

INFERNO!

TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



Issue 1

INFERNO!

TM

WELCOME TO THE debut issue of *Inferno!*, the first ever Black Library publication. This is bound to become a collector's edition, so I'd advise you to go back immediately and buy another two or three copies whilst you still can – it'll be no use feeling bitter in years to come when this magnificent tome is changing hands for hundreds of thousands of pounds. Don't say I didn't warn you...

'So what's this all about then?' I hear you ask. Well, for years the fantasy worlds of Games Workshop have been crying out to be further illuminated and illustrated through exciting fiction and graphic comic strips. Our games simply don't have the room for rip-roaring adventure stories and the like, so I just had to go ahead and devote a whole book to them. Well, almost. There are lots of other marvellous items crammed in here too:




Imperial reports, 3D battle maps, full page character illustrations and so on. Exciting, eh?

Don't be confused: you will not find a single game rule in these pages (not even one) so there's no point in looking. If, however, you're pining for a new Gotrek and Felix story from the legendary William King, or get uncontrollably excited by the very concept of a Dark Angels comic strip from ex-*Image* illustrator Logan Lubera, or if your idea of fun is spending ages pouring over Ralph Horsley's incredible 3D map of Gisoreux, this is definitely the book for you.

Issue 1, as its very title suggests, is the first – suggesting, you may think, that there are perhaps more issues to come. You wouldn't be wrong either! Upcoming are further stories from William King, Jonathan Green and many others. More action-crammed comic scripts from names such as Gordon Rennie and Dan Abnett, and illustrated by the likes of Dave Pugh, Colin MacNeil and Kev Hopgood. More exciting reports, communiqués, character studies, technical cutaway diagrams and all kinds of other great stuff are even now being discussed and developed in the nerve centre of our Black Library here in the heart of Nottingham.

So, abandon all rules ye who enter here. This book is packed from cover to cover with tales of Fantasy & Adventure. Dive into the *INFERNO!*



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THE MUTANT MASTER

By William King

WHEN HE HEARD the snap of the twig, Felix Jaeger froze on the spot. His hand groped instinctively for the hilt of his sword, as his keen eyes searched his surroundings and spotted nothing. It was useless, Felix knew – the light of the fading sun barely penetrated the thick canopy of leaves overhead and the forest's dense undergrowth could have hidden the approach of a small army. He grimaced and ran his fingers nervously through his long blonde hair. All of the peddler's warnings came back to him in a flash.

The old man had claimed there were mutants on the road ahead, packs of them, preying on all who travelled this route between Altdorf and Middenheim. At the time, Felix had paid no attention to him, for the peddler had been attempting to sell him a shoddy amulet supposedly blessed by the Grand Theogonist himself, a sure protection for pilgrims and wanderers – or so the merchant had claimed. He had already bought a small throwing dagger in a concealable wrist sheath from the peddler, and he had not felt inclined to part with more money. Felix rubbed his forearm where the sheath chafed, making sure the knife was still secure.

Felix wished he had the amulet now. It had most likely been a fake but at times like this any weary traveller on the dark roads of the Empire would feel the need for a little extra protection.

'Hurry up, manling,' Gotrek Gurnisson said. 'There's an inn in Blutdorf and my throat is as dry as the deserts of Araby.'

Felix regarded his companion. No matter how many times he looked upon the Dwarf, the Trollslayer's squat ugliness never ceased to astonish him. There was no single element that made Gotrek so

outstandingly repulsive, Felix decided. It wasn't the missing teeth, the missing eye or the long beard filled with particles of food. It wasn't the cauliflower ear or the quiltwork of old scars. It wasn't even the smell. No, it was the combination of them all that did it.

For all that, there was no denying that the Trollslayer presented a formidable appearance. Although Gotrek only came up to Felix's chest, and a great deal of that height was made up of the huge dyed crest of red hair atop his shaved and tattooed skull, he was broader at the shoulders than a blacksmith. In one massive paw, he held a rune-covered axe that most men would have struggled to lift with both hands. When he shifted his massive head, the gold chain that ran from his nose to his ear jingled.

'I thought I heard something,' Felix said.

'These woods are full of noises, manling. Birds chirp. Trees creak and animals scuttle everywhere.' Gotrek spat a huge gob of phlegm onto the ground. 'I hate woods. Always have. Remind me of Elves.'

'I thought I heard mutants. Just like the peddler told us about.'

'That so?' Gotrek showed his blackened teeth in what could have been a snarl or a smile, then he reached up and scratched under his eye-patch, rubbing the socket of his ruined left eye with his thumb. It was a deeply disturbing sight. Felix looked away.

'Yes,' he said softly.

Gotrek turned to face the woods.

'Any mutants there?' he bellowed. 'Come out and face my axe.'

Felix cringed. It was just like the Trollslayer to tempt fate like this. He was sworn to seek death in battle with deadly

monsters in order to atone for some unmentionable Dwarfish sin, and he wasted no opportunity to complete that quest. Felix cursed the drunken night he had sworn his oath to follow the Trollslayer and record his doom in an epic poem.

Almost in answer to Gotrek's shout there was a further rustling in the undergrowth, as if a strong wind had disturbed the bushes – only there was no breeze. Felix kept his hand clasped on his sword hilt. There was definitely something there and it was getting closer.

'I think you might be right, manling,' Gotrek smiled nastily. It occurred to Felix that he had known there was something there all along.

A horde of mutants erupted from the undergrowth, screaming oaths and curses and the vilest of obscenities. The sheer horror of their appearance threatened to overwhelm Felix's mind. He saw a repulsive slimy-skinned creature that hopped along like a toad. Something vaguely female scuttled along on eight spidery legs. A creature with the head of a crow and greyish feathers screeched a challenge. Some of the mutants had transparent skin through which pulsing organs were visible. They brandished spears, and daggers and what looked like rusty kitchen implements. One of them launched itself towards Felix, swinging a notched, blunt-edged cleaver.

Felix reached up and caught the creature's wrist, stopping the blade a moment before it crunched into his skull. He jabbed a knee into the monster's groin. As it bent double, he kicked it in the head, knocking it over. Its greenish vomit spewed all over Felix's boots before it rolled back into the undergrowth.

In the brief respite, Felix ripped his blade from its scabbard, ready to lay about him. He need not have bothered.

Gotrek's mighty axe had already cleaved a path of red ruin through their attackers. With one blow he cut down three more. Bones splintered under the impact. Flesh parted before the razor-sharp edge. The Trollslayer's axe flashed again. Two halves

of a severed torso flopped down, and, briefly unaware that it was already dead, tried to crawl away from each other. Gotrek's axe completed its upswing, severing the head of another mutant.

Appalled by the sudden carnage, the mutants fled. Some of them rushed past Felix into the woods on the far side, others turned and ran back into the dark undergrowth from which they had come.

Felix looked at Gotrek speculatively, waiting to see what the Trollslayer did. The last thing he wanted was for them to separate and pursue the creatures into the darkening forest. Their victory had been too easy. It all smacked of a trap.

'Must've sent the runts of this litter after us,' Gotrek observed, spitting on a mutant corpse. Felix looked down to see the Trollslayer was right. Very few of the dead looked as if they would have come up to Gotrek's chest, and none of them looked taller than the Trollslayer.

'Let's get out of here,' Felix said. 'These things smell awful.'

'Hardly worth the killing,' Gotrek grumbled back. He sounded deeply disappointed.



THE HANGED MAN was one of the most dispiriting inns Felix had ever visited. A tiny cheerless blaze flickered in the fireplace. The taproom smelled of damp. Mangy dogs gnawed at bones that looked as if they had been lost for generations in the carpet of filthy straw. The landlord was a villainous-looking individual, his face tracked with old scars, a massive hook protruding from the stump of his right hand. The potboy was a wall-eyed hunchback with an unfortunate habit of drooling into the beer as he poured it. The locals looked thoroughly miserable. Every one of them glanced at Felix as if he wanted to plunge a knife into the youth's back but were just too

depressed to summon up the energy.

Felix had to admit that the inn was appropriate for the village it served. Blutdorf was as gloomy a place as he had ever seen. The mud huts looked ill-tended and about to collapse. The streets seemed somehow empty and menacing. When they had finally intimidated the drunken gatekeeper into letting them enter, weeping crones had watched them from every doorway. It was as if the whole place had been overcome with grief and lethargy.

Even the castle brooding on the crags above the village appeared neglected and ill-cared for. Its walls were crumbling. It looked as if it could be stormed by a group of Snotlings armed with pointed sticks, which was unusual for a town which appeared to be surrounded by a horde of menacing mutants. On the other hand, Felix thought, even the mutants about here seemed a particularly unafraid bunch, judging by the attack they had attempted earlier.

He took another sip of his ale. It was the worst beer he had ever tasted, as thoroughly disgusting a brew as had ever passed his lips. Gotrek threw back his head and tipped the entire contents of the stein into his mouth. It vanished as fast as a gold purse dropped in a street of beggars.

'Another flagon of Old Dog Puke!' Gotrek called out. He turned and glared at the locals. 'Try not to deafen me with the sound of your mirth,' he bellowed.

The customers refused to meet his eye. They stared down into their beers as if they could discover the secret of transmuting into lead into gold there, if they only studied it hard enough.

'Why all the happy faces?' Gotrek enquired sarcastically. The landlord placed another flagon on the counter before him. Gotrek quaffed some more. Felix was gratified to note that even the Trollslayer made a sour face when he finished. It was a rare tribute to the nastiness of the ale. Felix had never seen the Dwarf evince the slightest discomfort or hesitation in drinking anything before.

'It's the sorcerer,' the landlord said suddenly. 'He's a right nasty piece of work. Things never been the same since he came an' took over the old castle. Since then we've 'ad nothin' but bother, what with the mutants on the road and all. Trade's dried up. No one comes here anymore. Nobody can sleep safe in their beds at night.'

Gotrek perked up at once. A nasty grin revealed the blacked stumps of his teeth. This was more to his liking, Felix saw.

'A sorcerer, you say?'

'Aye, sir, that he is – a right evil wizard.'

Felix saw that the customers were all glaring at the landlord strangely, as if he was speaking out of line, or saying something they had never expected to hear him say. Felix dismissed the thought. Maybe they were just frightened. Who wouldn't be, with a servant of the Dark Powers of Chaos in residence over their village?

'Mean as a Dragon with toothache, he is. Ain't that right, Helmut?'

The peasant the landlord addressed stood frozen to the spot, like a rat petrified by the gaze of a snake.

'Ain't that right, Helmut?' The landlord repeated.

'He's not so bad,' the peasant said. 'As evil sorcerers go.'

'Why don't you just storm the castle?' Gotrek asked. Felix thought that if the Dwarf couldn't guess the answer to that from the whipped-dog look of these poor clods, he was stupider than he looked.

'There's the monster, sir,' the peasant said, shuffling his feet and staring down at the floor once more.

'The monster?' Gotrek asked, more than a hint of professional interest showing in his one good eye. 'A big monster, I suppose.'

'Huge, sir. Twice as big as a man and covered in all sorts of nasty mut... mut... mut...'

'Mutations?' Felix suggested helpfully.

'Aye, sir, those things.'

'Why not send to Middenheim for help?' Felix suggested. 'The Templars of

the White Wolf would be interested in dealing with such a follower of Chaos.'

The peasants looked at him blankly. 'Dunno where Middenheim is, sir. None of us ever been more than half-a-league from Blutdorf. Who'd look after our wives if we left the village?'

'An' then there's the mutants,' another villager chipped in. 'Woods is full of them and they all serve the magician.'

'Mutants, as well?' Gotrek sounded almost cheerful. 'I think we'll be visiting the castle, manling.'

'I feared as much,' Felix sighed.

'You can't mean to attack the sorcerer and his monster,' one of the villagers said.

'With your help we will soon rid Blutdorf of this scourge,' Felix said shakily, ignoring the nasty look Gotrek threw him. The Trollslayer wanted no assistance in his quest for glorious death.

'No, sir, we can't help you.'

'Why not? Are you unmanly cowards?' It was a stupid question, but Felix felt he had to ask. It wasn't that he blamed the villagers. Under normal circumstances he would have been no more keen than they were to confront a Chaos Sorcerer and his pet monster.

'No, sir,' said the villager. 'It's just that he has our children up there – he's keeping them as hostages!'

'Your children?'

'Aye, sir, every last one of them. His monster and he came down and rounded them all up. There was no resisting either. When Big Norri tried, the creature tore his arms off and made him eat them. Nasty, it was.'

Felix did not like the glint that had entered the Trollslayer's eye. Gotrek's enthusiasm for getting to the castle and fighting the monster radiated across the room like heat from a large bonfire. Felix wasn't so certain. He found that he shared the villagers' lack of enthusiasm for the direct approach.

'Surely, you must want to free your children?' Felix asked.

'Aye, but we don't want to kill them. The magician will feed them to his monster if we gave him any lip.'

Felix looked over at Gotrek. The Trollslayer jerked his thumb meaningfully in the direction of the castle. Felix could see he was keen to be off, hostages or no hostages. With a sinking feeling, Felix realised that there would be no getting out of this. Sooner or later, he and the Dwarf were going to end up paying Blutdorf Keep a visit.

Desperately, he searched for a way of staving off the inevitable. 'This calls for a plan,' he said. 'Landlord, some more of your fine ale.'

The landlord smiled and fussed about at the bar pouring some more ale. Felix noticed that Gotrek was eyeing him suspiciously. He realised that he wasn't really showing the proper enthusiasm for their quest. The landlord came back and thumped down two more steins with an enthusiastic smile.

'One for the road,' Felix said, raising his ale jack. He swigged away at the beer, which tasted even fouler than it had previously. Because of the taste, he wasn't quite sure, but he thought there was a faint chemical tang to the beer. Whatever it was, a few more sips left him feeling dizzy and nauseous. He noticed that Gotrek had finished his ale and was calling for another. The landlord obliged and the Dwarf swigged it back in one gulp. His eyes widened, he clutched his throat and then he fell back as if pole-axed.

It took Felix a moment to register what had happened and he stumbled forward to examine his companion. His feet felt like lead. His head swam. Nausea threatened to overwhelm him. There was something wrong here, he knew, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was something to do with the ale. He had never seen the Trollslayer fall over before, no matter how much beer he drank. He had never felt so bad himself, not after so few beers. He turned and looked at the landlord. The man's outline wavered, as if Felix was seeing him through a thick fog. He pointed an accusing finger.

'You drugged... I mean drunk... no, I mean you drank our drugs,' Felix said and fell to his knees.

The landlord said, 'Thank Tzeentch for that. I thought they would never go down. I gave that Dwarf enough skavenroot to knock out a horse.'

