



Hazergal soared over the barren abyssal plains of Vrack, reveling in the singing wind as it danced around him. His vrock body, streamlined and aerodynamic, cut through the air with knife-like precision despite its owner's lack of experience on the wing. The ground below stretched into limitless perpetuity, broken only by a chain of towering black mountains on the far distant horizon.

Ahead, rising from the smooth monotony of the abyssal plain, a foreboding tower of black stone loomed. The bleak edifice was ungainly, ugly and coarse, lacking any aesthetic grace, much like its owner, the unlikely conqueror Hedrenatherax. Behind Hedrenatherax's abode lay Hazergal's



destination, the shattered ruins of Pyrak's once grand, floating citadel. It had been pulled from the air when Hedrenatherax assumed control of Vrack. Its ivory white pillars and soaring battlements now lay in ignoble ruin, infested with minor demons like vermin in a peasant's hovel.

Returning to the domain of Pyrak – which now belonged to Hedrenatherax – was difficult for the former mortal. Many painful memories lurked in the dust-laden air or howled along with banshee screech of the wind. It was here his nightmarish ascent to gods knows what had begun. He remembered clearly the terror he had felt on entering Pyrak's audience chamber that first time. How impotent and alone he had felt, laying there on the cold stone of the demon lord's abode, listening to the great fiend describe his doom.

Hazergal neared Hedrenatherax's tower unchallenged. The aerial presence on the plains of Vrack was much diminished since Pyrak's death. Most of the former demon lord's vrock had defected to the service of Pazuzu rather than serve the new, oafish master of Vrack.

A small flock of quasits hovered over Hedrenatherax's abode. The only flying creatures Hazergal had seen since he had returned to Vrack. The tiny demons scattered in terror as the former archmage neared, screeching and cursing in Abyssal.

Hazergal glanced down at Hedrax – the name Hedrenatherax had given his castle – as he passed over it. He noted only a token force of demons manning the battlements, mostly babau armed with long spears. He saw only one demon of higher station, a fat, toad-like hezrou, squatting atop one of the four towers of Hedrax, casually consuming the corpse of a babau. None of the

Tides of Chaos Preview

demons paid any attention to the lone vrock flying overhead.

Hazergal's return to Vrack was orchestrated by the rogue horned devil and the former archmage's newest "benefactor," the ancient demon lord Pazuzu. Gemnez, who still served Hedrenatherax as steward and major domo, had led the fledgling demon lord away from his domain and into an ill-advised meeting with a powerful Archodaemon called Yaghur Hod.

Desperate to solidify his power base, Hedrenatherax had been easily swayed to make the journey to Hades and beseech aid from the mighty Yaghur Hod. Gemnez, of course, had secretly contacted the Archodaemon beforehand, and had arranged for Hedrenatherax's destruction. The price of such aid must have been staggering, and Gemnez would not divulge to Hazergal or Pazuzu what the Archodaemon's assistance had cost.

Yaghur Hod had been imprisoned by celestials upon the plane of Elysium for countless eons, and his recent freedom and loss of influence upon his own plane, had made him susceptible to Gemnez's advances. However, Yaghur Hod was no bumbling fool like Hedrenatherax, and even Gemnez's oily skills would only motivate the mighty daemon so far.

Gemnez's reasons for leading Hedrenatherax to Hades – and what likely be the demon lord's doom – were twofold. Firstly, and most obviously, the destruction of Hedrenatherax would allow Hazergal and Gemnez to assume control of Vrack. This would grant Hazergal the space and freedom to explore his budding powers, in which the rouge devil was keenly interested.

Secondly, Hedrenatherax's current absence had allowed Hazergal to return to Vrack unmolested. This provided the former mortal the chance to further secure the loyalty of Pazuzu, who had recently proved to be a very powerful ally.

Pazuzu's aid would certainly be invaluable to Hazergal and Gemnez if they were to solidify their own rule on Vrack in the likely event that Hedrenatherax was destroyed by Yaghur Hod.

Of course, no one really knew just how powerful Hedrenatherax was. His powers were untested, and there was the off chance that he might actually slay Yaghur Hod and become even more powerful in the process. Gemnez had, of course, provided for this unlikely event. Hazergal's trip to Vrack coincided with the demon lord's absence, and if Hedrenatherax returned, the former archmage would still be in possession of the item Pazuzu desired – the demon blade *Fiendbleeder*.

