subsequent years was the large number of nobles who did not stand down and who continued to offer defiance. Indeed, there was considerable outrage over how quickly the prime minister had surrendered. To many, this seemed a cowardly act. Those living outside Merywyn and even in the city's outer districts had endured hardship and suffering for weeks at the hands of the invaders, and yet they continued to fight. It seemed as though Merywyn's aristocracy folded the instant Khadoran boots stepped on the streets of their neighborhoods.

It would later be revealed that Deyar Glabryn had been deeply complicit in the invasion and paved the way for the Khadoran seizure of Llael. For at least five years, he had been in communication with agents of the High Kommand and Great Vizier Blaustavya's ministry. They had persuaded him that their conquest of Llael was unavoidable and that his only hope to preserve lives was to cooperate.

Not only did Glabryn feed vital intelligence to the High Kommand, he actively worked to undermine the defenses of Llael. Under his influence, the military budget was slashed, and soldiers were reallocated away from the western fortifications. His lobbying convinced many of Llael's nobles that the expense of maintaining a large standing army hurt Llael's economy and was unnecessary so long as they could rely on Cygnar's support.

Indeed, he also did what he could to convince the Cygnaran generals that the upkeep of their soldiers in Llael was creating a cost burden on their hosts. That Glabryn had forewarning of the invasion was proven in the eyes of many when, just days before the invasion, he sent his wife and eldest daughter on a diplomatic mission to Caspia. There they would safely wait out the war.

Glabryn's treachery was contrasted by the actions of dozens of other nobles who proved willing to fight and die to defend Llael. After the surrender of Merywyn, thirty-seven of the kingdom's elite stood defiant before their conquerors. They were imprisoned, tried by Irusk and his officers, and then put to death as a demonstration of what would happen to any who failed to comply.