Felix fumbled for his sword but his fingers felt numb and he fell forward into the darkness.

'Cost me a crown a pinch, as well,' the landlord muttered. His peevish voice was the last thing Felix remembered before unconsciousness took him. 'Still, Herr Kruger will pay me well for two such fine specimens.'



WAKE UP, MANLING!' The deep voice rumbled somewhere close to Felix's ear. He tried to ignore it, hoping that it would go away and let him return to his slumber.

'Wake up, manling, or I swear I will come over there and strangle you with these very chains.' There was a threatening note to the voice now that convinced Felix he'd better pay attention to it. He opened his eyes – and wished that he hadn't.

Even the dim light of the single guttering torch illuminating their cell was too bright. Its feeble glow hurt Felix's eyes. In a way, that was alright, because it made them match the rest of his body. His heartbeat thumped in his temples like a gong struck with a warhammer. His head felt like someone had used it for kickball practice. His mouth was desert dry and his tongue felt like someone had sandpapered it.

'Worst hangover I ever had,' Felix muttered, licking his lips nervously.

'It's not a hangover. We were dru—'

'We were drugged. I know.'

Felix realised that he was standing up. His hands were above his head and there were heavy weights attached to his ankles. He tried to bend forward to see what they were but found that he could

not move. He looked up to see that he dangled from manacles. The chains were attached to a great loop of iron set in the wall above him. He confirmed this by peering across the chamber and seeing that Gotrek was held the same way.

The Trollslayer dangled from his chains like a side of beef in a butcher's shop. His legs were not chained, though. His frame was too short to reach the ground. Felix could see that there were leg irons set in the wall at ankle height but the Dwarf's legs did not stretch that far.

Felix looked around. They were in a large chamber, paved with heavy flagstones. There were a dozen sets of chains and manacles set in the walls. An oddly distorted skeleton dangled from the farthest set. In the wall to the far left was a huge bench covered in alembics and charcoal burners, and other tools of the Alchemist trade. A huge chalk pentagram surrounded by peculiar hieroglyphics was inscribed in the centre of the room. At each junction of the pentacle was set a Beastman skull holding an extinguished candle made from black wax.

At the far right of the room, a flight of stone steps led up to a heavy door. There was a barred window in the door, through which a few shafts of light penetrated down into the gloom. Near the foot of the stairs Felix could see his sword and Gotrek's axe. He felt a brief surge of hope. Whoever had taken their weapons had not been very thorough. Felix could still feel the weight of the throwing dagger in the hidden sheath on his forearm. Of course, there was no way he could use it with his arms manacled, but it was somehow comforting to know it was there.

The air was thick and fetid. From the distance Felix thought he heard screams and chants and bestial roars. It was like listening to a combination of a lunatic asylum and a zoo. Nothing about their situation reassured Felix.

'Why did the landlord drug us?' Felix asked.

'He was in league with this sorcerer, obviously.'

'Or he was afraid of him.' If he could have, Felix would have shrugged. 'No matter, I wonder why we're still alive?'

A high-pitched tittering laugh answered that question. The heavy door creaked open and two figures blocked out the light. There was a brief flare as a lucifer was struck, then a lantern was lit and Felix could see the source of the mocking laughter.

'A good question, Jaeger, and one I will be only too pleased to answer.'

There was something very familiar about this voice, Felix thought. It was high-pitched and nasal and deeply unpleasant. He had heard it before.

Felix squinted across the chamber and made out the voice's owner. He was just as unpleasant as his voice. A tall, gaunt man, he wore faded and tattered grey robes, patched at the sleeves and elbows. Around his scrawny neck hung an iron chain bearing a huge amulet. His long thin fingers were covered in rune-encrusted rings and tipped with long blackened nails. His pale, sweating face was framed by a huge turned-up collar. He wore a skull-cap trimmed with silver.

Behind the man stood an enormous creature. It was huge, half again as tall as a man, and maybe four times as heavy. Perhaps once it had been human but now it was the size of an Ogre. Its hair had fallen out in great clumps, and massive pustules erupted from its scalp and flesh. Its features were twisted and hideous. Its teeth were like millstones. Its arms were even more muscular than Gotrek's, thicker around than Felix's thighs. Its hands were the size of dinner plates. Its callused, sausage-sized fingers looked like they could crush stone. It glared at Felix with eyes full of insane hatred. Felix found he could not meet the thing's gaze and he turned his attention back to the human.

The man's features were gaunt and lined. His eyes were the palest blue and bright with madness. They were hidden only slightly by his steel-framed pince-nez glasses. His nose was long and thin and tipped with an enormous wart. A drip of

mucous hung from his nose. He tittered again, sniffed to draw the drip back into his nostrils and then wiped his nose on his sleeve. Then, recovering his dignity, he threw his head back and strode purposefully down the stairs. The effect of impressive sorcerous dignity was spoiled a little when he almost tripped on the hem of his robe and fell headlong.

It was this last touch which stirred Felix's memory. It brought everything else into focus. 'Albericht?' He said. 'Albericht Kruger?'

'Don't call me that!' The robed man's voice approached a scream. 'Address me as "Master"!'

'You know this idiot, manling?' Gotrek asked.

Felix nodded. Albericht Kruger had been in a few of his philosophy classes at Altdorf University before he had been expelled for duelling. He had been a quiet youth, very studious, and was always to be found in the libraries. Felix has probably never exchanged more than a dozen words with him in the whole two years that they had studied together. He remembered also that Kruger had vanished. There had been a bit of a scandal about it – something to do with books missing from the library. Felix could remember that a few witch hunters from the Temple of Sigmar has shown interest.

'We were students together back in Altdorf.'

'That's enough!' screeched Kruger in his thin and annoying voice. 'You are my prisoners and you will do as I say for what remains of your pitiful lives.'

'We will do as you say for what remains of our pitiful lives?' Felix stared back at Kruger in astonishment. 'You've been reading too many Detlef Sierck melodramas, Albericht. Nobody speaks like that in real life.'

'Be quiet, Jaeger! That's enough. You were always too clever for your own good, you know. Now we'll see who's the clever one – oh yes!'

'Come on, Albericht, a joke's a joke. Let us out of here. Quick, before your master comes.'

'My master?' Kruger seemed puzzled.

'The sorcerer who owns this tower.'

'You idiot, Jaeger! I am the sorcerer.'

Felix stared in disbelief. 'You?'

'Yes, me! I have probed the mysteries of the Dark Gods and learned the source of all magical power. I have plumbed the secrets of Life and Death. I wield the mighty energies of Chaos and soon I will have total domination over the lands of the Empire.'

'I find that a little hard to believe,' Felix admitted honestly. The Kruger he had known back then had been virtually a non-entity, ignored by all the other students. Who would have guessed at the depths of megalomania that lurked in his head.

'Think what you will, Herr-clever-clogs-Jaeger with your la-di-da accent and your my-father-is-a-rich-merchant-and-I'm-too-good-for-your-sort manners. I have mastered the secrets of life itself. I control the alchemical secrets of Warpstone and understand the innermost secrets of the Art of Transmutation!'

Out of the corner of his eye, Felix could see Gotrek's huge muscles beginning to bulge as he strained against the chains that held him. His face was red and his beard bristled. His body was contorted, arched to brace his feet against the wall. Felix did not know what the Dwarf hoped to achieve. Anyone could see that these huge chains were beyond the strength of man or Dwarf to break.

'You've been using Warpstone?' That explained a lot, Felix thought. He did not know much about Warpstone but what he did know was disturbing enough. It was the raw essence of Chaos, the final and ultimate source of all mutations. Just a pinch of it was enough to drive a normal man mad. By his tone, it sounded like Kruger had consumed a barrel of it. 'You're insane!'

'That's what they told me back in Aلدorf, back at their University!' Spitte dripped from Kruger's mouth. Felix could see that his eyes glowed an eerie green, as if there were tiny marshlights behind the pupils. Vampire-like fangs

protruded from his gums. 'But I showed them. I found their forbidden books, all wrapped up in the vault. They said that they were not meant for the eyes of mortal man but I've read them, and they've done me no harm!'

'Yes, I can see that,' Felix muttered ironically.

'You think you're so clever, don't you, Jaeger? You're just like all the rest, all of them who laughed at me when I said I would be the greatest sorcerer since Teclis. Well, I'll prove you wrong. We'll see how smart you act once I have transformed you, the way I transformed Oleg here!'

He tapped the monster on the shoulder with paternal pride. It grinned like a dog whose stomach has been scratched by its master. Felix found the sight very disturbing. Behind them Gotrek was practically standing against the wall. His arms were at full stretch, the chains holding firm, leaving him parallel to the floor. The Trollslayer was blue in the face. His features were contorted in a grimace of rage and fury. Felix felt that something would have to give soon. Either the chains would break or the Trollslayer would burst a blood vessel. That might prove to be a mercy, Felix thought. He did not see how Gotrek could overcome the monster without his axe. The Slayer was strong, but this creature made him look like a scrawny child.

Kruger raised his arm, brandishing his staff. At the tip, Felix could see that a sphere of greenish Warpstone held in a lead claw. Felix could not help but notice that the hand that held the staff was scaly, and that its fingernails resembled the talons of a wild beast.

'It took me years to perfect the Spell of Transmutation, years,' Kruger hissed. 'You have no idea how many experiments I did. Hundreds! I laboured like a man possessed but at last I have the secret. Soon you will know it too.' The Chaos Sorcerer tittered. 'Alas, it will do you no good, for you will not be clever enough to speak. Still, you'll provide fine company for Oleg.'

The glowing tip of the sorcerer's staff came ever closer to Felix's face. He could see strange lights in its depth. Its surface seemed to shimmer and swirl like oil dropped on water. He could sense the terrible mutating power emerging from it. It radiated out of the Warpstone like heat from a glowing coal.

'I don't suppose begging for mercy would help?' Felix asked breezily. He was proud that he managed to keep his voice even.

Kruger shook his head. 'It's too late for that. Soon you will be even more of a witless dullard than you are now.'

'In that case, I have to tell you something.'

Gotrek's muscles bulged as he made one last superhuman effort, throwing himself forward like a swimmer diving headlong off a cliff.

'What's that, Jaeger?' Kruger leaned close to Felix's mouth.

'I never liked you either, you madman!'

Kruger looked like he was going to strike Felix with the staff but instead he just smiled, revealing his feral teeth.

'Soon, Jaeger, you will learn the true meaning of madness. Every time you look in the mirror.'

Kruger began to chant in a strange, liquid-sounding tongue. It was not Elvish but something even older and considerably more sinister sounding. Felix had heard it before, at other times when he and Gotrek had interfered with rites being performed by the followers of Chaos. Well, it looked as though this time the Forces of Chaos were going to have the last laugh. He and the Trollslayer would soon be joining their ranks, however unwillingly.

With every word Kruger chanted, the Warpstone glowed ever brighter. Its greenish glow drove back the gloom of the chamber and washed everything in its eerie light. Ectoplasmic tendrils emerged from the Warpstone. At first they resembled glowing mist, then congealed into something more solid. There was about them the suggestion of something loathsome and diseased. As Kruger brandished

his staff, its ectoplasmic emissions trailed behind it like the tail of a comet. He waved it around with grand sweeping gestures, as if with every wave the evil device gathered power.

His chanting now resembled insane shrieking. Sweat beaded the Chaos Sorcerer's forehead and dripped down his glasses. Oleg, the mutated monster, howled in unison with his master's chanting. His bass rumbling providing an eerie counterpoint to the spell. Felix felt his hair stand on end, when the chanting stopped and an eerie silence blanketed the dungeon.

For a moment, everything was still. Felix could hardly see, so dazzled was he by the light of the Chaos staff. He could hear his own heartbeat and Kruger's frantic breathing as he gasped for breath after completing his invocation. There was a strange metallic creaking, and a grinding of metal on stone. He opened his eyes to see one of Gotrek's chains whip free from the wall, then the Trollslayer tumbled forward with a curse, ending up dangling above the flagstones.

Kruger turned at the sound. The monster opened his mouth and let out an enormous bellow.

Felix groaned. He had hoped the Slayer would be able to make a run for his axe. With his weapon in his hand, Felix would have backed the Trollslayer against any monster. However, Gotrek still hung from one of the chains. All he could do was dangle there, while the monster ripped him limb from limb.

Kruger seemed to realise this at the same time as Felix. 'Get him!' he yelled to his monster.

Oleg surged forward and Gotrek lashed out with his chain. The heavy metal links whipped towards the huge mutant's eyes. Oleg howled with pain as the chain hit his face, then reeled backwards, crashing into Kruger. There was a snapping sound as Gotrek used his moment's grace to break his other chain free from the wall. Kruger's face went white. He lurched to his feet and scuttled for the stairs. The last Felix saw of him was his departing backside.

'Now there will be a reckoning!' Gotrek pronounced, his flinty voice guttural with rage.

The monster surged forward to meet the Trollslayer, reaching out with one ham-sized hand. Gotrek brought the chain flashing forward and down, hammering the metal into the creature's hand. Once more it backed off. Gotrek's one good eye squinted sideways as though measuring the distance between himself and his axe. Felix could almost read his mind. The distance was too far. If he turned his back and ran for his weapon, the monster's longer stride would enable it to overhaul him.

Perhaps he could back towards it. As always, Felix misread the strength of the Dwarf's lust for combat. Instead of backing off, he ran forward, swinging his chain in an eye-blurring arc. It smashed into the monster's chest, then a moment later Gotrek caught Oleg across the face with the second chain.

This time Oleg expected the pain. Instead of retreating, he advanced on towards the Trollslayer, scooping him up in a bear hug. Felix winced as he watched the giant mutant's arms constrict. Oleg's flexed biceps looked the size of ale-barrels. Felix feared that the Trollslayer's ribs would snap like rotten twigs.

Gotrek brought his head forward, butting Oleg in the face. There was a sickening crunch as Oleg's nose broke. Red blood spurted over Gotrek. Oleg howled with pain and cast the Dwarf across the room with one thrust of his huge arms. Gotrek smacked into the wall and fell to the ground with a clattering of chains. After a few seconds, the Trollslayer staggered unsteadily to his feet.

'Get your axe!' Felix shouted. The dazed Dwarf was in no condition to take his advice. Besides, Gotrek was out for blood. He staggered towards Oleg. The giant stood there, howling and clutching his nose. Then, hearing the Dwarf's reeling footsteps, he looked up and gave a mighty bellow of rage and pain. He rushed forward, hunkered down, arms outstretched, once more intending to

catch the Trollslayer in his death grip. Gotrek stood on swaying legs as the monster thundered towards him, irresistible as an runaway wagon. Felix did not want to look – the mutant was big enough to crush the Slayer beneath his elephantine feet. Horror compelled him to watch.