Hazergal surmised that *Fiendbleeder* would still be in the ruins of Pyrak's citadel. Gemnez had told him that the blade had rejected Hedrenatherax during the former balor's battle with his master, and it was likely that he had left the blade where it lay. If this were true, then it would be a simple task to enter the ruins, find the blade, and escape back to Pazuzu's realm. If, however, Hedrenatherax had somehow contrived a way to keep *Fiendbleeder*, then Hazergal would have to find some way into Hedrax. A daunting proposition to say the least.

Once past Hedrax, Hazergal descended rapidly to the ground. Landing was still a bit tricky, and he had had to resort to *feather fall* spells on a number of occasions to avoid a painful and embarrassing re-acquaintance with the ground. This time, however, he managed to flare his wings in just the right way, slowing his momentum, and allowing him to touch down in a more or less perfect landing.

The jumbled ruins of Pyrak's floating citadel thrust up from the windswept plane like the bleached bones of some great beast. The citadel lay on its side, its collapsed towers and battlements



Tides of Chaos Preview

creating a deep labyrinth of tunnels, perfect to hide the scores of lesser demons that now inhabited the once mighty edifice. Hazergal had little to fear from individual dretch or babau, although in great numbers they could present a very real threat.

Hazergal moved towards the ruins, his eyes scanning the tumbled masonry for an entrance large enough to admit him. He knew that *Fiendbleeder* would likely be in Pyrak's audience chamber and throne room, where his battle with Hedrenatherax had taken place. Hazergal remembered this room clearly. It was there that he had been brought after his capture on the gateway plane of Abrigor. He remembered clearly laying on his back, his power throttled and impotent by the magical color around his neck. He remembered looking up through the great transparent ceiling of the massive room...*the ceiling*, Hazergal thought suddenly. *I can get in that way.*

Instead of winding his way through the broken ruins of the citadel, Hazergal could simply fly to the top, search for the great transparent ceiling, and smash his way through. He spread his wings and vaulted into the air, climbing the two hundred feet to the top of the ruins. He perched precariously on one of the citadel's towers, digging his talons into the stone to keep his balance. It didn't take him long to locate Pyrak's throne room. It stood prominently in the middle of the ruins, a great glass dome, like a transparent blister on the surface of the bone-white stone.

Negotiating the ruins was another matter entirely. The citadel rested on its side, making it exceedingly difficult to get to the throne room without clinging to the masonry like an insect, or through a controlled fall of some kind. Hazergal had nowhere near the expertise with his wings to accomplish such a descent, but he did have an almost unlimited array of magic at his disposal.

A simple spell sprang to mind, appearing at the fore of his consciousness as if he had plucked it from a well-indexed library. Hazergal aimed his body at the transparent dome of the throne room

and then stepped off the tower into empty air. Instead of plummeting to this doom, he floated slowly, descending at a very manageable rate. He used the projecting crenellations, towers, and other shattered pieces of the citadel to guide and aim his descending body toward his destination. Just before Hazergal reached the transparent dome, another simple spell rolled off his tongue. This incantation allowed him to "stick" to the dome and clamber over the slick surface like an insect.

Hazergal was prepared to unleash a very powerful spell to disintegrate a portion of the glassy dome, but soon saw that there was no need. The citadel's impact with the earth had fractured the dome in many places, and there were a number of large holes in the transparent material. Hazergal moved, spider-like, over to the nearest breach and jumped through. He activated another *feather fall* spell on the way down, and reached the interiors of the throne room without so much as whisper.

The manner in which the citadel had come to rest after its meteoric plummet to the ground made the interior of Pyrak's throne room a bizarre sight to the say the least. The "floor" was no the east wall, while the inside of the transparent dome made up the west wall. The ceiling and floor blended the transparent dome and what had been the east and west walls of the room, creating a curious double-bowl shape above and below. Pyrak's great black throne projected from the east wall, while the rows of carved columns created an odd set of stone bars that ran the length of the room. The great double doors that led into the thorn room now dominated the southern wall. They hung open drunkenly, exposing the thick darkness of the ruins beyond.