Oleg reached for Gotrek, his enormous arms closing, but at the last second the Slayer ducked and dived between his legs, turned and lashed out with the chain. It wound around the monster's ankle. Gotrek heaved. Oleg tripped and sprawled, and the chain unwound like a serpent.

Gotrek looped a length of chain around the mutant's throat. Oleg pushed himself to his feet, pulling Gotrek with him. The Trollslayer's weight tightened the grip of the chain around his neck. Using it to hold himself in place, Gotrek pulled himself up to behind Oleg's neck and continued to tighten the chain. The flesh turned white around the mutant's windpipe as the metal links bit into flesh. Felix could see that Gotrek intended to strangle the monster.

Slowly the thought percolated into the mutant's dim mind, and he reached up with both hands to try and unloose the grip of the metal noose that was killing him. He grasped at the chain and tried to work his fingers into the links but they were too big and the chain was gripped too tight. Then he tried to reach behind his head to grasp Gotrek. The Trollslayer ducked his head and pulled himself in tight. He pulled the chain backwards and forward like a saw now. Felix could see droplets of blood emerging where the links had bit.

Now Oleg's hand fastened in Gotrek's crest of hair. It held fast for a moment as Oleg tugged, then his fingers slipped loose on the bear fat ointment that held the crest together. Felix could see fear and frustration begin to appear in the monster's eyes. He could tell that the mutant was weakening. Now Oleg panicked, throwing himself backward at the wall, slamming Gotrek into the stone with sickening force. Nothing could

loosen the Slayer's grip. Felix doubted that death itself would make the Dwarf loose his hold now. He could see a fixed glazed look had entered Gotrek's eyes, and his mouth was half-open in a terrifying snarl.

Slowly Oleg weakened as his strength drained from him. He tumbled forward onto his hands and knees. A ghastly rattle emerged from his throat and he sank to the ground and was still. Gotrek tightened the noose one last time to make sure of his prey and then stood up, gasping and panting.

'Easy,' he muttered. 'Hardly worth the killing.'

'Get me down from here,' Felix complained.

Gotrek fetched his axe. In four strokes of the axe, Felix was free. He raced over and retrieved his sword. From up above, he heard the sound of windlasses turning, great metal doors being raised, and the howling of a bloodthirsty horde. Felix and Gotrek had just time to brace themselves before the door to the laboratory was thrown open and a tide of frenzied mutants swept down the stairs. Felix thought he recognised some of the creatures from the earlier battle. This was the place where the mutants came from.

One dived from the landing, its reptilian eyes glazed with bloodlust. Felix used a stop-thrust to take it through the chest, and then let his arm slump forward under the weight so that its corpse slid free from his blade. The tide of mutants flowed on, inexorably, pressed forward by their own bloodlust and the weight of those behind them. Felix found himself at the centre of a howling maelstrom of violence, where he and the Trollslayer fought back to back against the chaos-spawn.

Gotrek frothed at the mouth and lashed out in a great figure-of-eight with his blood-stained axe. Nothing could stand in his way. With the chains still hanging from his wrists, he carved a path of red ruin through the howling mob. Felix waded along in his wake, dispatching the fallen with single thrusts, stabbing the few mutants who got past the flailing axe.

On the landing above, Felix could see Kruger. The sorcerer had caught up his staff once more. A greenish glow played around his face, and illuminated the whole scene with an infernal light. Kruger chanted a spell and suddenly viridian lightning lashed out. It arced downwards and narrowly missed Felix.

The mutant standing in front of Felix was not so lucky. Its fur singed and eyeballs popped. For a moment it danced on stilts of pure sorcerous power and then fell to earth, a twisted, blackened corpse. Felix dived to one side, not wanting to be the target of another such bolt. Gotrek surged forwards, cleaving a mutant in two as he hacked his way to the foot of the stairs.

The lightning lashed out, aiming for Gotrek this time. He was not so lucky as Felix has been. The green bolt hit him head on. Felix expected to see the Trollslayer meet his long-threatened doom at last. Gotrek's hair stood even more on end than usual. The runes on his axe blade glowed crimson. He howled what might have been a final curse at his gods, then something strange happened. The green glow passed right through his body and along the length of the iron chain still attached to his wrist. It hit the ground in a shower of green sparks and dissipated harmlessly.

Felix almost laughed out loud. He had heard of such a thing before in his natural philosophy classes. It was called earthing: the same thing that let a metal lightning rod conduct the force of a thunderbolt harmlessly into the ground had saved Gotrek. He gave himself a moment to consider this, then flipped his hidden dagger from its sheath and cast it at Kruger.

It was a good throw. It aimed straight and true and buried itself in the Chaos Sorcerer's chest. It hung there for a moment, quivering, and Kruger stopped his chanting to peer down at it. Kruger dropped his staff and clutched the wound. Greenish blood oozed from the gash and stained the wizard's fingers. He glared down at Felix in hatred then turned and fled.

Felix gave his attention back to the melee but it was all over. The small mutants had again proved no match for the Slayer's axe. Gotrek stood triumphant, his muscular form covered in blood and ichor. A faint glow faded from his axe. Bear fat sizzled and spluttered on his hair.

Felix raced past him up the stairs and out into the corridor. A trail of greenish blood led off down the passage. It wound past a mass of open, empty cages. Felix guessed that it was from these that the mutants had come. They had been the products of Kruger's foul experiments.

'Let's free the children and get out of here.' Felix said.

'I want that sorcerer's skull for my drinking cup!' Gotrek spat.

Felix winced. 'You don't mean that.'

'It's just an expression, manling.'

From the look on Gotrek's face, Felix wasn't so sure about that.



THEY ADVANCED down the corridor towards their goal. The thought of saving the children gave Felix some comfort. At least he and the Slayer would be able to do some good here, and return the young ones to their parents. For once, they would actually manage to act like real heroes. Felix could already picture the tear-stained faces of the relieved villagers as they were reunited with their offspring.

The rattling of the chain on Gotrek's wrist began to get on Felix's nerves. They turned the corner and came to a door. A single sweep of Gotrek's axe reduced it to so much kindling. They entered a chamber which had obviously once been Kruger's study.

The massive silver moon shone in through its single huge window. The Chaos Sorcerer lay slumped over his desk, his greenish blood staining the

open pages of a massive leather-bound grimoire. His hands still moved feebly as if he were trying to cast a spell that might save him.

Felix grabbed his hair from behind and pulled Kruger upright. He looked down into eyes from which the greenish glow was fading. Felix felt a surge of triumph. 'Where are the hostages?'

'What hostages?'

'The villagers' children!' Felix spat.

'You mean my experimental subjects?'

Cold horror filled Felix. He could see where this was leading. His lips almost refused to frame his next question. 'You experimented on children.'

Kruger gave Felix a twisted smile. 'Yes, they're easier to Transmute than adults and they soon grow to full size. They were going to be my conquering army – but you killed them all.'

'We killed... them all.' Felix stood stunned. His visions of being feted by joyful villagers evaporated. He looked down at the blood that stained his hands and his tunic.

Suddenly blind rage, hot as the fires of hell, overwhelmed Felix. This maniac had transformed the village children into mutants, and he, Felix Jaeger, had taken a hand in slaughtering them. In a way that made him as guilty as Kruger. He considered this for a moment, then dragged Kruger over to the window. It looked down onto the sleeping village, a drop of several hundred feet down a sheer cliff face.

He gave Kruger a moment to consider what was about to happen and then gave him a good hard shove. The glass shattered as the sorcerer tumbled out into the chill night air. His arms flailed. His shriek echoed out through the darkness and took a long time to fade.

The Trollslayer looked up at Felix. There was a malevolent glitter in his one good eye. 'That was well done, manling. Now we'll have a few words with the innkeeper. I have a score to settle with him.'

'First let's torch the castle,' Felix said grimly. He stalked off to turn the accursed place into a giant funeral pyre. ●



THIS SPACE MARINE WAS SENT TO US BY LOGAN LUBERA. WE LIKED IT SO MUCH WE COMMISSIONED A FULL COMIC STRIP, THE TERROR OF DEATH, WHICH STARTS ON P.56!

SALVATION

• By Jonathan Green •

THE ROAR OF their storm bolters drowning out their battle-cries, the veterans of Ultramar's First Company vented their righteous fury against the abomination that was the Tyranid race. Shrieking, the hideous elongated head of a Hormagaunt appeared in front of Brother Rius, its fanged mouth dripping with strings of saliva. Responding instinctively, Rius turned his weapon on the creature. He watched with grim satisfaction through his visor as the creature's grotesque visage disintegrated. As his storm bolter kicked in his hand, the back of the creature's skull exploded outwards in a splattering burst of purple blood and bone fragments.

As another in a long line of vanquished foes fell before him, Rius found himself looking across the entirety of the vast battlefield. The rocky plain was covered with a seething mass of flesh and armoured warriors, accompanied by a host of support weapons and vehicles. To both left and right the barren plain rose up to meet steep cliff faces, above which the land bristled with a profusion of plants clustered in primeval jungles. The yellow sun shone down on the prehistoric steppes from a cloudless sky. At any other time the conditions could have been described as almost pleasant.

Reacting automatically, Rius turned his storm bolter on an advancing brood of red-skinned Termagants, pumping several rounds of armour-piercing shells into the pack before they had even mounted the outcrop. Despite the repulsing fire of the squad several of the cunning creatures managed to infiltrate the Terminators' position.

With an electro-chemical surge, a Fleshborer propelled its cargo of living

ammunition towards its target. The veteran Space Marine was standing his ground before the milling Termagants as they closed on the Ultramarine lines. The Borer Beetles impacted on the warrior's Terminator armour, many splattering harmlessly against the ceramite plates. A few survived, expending their remaining life energy in gnawing through the armour with their viciously gnashing teeth, but none of the voracious insects made it through to the warrior within the plasteel shell. The Marine's response was to swing his free right hand, enclosed by its power fist, into the Termagant's body. The creature's rib-cage shattered under the blow, the fist's disruption field liquefying its internal organs.

With a convulsive spasm, a spike rifle in the grip of another of the hive mind's assault troops launched a harpoon-like projectile. The barbed spike cut through the air with a hiss before embedding itself deep in the power armour of another of Rius's battle-brothers. The Terminator Marine replied with a burst of fire from his assault cannon. The Termagant was torn apart by a hail of shells, its ruined carcass knocked back into the genocidal horde.

Despite the Terminators' valiant resistance, Rius judged that soon they would be overwhelmed. As each of the murderous aliens fell it seemed that there were two more all too willing to take its place. Unaffected by grief for the death of their fellows or remorse for their actions, the inscrutable members of the hive mind were an awesome enemy indeed.

When the Gauntlet of Macragge had come out of warp, the mighty starship's sensors had picked up the tell-tale signals of a massive alien presence. Scanners

quickly confirmed the presence of a hive fleet in orbit around the fourth planet in the Dakor star system. Initial long-range scans of the world had revealed it to be in a state of evolution much like that of Old Earth millions of years before the rise of Man. Warm, tropical equatorial seas separated three massive continents which abounded in different environments: great burning deserts, coastal jungles and steaming swamps, forested uplands, globe-spanning mountain ranges.

A search of the Gauntlet of Macragge's library banks had revealed that this was the lost world of Jaroth. According to Imperial records, the planet had been settled millennia ago by isolationists and had subsequently become cut off from the rest of the Universe by particularly violent warp storms which had only abated in the last hundred years. So it was that in a routine patrol of the wild Eastern Fringe of the Ultima Segmentum, the flagship of the Ultramarine fleet had rediscovered Jaroth. The Chapter's commanders' first thoughts had been that no doubt if any of the human populace remained their society would have reverted to one of superstitious primitivism. The secrets of the Imperium's Techno-Magi would be lost to them. Jaroth would now be a feral world inhabited by a feral people.

The presence of the Tyranid fleet decided the matter. Whatever the state of its population, Jaroth was just the sort of world that the Great Devourer would relish in plundering of all life, human or otherwise. The galaxy-spanning entity that was the Tyranid race was voracious in its appetite. Dozens of Imperial worlds had already been totally scoured of all life to provide the alien horror with raw material from which to perpetuate itself. Who knew how many hundred others had been infested by the insidious cults of Genestealers, the blasphemous alien monsters working in collaboration with their corrupted human brood-brethren? The Ultramarines Chapter could not let another planet fall to the Great Devourer. It was their sacred duty to uphold the Emperor's laws, to defend the Imperium against the myriad menaces that threat-

ened to engulf it from all sides. The feeding frenzy of the hive mind's children was as effective at wiping all life from the surface of a planet as the world-scouring process of the Exterminatus, as a score of worlds would testify.

Squad Bellator fought atop a rocky escarpment in the centre of the bleak valley alongside the veteran Squad Orpheus. Here and there granite formations thrust up from a dried-up river-bed. Every outcrop was the scene of some conflict or other, with the bravest warriors of the Imperium fighting desperately to repel the invading alien horde.

Rius, himself a veteran of Ichar IV, was no stranger to the horrors of the hive mind. But no matter how many times he witnessed the foul abominations, nothing would ever inure him to them. He could only face each battle with the resolve and courage of the Ultramarines, as laid down in the ordinances of the Codex Astartes by the Primarch of the Ultramarines, Roboute Guilliman himself, centuries before.

A unit of Tyranid Warriors emerged from the slaving Ripper Swarms to confront the Ultramarines. As Rius watched, a bonesword sliced down through the ceramite shoulder pad of one Space Marine's power armour, severing the skin and sinews underneath. As soon as the serrated edge connected with flesh, the nerve tendrils within the bonesword delivered a potent psychic jolt to the warrior's body. The stun would only be momentary but it was long enough for the Tyranid, howling in triumph, to remove the man's head from his shoulders with its second blade.

Striding behind the charging Tyranid Warriors, lording it over his swarm, the hive queen's consort came into view. The Hive Tyrant was a truly terrifying figure to behold. The monster stood over two metres tall and its presence exuded a malign intelligence that filled the Ultramarines with dread.

Rapid bursts of laser energy struck the Hive Tyrant, but to no effect: the monstrosity's toughened carapace absorbed the lethal blasts. With unintelligible roars,

and no doubt telepathic signals as well, the master of the swarm directed the broods to seek out the humans and destroy them, consuming all available bio-mass in the process as well. The Tyrant had to die!