Hazergal's *spider climb* spell was still active, and would remain so for hours. This allowed him to move about the room unimpeded. He clambered about, searching amidst the shattered masonry that had been knocked free from the walls and carved columns. He found two skeletons, both of which had suffered horrendous wounds.

Tides of Chaos Preview

The first skeleton was of a large, winged fiend. It did not belong to any type of demon or devil he was familiar with, although it certainly featured aspects of both fiendish races. The death stroke was difficult to determine, for the beast has suffered what appeared to be dozens of slashing wounds. Bones in the skeleton's chest, arms, and legs had been hacked neatly in twain. Death could have been from blood loss, shock, or more than likely, significant trauma to a major organ.

The second skeleton, which Hazergal found near the south wall, was much easier to identify. It was, or had been, a marilith. Hazergal remembered Gemnez telling him about Heskera, Pyrak's marilith general, slain by Hedrenatherax moments after his ascension to demon lord. The fat devil had lamented her death, for he believed that she would have been a valuable ally.

The cause of Heskera's death was painfully simple to identify. Hazergal found her skeleton in two separate pieces. The spine had been shorn neatly in half just below the waist. He also noticed a wide, black stain on the east wall, on what had been the section of floor where Heskera had died and bled out.



Hazergal continued to search the large room, but it was soon obvious that what he was looking for was not there. *Fiendbleeder* was not in the throne room, nor was Pyrak's corpse, although it was very likely that Hedrenatherax had claimed the body of his former master as a trophy of his conquest.

Damn! Hazergal cursed silently. He had no desire to attempt a furtive infiltration of a demon lord's abode. An attempt to enter Hedrax alone would likely end in his destruction, no matter what kind of power he commanded. The castle housed thousands of minor demons, a threat he could likely deal with on a battlefield where he could smash groups of lesser fiends with powerful magics. But alone, in a confined space, he could be overwhelmed. It would be a battle of attrition, and he would almost certainly slay hundreds before they brought him down, and the demons of Hedrax *would* bring him down eventually.

Hazergal turned his formidable intellect to the problem of entering Hedrax, although his options were limited to say the least. He could return to Pazuzu's realm and beseech aid from the mighty demon lord, but he loathed putting himself further in debt to the great fiend. A frontal assault on the castle was ridiculous, even for him. Certainly, he could slay many demons, but the walls of Hedrax were thick, and if he were to alert demons there to his presence, they would focus all of their considerable resources upon him. Slipping into the castle unnoticed presented another problem.

He could, of course, mask his presence with magic, but demons were notoriously perceptive, even the lesser ones, and it was likely he would be noticed before he could reach his destination. Which led him to the other difficulty he faced. He had no idea where Hedrenatherax would keep *Fiendbleeder*. Even if he penetrated Hedrax's many defenses, fumbling blindly through the keep would certainly not help him achieve his goal, and would likely lead to detection and a lethal confrontation.

Hazergal was saved the necessity of choosing one of the less-than-optimal methods of entering

Tides of Chaos Preview

Hedrax by a guttural voice behind him, from the direction of the throne room's entryway.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here, my pets. It's an itsy-bitsy vrock, all by his lonesome." The voice contained a gurgling, slopping resonance that was painful to here.

Hazergal spun around to see a massive babau demon standing in the shadows beyond the immense double doors. The babau was surrounded by nearly a dozen dretches, and each of the small, flabby demons was eyeing Hazergal with obvious hunger.

Hazergal narrowed his eyes at the babau, and brought a powerful spell to mind. The babau was the largest of its kind he had ever seen, easily as tall as Hazergal, although very gaunt.

"What do you want, babau?" Hazergal asked, pushing as much menace and condescension into his voice as possible.

"What does Igyx want?" the babau asked, pointing to its own slime covered body. "Igyx needs to feeds his pets. They're awful hungry. Aren't you, my lovelies?"

The pack of dretches began to mutter and fawn around the babau's feet, heedlessly burning themselves on the caustic slime coating the babau's body.

"That's rich, *urghling*," Hazergal said, using the Abyssal slang word for a lesser demon. It translated roughly to "worthless fecal matter." "How do you suppose a pack of dretches and *you* would constitute even brisk exercise for one such as I."