MILES OVERHEAD, thrusters fired, desperately turning the vast spacecraft on its axis, but it was too late, and the Gauntlet of Macragge collided violently with the asteroid-sized pod launched from the hive ship. The massive spore mine detonated with the power of a thermo-nuclear explosion, the resultant shockwave shaking the spaceship.

Chunks of bone-like shell as thick as a fortress wall bombarded the craft. Some shards disintegrated as they struck the vessel's force-field but the shields had been damaged by the initial explosion and provided only intermittent protection. Other fragments struck the vast ship like meteors, wrecking communications antennae and tearing holes in its hull through which the accompanying shower of acids, algae and virus-bearing particles could gain access to the craft's interior.

The Imperial navigators reacted swiftly, bringing the ten mile-long vessel under control. Fission-boosters firing, the Gauntlet of Macragge moved off in pursuit of the bio-ship.

The prehistoric world resting four hundred miles below appeared as a welcoming blue-green paradise, its atmosphere streaked with wisps of white cloud, a total contrast to the smog-polluted planets that were so often the refuges of humanity. Jaroth's airless moon, no more than a planetoid that had become trapped by the larger astral body's gravitational pull, rose over the glowing nimbus of the planet. Then the stricken bio-ship came into view.

From the bridge of the Ultramarines' flagship, Commander Darius watched through the view screen wall as the Gauntlet of Macragge closed in on the Tyranid craft. The gigantic curled body of the organic vessel was tilted at a strange angle and appeared to be drifting. However, as the mighty Gothic cruiser closed the distance between itself and the Tyranid craft, Darius could see yet more spore mines and other sleek, finned creatures being disgorged from the bio-ship's gaping hangar-wide mouth.

'On my mark, hit that abomination with everything we've got!' the Commander ordered the soldiers at their control consoles. Returning to his throne of command Darius sat down, never once taking his stern gaze from the monstrosity displayed before him on the view screen. His brow furrowed: 'Fire!'

A hundred turbo lasers blazed into life, great beams of intensely focused light energy striking the already weakened Tyranid mother ship. In a blaze of coruscating fire, the nautilus shell of the massive space-travelling organism splintered, mountainous shards flying from the creature and its soft internal organs rupturing as its body depressurised. Its hundred mile-long innards spilling into space, the great creature dropped away from the Gothic cruiser as it was caught in Jaroth's gravitational field. The bio-ship plunged towards the planet's surface through the atmosphere, its shattered shell glowing red hot. As Darius watched, the organism began to burn, its pink flesh cooking as it hurtled planetward.



THE TERMINATOR squad moved cautiously through the undergrowth with grizzled Sergeant Bellator at its head. The Space Marines covered the jungle in front of them and to either side with sweeps of their guns, monitoring

their motion sensors for signs of potentially hostile life. The surrounding trees were alive with sound. Unknown bugs clicked and hummed while mosquito-like insects as long as a man's hand buzzed around the armoured warriors.

With the defeat of their Hive Tyrant, the Tyranid hordes had been thrown into disarray. Pressing home their advantage, the elite warriors of the Imperium had routed the foul alien army. The less determined Termagants and Hormagaunts had fled immediately but the rampaging, bestial Carnifexes continued to hammer the Space Marine ranks.

Even when its fellows lay dead around it, one of the Screamer Killers relentlessly charged a Razorback. Smashing into the tank, the alien horror scythed through the plasteel armour, its razor-edged killing arms flailing. A living engine of destruction, the Carnifex had gutted the vehicle and slaughtered its crew before it was felled by a bombardment of missiles from an Ultramarine Whirlwind.

There was a screeching cry from deep within the trees to the right of the Terminators' path. Sergeant Bellator fired off several rounds from his storm bolter into the foliage. All was quiet again.

'Precautionary fire,' Bellator's growling voice came over the Terminators' comm-units. 'It could have been a Tyranid.'

Had it been a Tyranid? Rius wondered. It could just have been one of Jaroth's indigenous life forms. There was no way of knowing. With the main Tyranid force wiped out, the Terminators had been sent into the jungle to carry out a clean-up operation. With the Hive Tyrant gone, many of the Tyranid troops had gone rogue, randomly attacking Space Marines that far outnumbered them or fled into the primeval jungles where it was harder for the Ultramarines to follow.

Although the Tyranids had been defeated, the veteran squad were still tense with anticipation. The Ultramarines' lines were miles away and out here in the depths of the jungle they were as much the aliens as the Tyranids.

'There's something up ahead,' Brother Julius said, breaking the communication

silence. The others checked their motion sensors. Several red blips had appeared at the outer limit of the small displays.

'Be ready, brothers,' the squad sergeant hissed.

The fronds gave way to a clearing. On the far side of the glade was the crumpled fuselage of an Ultramarines Thunderhawk gunship.

It was instantly obvious to the veterans what had happened. A broad hole gaped in the side of an engine housing. Its edges were corroded with an acidic slime and splinters of bone were lodged in the plasteel hull around it. The living cannon of a Biovore had fulfilled its deadly purpose. Having been fatally hit by the spore mine, its crew no longer able to control it, the aircraft had come down on the forested plateau.

A scorched path through the jungle showed where the Thunderhawk, its engines burning, had seared through the trees. It had flattened everything in its wake until it ploughed into the clearing, the soft soil thrown up around it putting out the fires.

But what had happened to the crew?

'Spread out!' Bellator instructed and the Terminators immediately began to take up appropriate positions around the crashed craft.

The blips were still present on their motion sensors. From the readings Rius could see that almost all the organisms were actually inside the downed gunship. As yet, however, the Terminators had not made visual contact with them. Were they the injured crew, Tyranids or denizens native to the planet? Were they hostile or totally harmless?

As if in answer, Rius heard his sergeant's voice again over his comm-unit: 'Expect the worst.'

Cautiously the squad strode across the glade, the servo-assists in their cumbersome suits whirring, closing in on the Thunderhawk with every step. When the craft had gone down it had probably been assumed that the crew had perished. However, it was just as likely that the crash would have gone unnoticed to the Ultramarines commanders as wave after

wave of mycetic spores hurtled down onto the teeming battlefield. Whatever the case, a rescue attempt had not been ordered.

From Rius's motion sensor, it appeared that the creatures inside the Thunderhawk had stopped moving. Were they aware of the Terminators approaching them? There were too many blips for it to be any surviving crew members, the Marine convinced himself – but were they Tyranids?

Brother Hastus was the first to reach the crumpled fuselage. He edged his way towards the open cargo bay hatchway as the others covered him. Several seconds dragged by as Hastus checked the interior of the cargo bay. A wave of his power fist and the rest of the squad moved in.

Rius followed Brother Sericus into the shadowy interior of the crashed Thunderhawk, the optical sensors in his helmet adjusting from the glare of the clearing to the gloom instantly. Lightning claws raised, Sericus advanced slowly through the gunship, brushing aside dangling pipes that dripped oily fluid into the chamber.

Rius glanced down at his motion sensor and then immediately looked up at the ceiling in alarm. A six-limbed, insectoid nightmare dropped out of the darkness. His reflexes working far faster than conscious thought, the Ultramarine automatically raised his power fist to protect himself. The creature hit its crackling distortion field and screamed as its carapace shattered; it fell squirming onto the floor behind Rius. Julius stepped over it, thrusting a whirring chainfist into its face. Then another of the purple-skinned monstrosities was on his back.

Genestealers! Rius thought. His worst fears had been confirmed. Before he could train his weapon on the Tyranid construct and blow its vile carcass apart, the monster plunged a taloned claw through the back of Julius's armour. It yanked it out again, dragging with it the man's spine, slick with blood.

A hail of armour-piercing shells from Rius's bolter punched through the Genestealer's exoskeleton and the alien's

corpse joined that of Brother Julius on the floor of the cargo bay.

Something heavy slammed into Rius, sending his heavily-armoured body sprawling on the metal floor with a resounding clang. Gripping his left arm between its vice-like jaws, another hissing Genestealer was trying to bite through the ceramite shell to get to the flesh within. The creature was swiftly dispatched with a bullet to the temple but even in death the Genestealer's jaws refused to release their grip. Several more shots shattered the creature's skull allowing Rius to extract his arm.

To his left, Brother Sericus was grappling with two of the Tyranid creatures, one gripped in each fist. A jet of orange flame illuminated the cargo bay as Brother Hastus kept yet more of the creatures from approaching his overwhelmed fellows.

Rius clambered to his feet, shaking the Genestealer's blood from his suit. Brother Bellator stood in the open hatchway, assailed on all sides by the rest of the Genestealer brood, defending himself as best he could at such close quarters with his power sword. The savagery and ferocity of the Genestealers was terrifying. His storm bolter blasting, Rius rushed to the sergeant's aid.

Another flare from Brother Hastus's flamer struck the frenzied press of purple bodies surrounding Bellator and the reek of burning alien flesh filled the chamber. With a sizzling flash an oily puddle ignited, the flames rushing back through the cargo bay following the trail of black liquid to where it cascaded from a broken fuel pipe. Sericus's horrified gaze followed the progress of the fire, his chainfist still embedded in the metal wall through the skull of a twitching Genestealer.

Rius reached the edge of the hatchway and the overwhelmed sergeant as the Thunderhawk's fuel tanks erupted in a conflagration of molten metal and oily smoke. The force of the explosion threw the Ultramarine out of the cargo bay, flinging him right across the clearing. Rius's body slammed into a thick tree

trunk. The unconscious Terminator slumped to the ground, the weight of his heavy armour embedding his body in the soft ground. Flames engulfed the wreckage of the gunship.



RIUS OPENED his eyes slowly, his vision taking a few seconds to focus. Above him were wooden beams and the underside of a thatched roof. Cautiously he tilted his head to one side.

'Hello,' said a small voice. Sitting only a few feet from him was a human child. Her keen blue eyes regarded him with intense fascination. She wore a simple smock and her waist-length auburn hair hung in a plait over one shoulder.

'H-hello,' Rius mumbled in reply. His tongue felt thick and there was the taste of stale saliva in his mouth.

'My name's Melina,' said the little girl. 'What's yours?'

Still only half-conscious, Rius tried to focus on the girl's question so that he could provide an answer, but he couldn't. A nebulous fog obscured that part of his memory from him.

'I don't know,' he muttered, bewildered. 'Where am I?'

'You're at home, in our house. Why don't you know your name?'

Ignoring the girl's question, Rius scanned the room from where he lay. It was small and spartan. The only other furniture in it apart from the bed was a chair and a small table on which rested a wash basin. Lying on his back in a rough wooden bed, he could feel the straw mattress beneath him.

'You do have a name, don't you?' the girl persisted.

'Come away now, Melina. Let our visitor rest.'

Rius swivelled to find the source of this second voice. A man had entered the

room. He also wore plain peasant clothes and although only in his thirties, Rius judged, he had already begun to lose his hair.

'You must be tired,' the man added, addressing Rius himself now. 'We will leave you in peace.'

'No!' Rius found himself demanding, something of the old authority in his voice returning. 'What happened to me?'

'You do not know?' the man asked, incredulously. 'Are you not a warrior of the Emperor himself, fallen from the stars?'

Rius stared at the man with incomprehension. 'Am I? How did I get here?'

'We saw the stars falling to the earth and knew that it was an omen. The menfolk set off into the untamed lands as our elders instructed. We found you in the forest. You were unconscious and badly injured,' the man explained patiently. 'We brought you back to my farm and did what we could for you. At first we were not sure if you would survive but your holy armour had helped to keep you alive. You have been asleep for almost a week.'

Desperately, Rius tried to clear the fog from his mind and piece together his shattered memories. He could remember nothing clearly from before the moment when he had awoken. There were only trace images of terrible, unreal monsters and the distant sounds of battle, like the last lingering fragments of a nightmare that are forgotten with the coming of dawn.

'Who am I? What am I?' Rius's voice was no longer aggressive and demanding, more like that of a pitiful child.

The man and his daughter looked at him sadly. 'I am sorry,' the man spoke wistfully. 'We can heal your body but we cannot minister to your mind. We cannot help you to remember. That is something that you will have to do yourself, given time.'

A sorrowful silence descended over the room for several minutes. Nobody moved. 'You saved me,' Rius finally said, humbly. The man smiled. 'Then I know what I must do,' Rius continued. 'I owe

you my life so now I must repay the debt. I pledge myself to your service. I will do whatever you wish.'

Rius tried to sit up and immediately white-hot daggers of pain shot through his body. His face a mask of agony, he collapsed back onto the bed.

'You must rest,' the man chided, gently. 'Tomorrow is another day. Then we will see.'



EVERY DAY JEREN the farmer and his family tended to Rius's needs, bringing him his meals and seeing to his injuries. The little girl, Melina, was a constant companion. The time Rius spent with the child, hearing of her youthful adventures or helping her with her letters, filled him with joy and gave him new strength to face the long haul to recovery ahead.

But it not to be a long recovery. Within days his wounds had healed as if they had never been. He was able to leave his bed and walk again; he began helping out around the farmhouse where he could. Jeren and his family, along with the other villagers, were in awe of Rius's restorative powers. The injuries he had suffered would have taken a mortal man months to recover from, if he did at all. 'Truly he is a warrior from the stars,' the people said and heaped blessings upon the Emperor for sending them a saviour. Yet each day Rius still came no closer to resolving his own internal struggles, no nearer to remembering who he was or where he came from.

Only a fortnight after his arrival at the farm, Rius was able to set to work in the fields. Jeren and his family were the owners of a few tidy acres at the edge of a village which consisted of nothing more than a collection of farms, a mill and the local tavern. During the following months he learnt much about the people of the

village and their customs. They spent most of their days toiling in the fields in order to raise crops from the unforgiving land. It appeared that the humans fought a constant battle with the surrounding jungle, 'the untamed lands', as the farmers called them. Wherever trees were cleared to provide more land for growing cereal crops or to graze animals, the primeval forest reclaimed an acre left fallow on the farm's boundary. Weeds seemed to grow more readily than wheat and much of the villagers' time was spent clearing them from their fields. It seemed like the forest didn't want the humans there and was trying to evict its unwelcome tenants.

Rius joined Jeren and his family in their own battle with the jungle. He would be the first up at dawn, taking a mighty axe to the twisted trunks, and the last to return to the farmhouse at dusk. The other villagers marvelled at the Star Man, as they called him, for his strength was many times that of the other humans. Soon he was also helping the other farmers, single-handedly repairing broken wagons and erecting barns for the grain harvest. There was not one person among the villagers who did not welcome Rius's assistance.

But for all he learnt about the resilient, magnanimous people who had taken him in, he was still no wiser as to his own origins. Perhaps, he began to think, the villagers were right, that he had been sent from the stars in order to help these kind people in their plight. This growing conviction was strengthened by news that came to Jeren's farm one chill morning.