"Oh, the vrock has some venom in his spleen," Igyx said, chuckling. "But that just makes him taste better, doesn't it my pets?"

The babau spoke to the dretches like a pampered noble woman might coo to a small dog. It was revolting.

"Look, Igyx," Hazergal said. "I am searching for something, and if you tell me where it is, I won't destroy you. I shall even reward you if you can help me."

"It wants to reward us, my lumpy ones," Igyx crowed to his fawning pack of dretches. "But its flesh is all the reward we need."

The dretches, as if compelled by a mental command from their master, surged forward. The pack of lowly demons was more than fifty feet away from Hazergal, where he stood on the inside of the glass dome. The dretches, already slow moving, had to clamber clumsily over fallen masonry to get at their prey. When they reached the slick surface of the transparent dome, their tiny claws found no purchase, and they began to slip and fall on one another, creating a tangle knot of wriggling demonic flesh.

This slapstick advance gave Hazergal plenty of time to unleash a spell. When the final intonation of the powerful enchantment smote the air, a blazing, sword-shaped construct appeared before the vrock mage. With a wave of his hand the shimmering plane of force streaked toward the bumbling pack of dretches. It cut into the tangle of minor demons like a hot knife through butter, splashing their foul ichor in all directions.

"*Nooo! My pets!*" Igyx screamed. The babau's face was wrenched into a rictus of grief. Grief that Hazergal saw was very real.

Hazergal held up his hand, and the mage blade suddenly stopped in mid stroke. There were still half a dozen dretches still alive, although they were spattered in their pack mate's gore, making it difficult to tell the living from the dead.

"If I let the rest live, will you help me," Hazergal asked.

"Yes, Igyx will help. *Just don't huuuurt them anymore!*" the babau wailed, clutching his head in a bizarre display of maternal pain.

"Fine," Hazergal said, and with a short barked phrase, dismissed the mage blade. It blinked out of existence with a faint *pop*.

"Come back to me, my lovelies," Igyx beckoned to the dretches. They returned to him mewling and whining like a pack of mangy dogs.

"Now you will answer some questions," Hazergal said.

Tides of Chaos Preview

“Yes, ask your questions, vrock,” Igyx said.

“How long have you dwelled within these ruins?”

“Since the master pulled the other master’s house down.”

“There was a sword in this room,” Hazergal said. “A great black sword.”

“Yes, *Fiendbleeder* was here. Master Pyrak kept it here always.”

Hazergal brightened. “Do you know where it is?”

“The other master took it. He took it to his new house,” Igyx replied. “Why do you want the sword? It is too strong. Too smart.”

“It does not matter why I need it,” Hazergal said, dismissing Igyx’s question. “Do you know where Hedrenatherax keeps it?”

“Yes, Igyx takes his pets to look at the sword... and the great master.”

“You’ve seen *Fiendbleeder!*” Hazergal burst out. “How. How did you get into Hedrax?” It was quite obvious that the deranged babau was not one of Hedrenatherax’s servants, and if he had seen the sword, then he had gotten into the castle without the demon lord’s knowledge.

“There is a tunnel. My pets dug it for me. Didn’t you, my scruffy ones?” Igyx squatted down

and caressed his dretches, scratching behind their ears, and eliciting a chorus of pleased mewling and muttering.

Hazergal shuddered in revulsion. “Can you take me to this tunnel?”

Igyx looked up, the babau’s eyes narrowed. It sensed an advantage. “What does it offer Igyx for the pain it has caused my pets? Why should I help it?”

Enough of this nonsense, Hazergal thought, anger flashing bright in his eyes. He coughed a single powerful arcane syllable and the dretch nearest Igyx exploded. The detonation spread dretch gore in a radius of thirty feet, covering its master and the remaining dretches with dripping, greasy ichor.

Igyx screamed. His voice climbed in octaves until it reached a near earsplitting shriek. When the scream faded, the babau clutched the clotted remains of the detonated dretch to his chest and sobbed.

“You’ve got five left, Igyx,” Hazergal said. “I can pop them one at a time or all at once, your choice.”

“NO!” the babau howled. “Igyx will show you.”