A small party of farmers arrived at Jeren's door, out of breath and in a state of agitation. Jeren and the farmers spent a few minutes in anxious conference before turning to Rius.

'What is it?' Rius asked, concerned.

'Last night Old Man Hosk's place was attacked by something that came out of the forest. Hosk died trying to defend his home but his wife and children escaped.' Jeren paused, as if he hardly believed what he was about to reveal himself. 'They say it was a monster as big as a

house and with the strength of a giant. And then there were the terrible, unearthly screams heard outside Kilm's farm during the night. This morning, Kilm found his entire herd slaughtered in the fields and his grain store razed to the ground. Everyone in the village is too terrified to go after the beast. They want you to hunt the monster down for them and kill it.'

'You're the only one that can kill the Screamer, Star Man,' added one of the petitioners. 'You will help us, won't you?'

The Screamer... the name troubled Rius. He was certain that he had heard it before – and that it spelled danger. Despite his unease, however, now was his chance to repay these people for their kindness and fulfil his purpose. 'Of course I will.'

Taking up his axe, Rius left the farm with Jeren and the other villagers, and headed for what remained of the Hosk homestead. At the head of the valley in which the ruined farm lay, he saw that the farmers' descriptions of the devastation had not been exaggerated. Most of the buildings had been demolished as if something huge had ploughed straight through the wattle walls.

Suddenly the uneasy quiet of the morning was broken by a blood-curdling, high-pitched bestial scream that cut through Rius like a knife. 'What was that?' he demanded, turning to the crowd of farmers huddled behind him.

'That was the Screamer,' one of them replied, nervously.

The howling beast emerged from the line of trees on the far side of the valley. Although still over a mile away, thanks to his enhanced eyesight, Rius was able to make out the monster quite clearly. He saw the bleached, bone-like dome of its head; the great curved arms; the crushing hooves; the tough, chitinous hide.

Instantly Rius's mind was awash with terrifying images and recalled sensations: slaving jaws, burning acid death, stinging tentacles, blood-drenched talons, fetid decay-ridden breath, a nightmare of purple and crimson. It was as if someone had opened the floodgates that had been

holding back his memory. Temporarily stunned as forgotten experiences came crashing back into his mind, all Rius could do was stand stock-still, staring at the beast that had banished his amnesia.

'What is it, Star Man?' Jeren asked.

'No, not Star Man. Rius. I am Rius,' the Space Marine mumbled, as if coming out of a dream. 'I know who I am, what I am.' His thoughts and words became more focused and determined: 'I know where my destiny and duty lie. Where is my armour? Where are my weapons?'

Hefting aside the bales of straw, Jeren uncovered the trapdoor set into the floor of the barn. 'I always thought that one day you would ask for it back. When we found you it was encrusted with dried blood and in a condition not befitting a warrior of the Emperor. I cleaned and polished it, then laid it here, together with your mighty weapons, for safe-keeping.' The farmer raised the trapdoor to reveal the gleaming blue armour that lay there.

The Space Marine held up the helmet, a shaft of sunlight catching its whiteness in a dust-shot beam. Reverently, Rius removed each piece of the centuries-old Terminator armour from its resting place. As he did so, his gaze lingered on the badges of honour won through decades of conflict on a hundred worlds. Pride welled up within him as he took in every crack and inscribed line of the great stone icon fixed to the left shoulder pad. Only the most honoured of the Emperor's veterans wore the Crux Terminatus.

The winged skull carved into the chest plate of the armour attested to another righteous victory against the enemies of humanity. The Purity Seal granted him by the Chapter's Chaplains was still intact too. Its blessing had certainly not proved wanting for Rius: it had kept him alive while the rest of his squad had been condemned to death as a result of the accursed Tyranids' intervention at the Thunderhawk. Pride turned to sadness as he mourned his departed battle-brothers. He would never fight at their side again. The coming challenge he was to face would be as much for them as for the

Emperor and the people of this unforgiving planet.

'I would like to be alone now,' the Space Marine said, turning to Jeren. 'I must prepare for battle.'

As Rius strode out of the barn he looked nothing like the man that had entered. His mortal frame was encased within the metal body of a Terminator and mighty he looked indeed. He had donned the armour of his ancestors and chanted the litanies of war. Now he was ready to confront his foe. He addressed the overawed farmers gathered outside the barn. 'This day I go to face my destiny.'

'Will you return?' Jeren asked.

Rius turned his helmeted head towards the horizon. These people had shown him such compassion, hospitality and friendship. Now he could finally repay his debt to them. 'If the Emperor wills it. If not, my death will serve the greater good.'

'What is your name, warrior?'

'I am Brother Rius of the First Company of the Ultramarines Chapter of the Imperium, may it never fail.'

'Then farewell, Brother Rius. May the Emperor's spirit go with you, as do our blessings.'

Rius saluted the man who had done so much for him and then paused before departing. 'Jeren, will you do something for me?'

'Of course, my friend. Name it.'

'Remember me.'

With that the Ultramarine turned his back on humanity and strode off down the track away from the farm, towards the primeval jungle to meet his destiny.



BROTHER RIUS FROZE. There it was again, a rustling in the undergrowth ahead of him. He checked his motion sensor. There was definitely

something there, but was it his quarry or yet another tree-fox? He had hunted the beast for three solid days without resting, having followed its tracks from the ravaged farmstead that now lay many miles away behind him.

With a bellowing scream the Carnifex broke through the tangle of fronds before him, all four of its razor-edged killing arms scything wildly at the vegetation as it ran. Instinctively, Rius hurled his heavily-armoured body to one side, out of the way, himself crashing through the undergrowth. As he hit the ground, his storm bolter was already spitting round after round of devastating fire in the direction of the rampaging Tyrannid.

Still screaming, the Carnifex ground to a halt and turned, ready to charge Rius a second time. The Screamer Killer well deserved both its name and the reputation that went with it. The piercing cry of the Carnifex was enough to discourage the most resolute of men, while its diamond-hard, sickle-shaped arms could tear apart Rius's ceramite armour as easily as it could his flesh. Its chitinous hide was virtually impenetrable to normal weapons and the great mass of its rounded body made it unstoppable as it stampeded across any battlefield.

This must be the last of its foul kind on the planet, Rius thought – left behind, as he himself had been, after the defeat of the hive mind's forces.

As the Space Marine struggled to get to his feet, almost cursing the bulky suit in which he was encased, the monster charged again. The Carnifex hit the Terminator with the force of a mortar shell, forcing the air out of his lungs and throwing him bodily through the air. Rius crashed to the ground, splintering the branches of a tree on the way down, landing at the top of a steep, densely-forested slope. The impetus of the charge and the subsequent momentum of his own body sent Rius rolling over the edge, tumbling down through the undergrowth.

He came to rest at the bottom of the slope, stunned and crying out in agony. It was like trying to wrestle a tank! Doing his best to suppress the pain mentally,

Rius got to his feet. The fall had knocked out a servo-assist in the left leg of his suit so that he now walked with an acute limp. It would also slow him down.

He was standing in a clearing at the edge of a great plateau and, looking out beyond the cliff edge, he saw the prehistoric terrain shrouded by the smoke of distant grumbling volcanoes. Down in the broad valley, partially buried under a layer of ash, were the indistinct outlines of alien skeletons and twisted metal hulks. This was where the Battle for Jaroth had been won – and where the final conflict in the war would take place.

A high-pitched screech accompanied the sound of a huge shape ploughing through the jungle towards the Space Marine. The Carnifex burst through the trees – and stopped. A disgusting purple fluid oozed from several small holes in its chest where the extremely tough bone and cartilage had been punctured. He had managed to wound the beast, the Emperor be praised! However, his excitement almost instantly turned to disappointment. The flow of alien blood stopped and before his very eyes the wounds began to heal themselves. The Carnifex was regenerating!

The great creature's shoulders heaved as if the Tyranid was breathing heavily. The deafening scream continued as the Carnifex pawed the ground with its crushing horned hooves. A crackling field of bio-electrical energy flickered around the scissoring arms. As Rius watched transfixed, the creature convulsed violently and a glowing green ball of plasma emerged from its fang-lined mouth. Trapped in the energy field of the beast's claws, the Carnifex was able to determine the direction in which it would fire the incandescent missile.

Rius ducked as the scorching ball of plasma hurtled towards him. The blazing gout splashed against the Terminator's back, bathing the armour in licking green flames. At once the ceramite began to sizzle and dissolve. Still safe as yet inside his suit, Rius raised his bolter, took careful aim and fired. As many shells rebounded off the reinforced carapace as penetrated

it, and those that did wound the creature seemed to make no difference as the Tyranid's supernatural vitality and single-minded desire for slaughter drove it onwards. A new pain shot through the Ultramarine's nervous system as the bio-plasma reached his skin, having eaten through the armour. Rius realised that there was only one thing to do. He braced himself. As the rampaging monster ran at him he prepared to meet its charge, not flinching as the distance between the pair rapidly decreased.

As the monster hit him head on, Rius grabbed the creature around its waist. At the same moment he could not contain his agony and screamed. A jagged, curving arm sliced through his armour and deep into his side. The Ultramarine was now face to face with the Tyranid. Surprised by its enemy's retaliation, the creature lost control of its charge and stumbled, its momentum carrying the two of them rolling towards the precipitous edge of the plateau.

The hulking monster towered over him. Rius gagged at the stench of the Carnifex's reeking breath, its grotesque face mere inches from his visor. The Marine could feel his life-blood seeping away. It was now or never.

With the last of his failing strength he lifted his gun and rammed its muzzle between the monster's jaws. Depressing the trigger he emptied the rest of the cartridge into the Carnifex's mouth. Shells blasted through the back of the creature's malformed head; others ricocheted around inside its toughened skull, liquefying its tiny brain.

Rius knew he was dead, but it no longer mattered. He had reclaimed his honour and identity and repaid his debt to the people who had saved him from ignominy. Thanks to them he could die the death of an Ultramarine. Trapped within the Carnifex's grasp he could not stop the great bulk of the beast dragging him with it as it toppled over the edge of the plateau. Locked in the inescapable embrace of death, Brother Rius and the Tyranid fell into oblivion. The Battle for Jaroth was finally over. ●

THE SIEGE of GISOREUX

By Jonathan Green

TAKEN from the journal of Pierre le Roc, Master Engineer of Siege Defences to Duc Travers de Gisoreux, kept during the Siege of Gisoreux by the Undead army of Mallac the Scourge in 2254 by the Imperial Reckoning.

Day 4: The Sacrifice of the City

The levelling of the Peasant Quarter is progressing well – the foul Undead hordes will hide no longer behind our own dwellings. Soon we shall abandon our defence of the outer walls. The men freed from there can be used to secure the walls to the east and west. For once I am glad that our city is bordered to the south by the great Forest of Arden. The dense woodland prevents the Scourge's troops mustering there, so he is prevented from assailing us on four fronts.

There was a respite from the constant bombardment of the city at noon again today. As the sun climbed towards its zenith, the Undead host laid off from their assaults, retreating into their camp and mighty siege towers. Our own brave soldiers were in no position to retaliate, weakened as they were by the constant fighting. It was all we could do to treat the wounded and make what repairs we could to our defences.

Men were despatched to recover the bodies of those brave souls who have died this day. This will prevent their immortal souls from the dread fate of being raised to fight alongside the forces of Chaos.

It would seem that Mallac's powers are strongest at night and that he is most vulnerable in the middle of the day. We must plan our counter-attack accordingly.

Day 5: The Blackest Day

Such sacrilege! During the night, Mallac's Necromancers finally broke the seals protecting Le Mausolee des Anges, where the great and the good of Gisoreux have been laid to rest since our city was first founded. The tombs have been ransacked and our heroic ancestors have been brought back to fight with the evil horde.

Gibbets have been raised behind the

Undead lines. Bretonnian prisoners are being executed, only to be brought back to life again by the chanted spells of Mallac's thrice-cursed Necromancers.

Thankfully, the warding spells of our wizards are preventing the ethereal creatures that the Scourge has summoned from penetrating the inner circuit of the city. The outer walls to the north fell quickly once they were abandoned, allowing the Undead to approach with their siege engines. These are horrifying edifices, constructed in part from the bones of the Scourge's enemies. Some of them are being driven deliberately into the Ois to bridge the flowing waters, which are as acid to their kind and which so far have protected the city from a more serious assault from the east.

The Scourge has summoned fell Zombie Dragons to aid him in his conquest of our fine city. The foul, parchment-winged creatures have already set parts of the Tradesmen's Quarter alight with their fiery assaults and all have evaded the arrows of our archers, who are themselves decreasing rapidly in number.

Despite our destruction of several of his war machines, the Scourge has the upper hand. Word has come of reinforcements, in the form of the Duc d'Arcey's knights. Their pennants have been spied through the clouds of winged creatures of Darkness which beset them upon their arrival. Our own brave knights rally to the banners of Bretonnia in the shadow of the Statue of Chivalry and sally forth from there to meet with the enemy in battle. Despite this good news, I fear that we are outnumbered by too great a degree. We pray to the Lady of the Lake and hope we do not go unheard – for otherwise we are surely all doomed.

None will sleep well this night...



The SIEGE of

~The Blackest Day of the Siege~

Drawn by PIERRE LE ROC, Master Siege Engineer to Duc Travers de Gisoreux, in 2254, on the Occasion of the Relief of the City by the armies of DUC BONNAR D'ARCEY. The arrival of Duc d'Arcey's famed KNIGHTS on the Sixthe day of the Siege turned the tide



GISOREUX

1/2 MILE

of battle in favour of the besieged Citizens of Gisoreux. After an Horrific night of constant fighting, the accursed Undead Horde was eventually routed the next day, and the evil LICHE slain within even his own camp, when the sun was at its highest and his own Fell Powers were at their weakest.

XX99AAA PRIME : STATUS Most Urgent

Agent

Code Name Eversor Assassin 0034/H/N/Tormentius

Location Segmentum Obscurus - Uphrateus

Missions to Date 67 **Success Rate** 100%

Kill Ratio 99:1

Status Permastasis

REVOKED

Subject

The Uphrateus Incident

200 years ago the planet of Uphrateus was engulfed by the Eye of Terror. No attempt has been made to recover it. The planet is beyond salvation, coded for eventual erasure from Imperial Records.

• **Addendum/Maximum Security:** Uphrateus was a vital base for guarding against Chaos incursion, and also a founding planet to one of the Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes – the Sentinels of Uphrateus, currently struck from the Roll of Chapters.

Briefing

The area of the Eye of Terror which engulfs Uphrateus has receded. A major operation has been launched to restore the planet as a base of operations for the continuing war against

Chaos. Initial scouting indicates that under the warping influence of Chaos, Uphrateus has become a world of insanity.

Prime Objective – Southern Necropolis: From a vast and cursed Necropolis, erected by the Wordbearers Chapter, Lord Saegius Mindblighter preaches his blasted sermons (**Key ref** N5600CZ.) Scholastica Psykana Operatives report that Saegius Mindblighter is manipulating the carnage and destruction within his cathedral in order to summon a vast Khornate Daemon host to his aid.

Reports indicate that the Sentinels of Uphrateus still exist, loyal to the Imperium. They have been warring unceasingly for control of the destabilising planet, and despite grievous casualties have breached the insane Necropolis of the Mindblighter.

This successful assault has caused the abating of the warp storms - the Realm of Chaos' grip on Uphrateus is presently loosened. Planetary scanners still indicate heavy concentrations of heretics and traitors. Demonic influence cannot be ignored.

Action

Mindblighter must be eliminated before he can complete the summoning. With the Warp Storm abating, an unrepeatable opportunity presents itself.

I. Two Space Wolf Great Companies will be despatched to reinforce the attack.

• **Addendum/Maximum Security:** THEY WILL NOT ARRIVE IN TIME.

II. Despatch Eversor Assassin 0034/H/N, codename Tormentius. Estimates conclude he has no more than three hours to infiltrate the Necropolis and assassinate Lord Mindblighter.

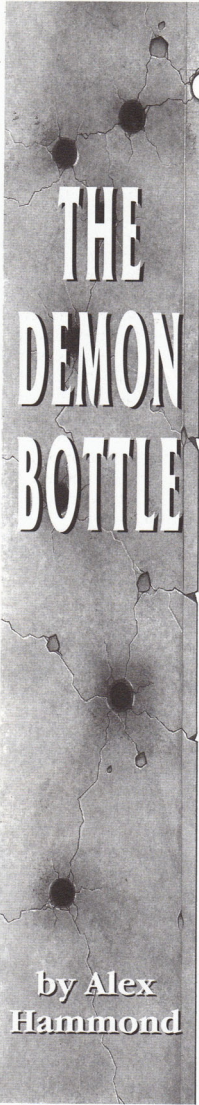
• **Addendum/Maximum Security:** Tormentius's permastasis – due to erratic extremes of psychopathic behaviour – is revoked with immediate effect.

Dispense the Eversor immediately. Abandon all covert programming. Maximise aggression patterns. Maximise pain threshold. This is a singular non-deviation erasure mission. Failure is not an option.

Death to the enemies of the Imperium.

ACTION IMMEDIATELY





THE DEMON BOTTLE

by Alex
Hammond

0700 HRS

'...And there will be fire from the heavens and righteous bolt guns will quicken and purge even the deepest crevices of the underhive. All that is foul and pestilent will be washed away! For this is the teaching of House Cawdor of the Redemption.'

First there was a sound. Like a burst of fire that stirred the dim mutterings of my mind to action. Somewhere in the back of my head, a woman from my dream, beautiful body scarless and soft, still danced in the upper hive.

'Look upon this scum. The deepest slag pits could not outmatch his sins in their filth and perversion.'

Thoughts swelled. My dancing girl disappeared.

'See – though he wakes from his slumber, he does not release the bottle from his hand.'

The voice was closer than I remembered in my sleep. Louder too. Enraged. I opened my eyes.

Legs. Lots of legs, some bound in cloth, others wearing heavy boots, stretched out before me. I followed them upwards and discovered the hard, ash-worn faces of a crowd of settlers. Their attention flitted between my recumbent form and someone behind me. A preacher? I began to stand, bow-legged, still recovering from a bottle of WildSnake.

'On your feet and face the prophet of universal destruction!' A solid boot in my back sent me floundering forward into the

reeking mud.

The crowd cheered. I rolled over onto my back, elbows deep in the sludge. Through mud-splattered eyes I made out the robed preacher – thick burgundy cloth ran in torn strips from ground to neck. A leather mask covered all but a pair of rabid eyes and a mouth spitting blood. A House of Redemption preacher had come to town.

'Vermin man! Stand and answer to the House Cawdor, the true prophets of the flames of salvation.' Through the black leather face mask one eye caught my attention. Bloodshot streams ran their course to a pupil as dark as pitch. Another boot struck me full in the face.

'Look,' my voice cracked, from behind the haze of last night's drinking, 'I'd be able to stand if you'd stop practising ratball with my face, old man.'

Stunned silence behind me. The preacher staggered and began to shake violently on the spot. Theatrical performance or the jiggling of a religious psychopath, I wasn't going to hang around to find out.

Slowly I stood. The Cawdor preacher stopped moving. The crowd clustered well back.

'Oh bugger,' I muttered as a leathery fist pulled out a hand flamer.

'Talk back will you, rat man? Mock those that herald cleansing flame?' A white tongue slid in and out of the priest's mouth. 'Seek ye retribution?'

'Look, I'm happy to go sleep in some other part of town.'

The preacher pointed his flamer in my direction. The crowd scrambled wide. 'This town is in no need of Ratskin scum. Go converse with your blasphemous hive spirits!'

'That's half-Ratskin, slimehole!' I rushed for the crowd hoping the distance and their bodies would afford me protection from the flames.

Click

'Aaaaagh!' I threw myself into a pile of scrap.

Plop

No wash of flame. I turned to look over my shoulder.

The zealot stood there. The antiquated weapon still levelled in my direction had failed to discharge its round. An empty fuel canister came to rest in the mud beside me.

The old man began to reach for a reload amongst his tattered robes.

A lead pipe, thick bolt rusted to one end, felt good in my hand. I wrenched it from the mess of ancient metal about me and whirled it about my head.

The priest, rustling about his drapery, produced another canister.

'Aaaaargh!' I screamed in terrified panic.

'Aaaaargh!' The Redemptionist thrust his hands together, loading the weapon.

A warm trickle of liquid down my leg. My only source of comfort. I swung towards the preacher and reconsidered my options...

...this man had friends...

...too late.

The pipe sunk deep into the leather mask. Somewhere in his head something cracked. A muddy thud later, the preacher lay on the ground. I grabbed his flamer and spun to face the rabble. Only a silver snowfall of effluent ash from somewhere overhead – not a settler in sight.

The silver ash fall began to thicken. Somewhere in the hive city, miles above me, ancient machines were grinding over, pulling on pistons, driving cogs and starting the thousand year-old machines of Hive Primus.

0800 HRS

The ash fall had worsened. I watched from inside Karag's Saloon as desperate underhivers ran for cover, trying to keep their particle intake to a minimum. Push your annual quota too high and you'd reduce your life span by as many rads as you'd inhaled. Inside the bar, smoke hung momentarily before air filters dragged it into the bowels of Downtown's evaporation tanks. I had used the old zealot's money to purchase a fresh bottle of WildSnake and a few pills from a fixer I knew. I began to think things over. Life was getting bad for settlement-dwelling Ratskins – so bad, it appeared, that even half-castes like myself were now the targets for retribution. I should move uphive, work in an Orlock factory till I had enough creds to pay for some NuFlesh and a day on a serum drip. (I had no need of a lung pump: the respirators I'd scavenged when I was young had kept me free from noxious air.) Once I'd had a wet overhaul, I'd have a better chance of getting employed by one of the spire noble families.

Karag's extraction fan above the bar spluttered, gave a grinding death rattle and stopped. Almost immediately all eyes turned to me. Karag – big man, lots of teeth – stretched out his hand towards me. His two real fingers held out a stack of guildler credits.

'Sarak, we'd all appreciate it if you'd go in there and fish out whatever's got caught in the fan.'

'I've quit cleaning ducts.'

'Even for your friends?' Karag flipped out a couple of extra coins.

'You try wrestling a Catchacan face-eater one day and then see if you're keen on going back into an air duct.'

'There's another bottle of WildSnake on me if you'll do it.'

0850 HRS

Somewhere in the duct something was half-alive. Its squeals echoed down through the steel lung that fed air into the bar below me. The humid conditions of the air ducts of the underhive were home to creatures that just could not bear to live

anywhere else: albino Millasaurs, phosphorescent Lashworms and all manner of tropical spores and bugs.

A few tiny carapaces cracked beneath my hands as I inched further towards the bar's extraction fan. The squealing stopped. It had heard me. I struggled with a flashlight and shone it forward onto the mechanism.

EEEEEEEEE Like a leathery bolt something rushed forward, needle teeth snapping at my face.

'Wha-' I slipped forwards.

The flashlight spun out of my hand sending spiralling patterns about the air vent. It came to rest dead on the creature. Four eyes perched in a row across its brow stared into mine, unblinking. A multitude of legs, wing flaps strung between them dipped – the thing sprung again.

'Aaagh!'

Snap*Snap

Its teeth were just inches from my face. But no further.

Looking over the thing's back, I followed its tail, like a large welt of flesh, to the extraction fan. It was caught.

'Karag!' I called down to the mumbling bar through the vent.

'Quiet!' Karag poked at the air duct from below with a broom. 'Zat you, Sarak?'

'Karag, notch your fan up a few dots.'

'You sure about that?'

'Karag, this thing is going to eat my nose if you take any longer!' Hurried footsteps somewhere below.

The fan ground a full revolution, pulling the creature eight inches towards the rough blades.

'Again!' I called.

The creature squealed and lost its footing, scrabbling on the metal. The fan, now free, whirred up to full speed, sucking the thing backwards into its blades. It ground the thing up like a paste, spitting its entrails, many legs and bright yellow ichor into the vents, all over me and down into the bar.

'It's dead!' Karag's voice observed astutely from below.

1000 HRS

A fresh bottle of WildSnake in hand, a few off-cuts of giant rat skin tucked around my feet, I settled down in an alleyway behind a tanner's shop. I opened the stopper on the bottle and let its pungent odour hit me full in the face. I had done well: the distiller had let part of the brewed snake slip into this bottle. Looked like a rib. I took a swig and swallowed one of the pills I'd acquired earlier.

Somewhere in the distance, gunfire rattled out a staccato beat – the gangers were waking. Leaning back I looked skyward. The thousand walkways of the underhive disappeared up into the darkness like a thousand steel-black arteries feeding the life blood to the Hive City's dark heart. I could make out underhivers moving along the lower levels.

Little people moving. Little people with more scar tissue than sense. This place swarmed with the very worst humanity had to offer. Here I was, knee high in effluent with only a bottle of WildSnake, a dust-respirator, a dead man's weapon and a rad-counter to my name. I had to move uphiv. I'd almost lost my life twice today and wasn't going to settle for a third. In the hive spire they don't have bugs. No bugs, no wounds either.

The tiny lights of the hive city above me looked like a galaxy of stars, a glimpse of greater things. A gentle breeze washed over my face and... and I knew I was in. The soft sound of music, light as though touched by the fingers of air – a small coloured bird in a cage – a clear night sky free from poisonous cloud cover – star freighters, bright blue thrusters propelling them deepspace – the woman, injury free and white skin dancing, turning around and around, calling out my name, soft melodious voice – no rattle of gunfire – just the soft wind, the dancer and the smell of real plants.

1200 HRS

I woke for the second time that day. With the visions of the hive spire still playing through in my mind, I walked out of the alley way into the city streets, holding the fur off-cuts tight around my shoulders.

For the first time in years, I smiled at a woman and child as they passed me by, fresh rats hung off their belts. I knew where to go and how to do it. I was going uphive.

1230 HRS

When you've got little that you own and are still getting over the euphoric effects of a drug cocktail everything seems a lot easier. Perhaps if I had been straight I would have gone about my exodus a little differently. Perhaps I wouldn't have gone to the front gate.

'You Ratman Sarak?' Masked man. Three others with him

'Huh?' I stared through the two ancient pillars that denoted Downtown's front gate – it was five metres away. The drugs in my system tripled that distance.

'Ratman Sarak your name, half-breed?' The man was dressed in robes, a pair of ape like lips jutted out of a leather mask.

'Ah, yeah?'

'Someone paid a lot of money so that they could have a problem with you instead of us.' One of the other men, cradling an auto pistol in his hands, spoke tightlipped through a similar mask to his friend.

'Oh?'

'Enough of this.' The big man was giving the orders. 'Pack him up and let's make that delivery.' I couldn't remember where I'd tucked the flamer. One of the men stuck me with a syringe filled with black liquid. My body sagged– and then I realised what I'd done.

1400 HRS

'Hullo, my sweet.' The dancing woman? I'd be able to open my eyes if I could stop my head from rotating. There were others in the room.

I caught hold of my head and snapped my eyes open.

'Oh?' A bloated neck lead in rolls of flesh up to the back of a shaven head. 'He's awake.' The figure turned around to face me. A pair of bespectacled eyes stared down on me from within a wealth

of flesh. A large guilder badge predominated a costume of rich cloth and precious metals.

'Greetings, Mr Gunta,' I slurred.

'Oh Sarak, there's no need for formalities. No, debts as steep as yours make us business partners. Call me Otto, do.'

Otto Gunta, the Black Tongued Guilder Prince of the Underhive. First time we'd met, although I knew his agents well. A guilder with as many kills to his name as he had guild bonds.

'OK, Otto.' I attempted to reach out a hand but found it tightly constrained by an iron brace.

'Silly boy. You're in no state to move. There's enough Spore venom in your blood to have you flapping about like a fish on the floor if we don't keep you restrained.' His pitch-black tongue licked his lips.

'Which spore?'

'Lugtekk, what colour was it?' Otto turned back over his shoulder.

'Yellow.' A metallic voice in the shadows, the only other thing in the big, empty warehouse.

'Now, Sarak. I have the antidote to this poison if you'd just pay up your debts.'

'Nothing.'

'That used respirator, rad counter and that hand flamer you so cleverly hid on your belt make up at least, say, thirty credits? Now if you could make up the other one sixty?'

'I don't have any money.'

'Oh yes? Well this is no good. Discovered any archaotech recently?' The guilder's pudgy fingers danced at the mention of ancient technology.

'No.'

'Some green hivers I could extort?'

'No.'

'Well I guess I'm going to have to sell your carcass to a body bank–'

'Wait... I could offer you my services.' Perhaps I didn't sound desperate enough.

'I'm afraid you're a little under-skilled. You're the town drunk and a chemhead to boot. You're worth about ten credits to a generous body harvester.'

'Seriously, I take care of infestations.'

'Infestations?'

'Pests.'

'Pests? ... Alright Sarak. You've got yourself a job. You take care of an infestation and we'll wipe the slate clean. I might even see about that dancing girl.'

'What?' Otto's nasty little mouth broke into a smile. 'You dare touch my mind with an unsanctioned psyker and I'll—'

'I don't deal with psykers, Sarak. You spilled your guts to us when you were under – once metaphorically and the second time, well...'

'I'm not laughing, fat man,' I slurred.

'You're in no position to laugh, you mincing turd!' Otto's spittle sprayed my face. 'Lugtekk, give him the antidote and get his sorry behind rigged up to infiltrate those Scavvies.'

'What?'

'Your chosen vocation is pest extermination? Well I'm up to my armpits in mutant scum from the bottom of the hive and they're costing me profit.' Otto spat out the words, slapping the guilder badge on his chest. 'What did you think I'd do, send you into my warehouses with a stick and a rat quota?'

'Yes.'

'Baha!' Otto wobbled as he broke out into a high shriek. 'Let's get this show on the road.' The warehouse suddenly came to life, lights cast the shadows aside and the ground shook and began a steady rumble.

'Where are we going?' I stumbled over the words, my fear obvious.

'We're taking this rig deeper into the hive.' Otto smiled.

1500 HRS

'What Mr Gunta wants is simple. And when Mr Gunta wants something simple done, for a lot of money, we do it. Right?' A strap was pulled tighter across my chest.

'Look – Lugtekk?' The man comprising more machine parts than real flesh stared across at me. 'You don't want to be leading an assault against these depraved cannibals – just like I don't want to be sneaking into their hide out and poisoning them.'

'Not all of 'em. Just the leader. Without him they're toasted rat.'

'That's a moot point. I'll be dead before I get close to any of them.'

'Not with this you won't.' Lugtekk fastened another strap across my chest and placed an electrode on my head.

'What is it?'

'A holo-suit. Mr Gunta was planning on selling 'em to the Talloran rebels,' Lugtekk's metal fingers pressed another electrode roughly to my head, 'but an Imperial Patrol clamped down on his spaceport and the stock ain't moved since.'

'What's it do?'

'Rerouted to make you look more like a Skavvy. Here.' Lugtekk flashed a piece of mirrored glass in my face.

Woah. Welts and a third eye adorned my head.

'Come on, Lugtekk. You know I would look more realistic with sludge meal smeared on my face.'

'It's still configuring to your dimensions.'

'You really want to go into battle? Come on, we could ditch this caravan and head uphive together.'

'Sorry, little man. When exactly did you become a friend of mine?'

'Bu—'

'See these?' Lugtekk flashed out a series of pictures.

'Aw, no, frag—' Skinned like sludge rats.

'These are the faces of gangers Mr Gunta had me ride out of town. These holos are all that's left. Right now they're eel food. I'm not in the business of being pleasant. I'm a hired gun, little man. Now get ready to go.'

I didn't speak to Lugtekk again. Otto, seated behind a control panel in his head caravan, issued orders to a band of mercenaries and hired scum, a posse he'd pulled together from the toughest bars in the underhive.

I pondered my predicament. In my sweat-drenched palms I held five melting capsules. Poison, Lugtekk had said, but I had my own suspicions. Through the shimmering light of the holo suit I pulled

on the fuel canister Otto had reimbursed me as part of the hand flamer. It was fresh. Brand new.

Otto finished his commands. 'Now Sarak.'

'Ah-huh?'

'We're going to equip you with that flamer to give you a little confidence. Pep you up some. Nothing is going to go wrong.'

'Ah-hah?'

'We've been planing this for weeks. So all you have to do is mosey on up to them with that carcass and its juicy piece of bait in your hands, pop those pills in their leader's food and, hullo hullo, come home to mummy.'

2100 HRS

The grinding of the machines above had always been of comfort to me. But down here at hive bottom I could not hear them, only the soft squelch of the mould carpet underneath me. Huge pillars bored into the ground, like the trunks of a steel forest. Fluorescent bugs scuttled up and down them like blood in the veins of an ancient giant.

In the darkness I regarded the dead ganger I had dragged all this way. His eyes were bloodied, a pock mark of jagged flesh torn through his jaw. His death had been slow. Into his belt was tucked a map and a guilder schedule, pretty good ones – even I couldn't tell they were fakes. I hoped the smell of blood hadn't attracted the nasty things from their recesses.

'Skav you're?' A voice in the darkness. A stunted figure.

'Un,' I replied trying to give as little indication of my uphive origin.

'Big Eat on. Hoegas kin?'

I didn't understand a word. 'Un.' I stuck to what worked.

'Sludge meal and manflesh to eat.'

'Oh, splendid,' I muttered under my breath.

The dark figure led on, stumbling towards a dim glow in the distance. We approached the Skavvies' stronghold, twenty figures gathered about a large fire in the middle of a shanty town. I nearly

retched when I saw the faces of these depraved souls, the garish light the fire threw up highlighted their pustulent limbs, encrusted skulls and infested wounds.

Upon the fire was a giant, spent ammunition shell, used as a cooking pot. A stray limb fell out as a bloated Skavvy stirred. Not even the visions of my worst drug-induced stupor with its skinless apes and pit-eyed marionettes compared to this spectacle.

'More for pot?' A plastic-wrapped man, jagged smile and pointed teeth, stepped out of the mass of cannibals. 'You bring good eatin?'

'Un,' I muttered, sticking with the routine.

'Me Hoegas, I lead.' The half man reached out a wrapped hand.

I passed him the body.

'You kill 'im?' His eyes shifted.

'Uh-ha. Look like guilder.'

Hoegas looked down. His smile dropped. For a second the holo suit shimmered. 'What?' The Skavvy leader reached towards the body and removed its torn flack jacket. 'He got words!' The Skavvies left the pot. They huddled close, small luminous worms digging about their flesh. I closed my eyes. 'Words tell of more guilder kin, travel slow through old walls. Got good stuff!' Hoegas translated.

'Good stuff!' The Skavvies cheered, moaned and shrieked in near unison like a demonic chorus.

'Bring new Skav down front. Let 'im eat sum.' Hoegas flapped a claw at me.

I would have been happier if I had been buried alive in a mass grave. These fiends gorged themselves for an hour on the half-decayed carcasses of former companions and the fresh kill I had delivered to them. The leader sipped periodically from a private keg of WildSnake by his side. His plastic squeaked and rustled as he stood to fetch another bowl of flesh gruel from the pot. I stumbled towards it through the crowd of Skavvies, half-frotten hands slapping me on the back as I moved. I reached for the keg. Its neck in my grasp, all sound and movement stopped. All eyes were on me.

Hoegas spun about. His eyes met mine. Thin wisps of psyker-electricity played across his fingers. I had to think quick. I unplugged the lid of the keg and, dropping to one knee, offered it to him.

'Hail Hoegas, witchman king!' I was fast running short of ideas.

'Hail!' chorused the Skavvies. Hoegas grinned a jagged toothed smile at his monstrous comrades. In the moment his head turned I crushed Otto's pills through the gaps in my clenched hand. 'Hail Hoegas!' Hoegas chuckled and reached towards the keg of WildSnake.

A shot rang out. The Skavvies fell to the ground, drawing out ancient blades and muskets. Hoegas fell to the ground - clutching at his chest.

A large scaled Skavvy stood up, smoking pistol still in his hands. 'No hail Hoegas. Hail Blotta, hail all Skavs!'

Oh great. I was in the middle of a Skavvy revolution. A cannibal collective.

Hoegas gurgled, shimmering blue light dancing about his chest wound.

'Blotta!' Hoegas cried, then erupted in a rush of blue flame and sparks. The cannibal pot spilled its gore into the sludge. I slipped on a rotten intestine.

'Blotta good Skav, let other Skavs drink!'

Blotta - three arms, one eye - snatched the WildSnake from my hands and took a deep swig. I scuttled back from him, eyes roaming the Skavvy crowd for an escape route. Blotta grinned across both his mouths.

'Good drink!' His eye caught mine, 'New Skav drink up. All Skavs drink!'

I shook my head. Blotta wasn't showing any signs of being poisoned yet; perhaps it took a little time to wear in.

'Drink!' Blotta waved his gun at me.

The other Skavvies fell silent. I fingered the trigger of the hand flamer tucked inside my shirt. An arching spray would hit most of them - what was I saying? I'd never shot a gun, let alone a highly volatile antique.

Click-chink 'Drink!' Blotta cocked and thrust his pistol at my head.

They must have been getting suspicious. I reached forward, taking as long as

I could to reach the bottle. Still no sign from Blotta. Slowly I grasped its neck, and held it to my lips. A small clock was ticking down the time in my head, I tried to move its hands. I let only the smallest amount of the WildSnake touch my lips and trickle down my dry throat.

'More!' Blotta grabbed my hand and upended more of the drink into my mouth.

I spluttered backwards onto the ground to a burst of laughter. I lay there while the Skavvies drank themselves silly on the WildSnake. I was poisoned. I tried forcing my fingers back into my throat but nothing happened.

'New Skav. Come slay guilder kin!' It was Blotta. Looked like Hoegas' old plan still stood.

I staggered to my feet. Perhaps Otto had an antidote. All I had to do was circumvent the holo-suit and get up to his caravan. Half a chance was better than none. The Skavvies armed themselves with stolen weapons and rust-encrusted blades. As they busied themselves I struggled with Hoegas' body, trying to find some evidence of his death. In the end I cut a ring from his finger.

'New Skav?' Blotta and his mutant comrades were ready.

'Un.'

NOW (0000 HRS)

Glad to be
r u n n i n g .

Good to be running. Perhaps we'll make up time. But what if there is no antidote? No means of stopping the poison that runs through me. I'm not feeling ill but it could be one of Otto's nastier concoctions, something seeping into my system and eating away at me from inside. Otto must have planned for the poison to kick in when the Skavvies arrived in his trap. Why didn't he tell me about it? How could he know they'd come straight away? What if-

We arrive. An old dome town, the metal braces that held its roof still remain like an old iron skeleton. The perfect place for a trap. A guilder caravan sits in the centre of the dome. The Skavvies cheer as

they see it below. Guns blazing, they rush at it. I follow, keeping my distance, trying to catch sight of Otto.

Nothing... and then it starts. Before the Skavvies even reach the caravan one falls to the ground. It clutches its head and thrashes about on the ash floor. Dust kicks up at its feet and thin wisps of light crackle about its head. One last kick and it lies still, electricity tracing along its lifeless body. Blotta begins to scream, firing shots wildly into the air. One gets lucky and hits one of Otto's mercenaries hidden in the iron braces.

A volley of gunfire, heavy weapons and red hot lasers rains down on the Skavvies. A few shots are good but the mutants seem to have an uncanny speed. Blotta still screams and then begins to slowly rise from the ground. A wyrd? Spiralling upwards, his shotgun buckles as forces beyond his control wrack his body. Other Skavvies, hidden amidst the old machines and broken concrete slabs, begin to cast fire from their fingers, burn white hot and float.

'Gunta!' I yell over the sound of the screaming Skavvies and the gunfire. A red dot traces its way across the ground towards me. I struggle with the electrodes stuck to my head. I start running. Bullets pepper the ground behind me, throwing up ash and ricochets from scrap metal. I duck into an old doorway and slump to the ground.

A Skavvy's hiding here too. It draws out an old musket.

I wave my flamer at it.

'Skav?' It moans. 'Others think in my head.'

'What?'

'Big man laughing, metal man shoot metal from above. Skavs think of dead.' It slaps its brow. 'All in my head. All in my head.'

Suddenly I work it out. Spook. The street name for what wannabe Psychers hit up on in order to get some psychic action. It was banned throughout the underhive, but some still couldn't refuse the chance of wielding a bit of netherforces. Otto must have wanted to fry the Skavvy boss' mind, make him overload on

psychic juices or something. But now it was messing with everyone's head.

'You think man-thoughts. You not Skav. You friend of laughing man!' The Skavvy levels its musket at me.

I let my finger run the flamer's trigger as far as it will go.

Flaaaash The flamer begins spewing blazing napalm across the Skavvy and throughout the burnt-out room we were in. I leap from the flames. A bullet grazes my head from above. The sniper must have been waiting. I start running again, panting and desperate. One of my legs catches alight from a lick of flame that comes rushing down from above.

The scene outside is rife with destruction and carnage. Skavvy turns on Skavvy hallucinating wildly as the mercenaries gradually tighten their stranglehold. Bullets fall in waves about the dome. I drop to the ground and beat at the flames on my legs. I rip the electrodes from my head and hit the holo-suit's release button. Blood trickles down across my eyes.

'Gunta! You slimehole!' I scream.

Don't worry. He'll get bis. A voice in my head.

'What?' I groan, flat on my back, the ancient dome above me. My head spins. Some thing is inside my head. Hive spirit?

Not exactly.

'What're you doing in my head?'

You eat those pills?

What? Uphive. Dreams of uphive. Think... Focus!

I pull myself across the ground. Skavvies lie twisted and contorted in the shapes of painful death. Many are alight.

You're the last one alive.

'How do you know?' Voices in the distance. Outside my head.

Trust me. I was there when each of them died.

Otto Gunta the Black Tongued Guilder Prince strolls about the corpses, surrounded by men, marking each dead Skavvy off on a clipboard.

'We've done well, Lugtekk.' Otto addresses the mechanoid man beside him. 'Quite well.'

'Gunta!' I call out.

He can't bear you.

It's true – he doesn't react.

'Gunta!' I scream so loud I think my lungs will burst.

I won't let him bear you. Not until we've had our chat.

'Who are you?' Sharp pain shoots throughout my body. 'Get out of my head.' I roll over, face-first in the ash.

She dances pretty well.

'What?' Ash tastes like burnt bones.

The girl in your head.

'Leave her alone.'

Oh-bo, silly boy! The Spire looks nothing like this. No no. Scrap the coloured birds and the warm breezes. They're all booked up on life support systems up there. Air's too thin to breathe. The voice is jagged with cynicism.

'Liar!'

How'd you know? Like a pain in the back of my head. *Don't cry now.*

'Damn you!'

That's better, use those emotions all up. I feel my body being lifted. *Now let's get us moving eh?*

I stand in my feet, legs propelled by forces other than my own. The men move with suspicion. Otto is undeterred.

'Well done, Sarak.' Otto approaches.

'Why'd you use Spook?' My voice rings loud like a roll of thunder.

'Oh no. I don't deal in illegal substances.'

Crack

A pain through my chest. 'That's your payment done.' The obese guildler slides his pistol back into its holster.

Did that hurt? It had to hurt.

'You're dead!' I stagger forwards, thrusting the flamer at Otto.

'Wa-?' Otto turns, my sudden actions making the fat man dance on his feet. 'Kill him!'

A hail of gunfire jousts with the wave of flame that I launch from the weapon in my hand. I'm struck all over, hot metal boring into my flesh. The bullets feel warm inside my cold body. Not too much pain.

That's the spirit!

I burst alight, the flamer dropping at my feet. Otto's men roll and writhe on the ground slapping at the flames.

Let's dance.

The few remaining mercenaries rush at me, controlled bursts breaking into wild fire as I fail to fall to the ground in a bloody heap.

'What are you doing to me?' I scream as I am flung about like a puppet on a string.

You're possessed from the warp, boyo. It's a lesson in messing with psychic drugs.

Claws I never knew I had begin to cut the fighting men to ribbons. Only Lugtekk fights on. Blood and oil streams from his body, his machine limbs clogged with his own life fluid. All too soon he falls to a burning heap on the ground.

This is it, I think, I'm going to die. But I have one last trick to play.

What trick?

'Never you mind,' I say aloud.

I take a few deep breaths and rush Otto. He screeches and tries to run, but I do not let him.

'Take my credit badge! Sarak, I can fix it! I have friends in the spire. I can get you work there!' Otto weeps like a child.

'No,' I reply calmly. I feel pain. 'No, Otto. We're both going to die.' The hurt runs in waves across my body.

What are you doing to me? The voice is fading.

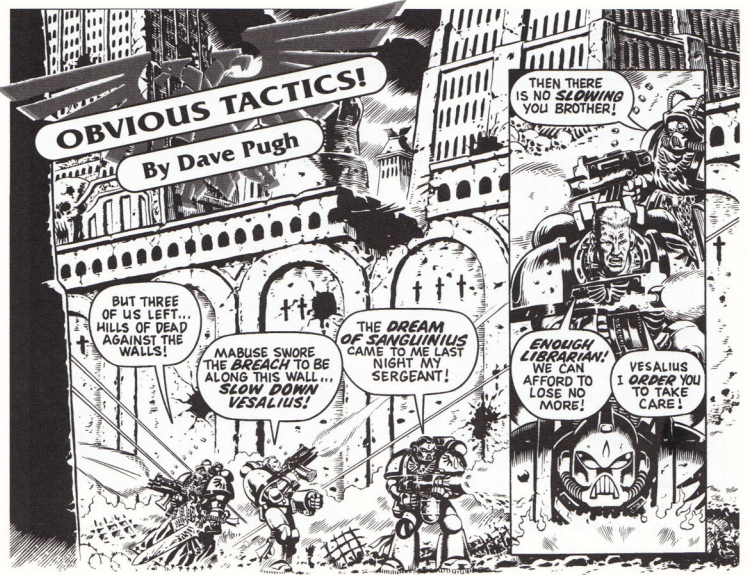
'I have a present for you, Otto.' I release hold of all that I care for; let my emotions slip into nothing. Slumping forward, I fall on top of Otto, crushing his body to the ground.

Otto shrieks. Already a death spasm grips my body.

You're dying.

'I know.' I thrust a bloodied arm down the screaming guildler's throat. And let go of the dancing girl.

My eyes are glazing over. Consciousness slips away with the last drops of blood. A final image burns into my retina – the screaming guildler, possessed to die and burn for eternity. ●



OBVIOUS TACTICS!
By Dave Pugh

BUT THREE OF US LEFT... HILLS OF DEAD AGAINST THE WALLS!

MABUSE SWORE THE BREACH TO BE ALONG THIS WALL... SLOW DOWN VESALIUS!

THE DREAM OF SANGUINIUS CAME TO ME LAST NIGHT MY SERGEANT!

THEN THERE IS NO SLOWING YOU BROTHER!

ENOUGH LIBRARIAN! WE CAN AFFORD TO LOSE NO MORE!

VESALIUS I ORDER YOU TO TAKE CARE!



NOT THIS DAY! SEE, THE BREACH AHEAD!

HOLD, IT'S UNGUARDED! AN OBVIOUS TRAP!



THEN, IT CALLS FOR OBVIOUS TACTICS!



NO!

VADOOM!



OPERATION 00SW90023.45 'Stormfrost'

Honour Record (D)

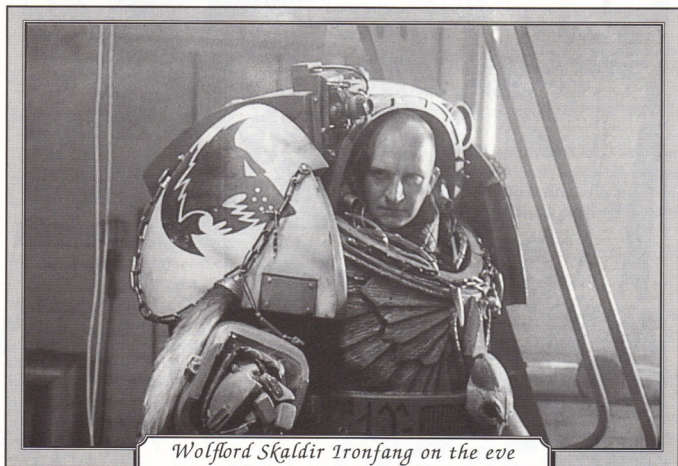
DURING the Great Hunt which led to the cleansing of the K'Dar, K'Fir and the neighbouring Takaran systems, the Space Wolves fought with customary distinction, particularly during the final 10 day assault on the heretic fortress code-named Magnavox Ultima. Wolflord Skaldir Ironfang, of the line of Harek Ironhelm, led his Great Company on the legendary attack which utterly crushed the World Eaters' planetary bastion to rubble.

During the operation, Longfang Egnar and Sergeant Wulfric distinguished themselves notably. Egnar single-handedly held the breach on the north wall for over an hour, until eventually

rendered immobile by the sheer weight of slain World Eaters piled up against him. This heroic action culminated in the fall of the Tower of Souls, arguably the real turning point in the battle for the Imperial forces.

Wulfric's squad teleported directly into the command bunker of Ghordane the Torturer, slaying no less than fifty heretics and entirely dismantling the World Eaters' defensive command structure, at the cost of their own lives. Sergeant Wulfric is commended posthumously.

Ironfang returned with the head of Ghordane, which now resides in the shrine of Harek on Fenris.



*Wolflord Skaldir Ironfang on the eve
of Operation Stormfrost.*



*Longfang Egnar, 1st Great Company,
veteran of 115 battles.*



*Sergeant Wulfric, 1st Great Company,
posthumously commended.*

GRUNSONN'S MARAUDERS

By Andy Jones

GENTLEMEN, the deal is done. Your honour, sorry, *our* honour is at stake!' The young man stood defiantly in front of the rough wooden table, around which three travel-worn characters played cards and drank from battered tankards. Two tankards were full of frothy ale in which suspicious shapes surfaced now and then. The other held a liquid golden glitter, which the owner refilled from a delicate bottle every so often.

'Raise yer ten, and throw in me spare dagger of wotsit slaying.' The gruff voice was that of a Dwarf of indeterminate age and very few teeth. His black beard was streaked with silver grey (and gravy stains), his face a mass of scars from old wounds, weather-beaten and rugged. His armour was dented and scratched, and two fingers were missing from his left hand. A huge, rune-encrusted axe leaned against the table next to him. Unlike everything else about the Dwarf, the axe gleamed and shone, even in the fuggy gloom of the Broken Bones Inne. Grimcrag Grunsonn peered at his cards through beady black eyes.

'Ach, Grimcrag, ven to admit Defeat! Dat Kard is nozzink bot a Seven.' The heavily-accented growl came from the lips of a wolfish Barbarian sitting opposite the Dwarf. Heavily muscled, with a bearskin draped across his broad shoulders, the Barbarian glanced at Johan Anstein and grinned, showing white teeth. 'I got 'im now, ja?'

Johan threw his eyes heavenwards and tapped an impatient foot on the worn floorboards. 'Look, we've been sitting around for weeks now. So I've sorted us a job out, and—'

'What sort of a job, lad? More wet-nursing ladies on the way to court? You know what happened last time! Hah! Wet-nurses!' Jiriki the Elf laughed quietly, a knowing look shining in his eyes.

Keanu the Reaver, the fur-clad Barbarian, emitted something halfway between a belch and a throaty guffaw. 'Vet-nurse! Ha! Zome joke dat, eh, Grimcrag?'

The Dwarf stared stony-faced at his cards. 'Weren't no fault of mine. Should've had good Dwarf buckets 'stead of them shoddy things.'

Johan winced at the memory, but pressed on bravely. 'No, a proper job. You know, underground – with monsters and danger and stuff, a real quest.' The young would-be hero looked dreamily across the bar, already envisaging the many brave and daring deeds awaiting them.

The others ignored him. They'd heard it all before; Johan's pipe-dreams rarely came to anything.

'Okey-dokey, Grimcrag, da dagger it is.' The Reaver held his cards to his massive chest in a conspiratorial fashion.

'It's a wizard, see, lives here in town, wants us to find a long-lost magical item.'

'They all do, lad, they all do,' Grimcrag muttered. 'Let's see you, then.'

'Funf tenz!' proclaimed the Barbarian.

'Damn!'

'Ja!' Keanu grinned viciously. 'I vin! I vin! Da dagger 'f ya pleez...'

Johan drew in a deep breath and threw a sizeable bag down on the table. It clinked with an instantly recognisable metallic sound. 'He's given me a down-payment.'

Expecting a row for dubious tactics, Keanu was more than a little surprised when Grimcrag handed over the dagger, but the Barbarian did notice that a familiar glazed look had come over the Dwarf's craggy features. Even as Grimcrag's left hand passed over the weapon, his right sidled of its own accord towards the bag, giving it a nudge. The bag jingled again.

'It's—' Johan began.

'Shush now, lad, I knows what this is.' Grimcrag's features had taken on a look of

rapturous awe. 'Bretonnian gold, brought back from the new lands of Luscitara.'

'Lustria actually,' Jiriki corrected. 'And you only had to ask; we've known about the humid, swampy, jungle infested place for...'

'Never mind that. Their gold is second to none.' Grimcrag felt the bag again. After a few more investigative pokes, a secretive, greedy look came over the Dwarf's craggy face, and he paused, before continuing in a disappointed tone.

'Actually, on second thoughts, I'm wrong y'know.' He dragged the bag towards him across the table.

'Vot meanink?' Keanu asked, his razor-sharp intuition picking up the change in the Dwarf's manner.

'He's gone all goldsome on us. They all go like that,' the Elf sighed. 'He'll be alright in a minute or two.'

'Can we get on with it? The wizard is waiting.' Johan was getting more exasperated by the second. 'You've got... sorry, we've got the gold. It's just a down-payment; we've got to meet him at his tower within the hour.'

Grimcrag shook his head, a sly look in his eye. Jiriki gave a short barking laugh and drew his dagger. From past experience, the Elf knew what was about to happen.

'You've bin done, lad,' the Dwarf said, peering inside the bag. 'Yup, just as I thought: brass and copper, brass and copper – just enough to pay back what you owes me for the sword and stuff I gave you.' Tutting disappointedly to himself, Grimcrag made to put the bag into his pack, moving with startling speed – but the Elf and Barbarian proved faster.

Keanu held Grimcrag's wrist while Jiriki split the bag open with one lightning-swift stroke of his dagger. Gold coins spilled across the table, glinting and gleaming in the light.

'Koppa?'

'Brass my--' Jiriki began.

'Sorcery!' exclaimed the Dwarf, looking sheepish, 'It was all brass a moment ago, I swear.' Johan could have sworn that the Dwarf was shaking, and had tears in his eyes, but he put it down to the smoke which filled the air of the gloomy inn.

The young man drew a deep breath and gave it one more try. He was one of the

Marauders now, so they had to listen to him. Johan tried to look stern and authoritative, copying a look he'd seen Grimcrag use to good effect a number of times – usually when confronting ogres or trolls and addressing them as if they were naughty children who deserved spanking.

'Ahem!' Johan frowned for effect. 'AHEM!'

Keanu shot the ex-Imperial Envoy a glance and involuntarily spat beer across the table.

'Vot's up, jung `un? Konstipatid?'

Grimcrag was dabbing his eyes with a dirty cloth, whilst trying to regain his composure. Jiriki was putting the last coin away in his pack to be shared out later, but he looked up and grinned at Johan's posturing.

'Not bad, lad, not bad – now, what's the story again?'

Seizing his chance, Johan closed his eyes and took a very deep breath, before rattling off as many of the details as he could remember of his chance encounter with the cowed wizard with the twinkling eyes.

'Err... He wants us to rescue a magic item of some sort from the clutches of the monsters – that's undead and suchlike – from some caves under the Grey Mountains. He's been after it for years, and it's all he wants. He has lots of gold and treasure, and the bag is a down-payment. He lives in the big tower on the outskirts of town, and says that if we bring the artefact back, we can keep all the other loot from the dungeon – all he wants is the thing itself!' Panting, Johan finished his monologue and opened his eyes, proud of his powers of recall.

He was sitting on his own at the table. A few regulars stared at him as if he was mad, or had the plague perhaps.

Flushing a bright red, Johan picked up his pack and stumbled for the door, making his excuses as he fled. 'Damn them all to hell!' he muttered, buckling on his sword belt and setting off after his companions. He could just make out Grimcrag's stumpy figure running off at the end of the street.

'Wait for me, you callous bunch of thugs!'

Johan set off in hot pursuit. Well, he knew where they going. As he tore round the corner, he heard the unmistakable voice of an enraged Innkeeper.

'Wretched Marauders! Who's payin' for all this beer?'

Johan Anstein wasn't stopping. This was his quest, and he was going to be in on it whether the others liked it or not.



THE GREY-COWLED wizard had obviously been expecting them, since he was waiting by the door to his tower. It was a run-down building, perhaps a hundred feet high and little more than twenty feet in diameter. Weeds grew in thick clumps around its base, and ivy crawled up the lichen-encrusted brickwork. No windows looked out any lower than a good thirty feet up the walls, giving the tower obvious defensive capabilities.

From the top, Johan imagined, you could see for miles and miles, at least as far as the Grey Mountains, far off to the north. He also noticed that although the tower looked decrepit in places, the front door was very impressive indeed. Ten feet tall, five feet broad, its dark black timbers and heavy iron surround suggested indomitable strength and near indestructibility. It had so many locks and bolts that in places it was hard to see the wood at all.

'Spouse that's magic-locked too?' Grimcrag had asked with grudging admiration.

'Not at all, not all,' beamed the twinkly-eyed wizard from deep inside his grey hood. 'You can't beat a good set of locks and a strong door. In my experience, ostentatious displays of magic just seem to make the wrong sort... inquisitive, if you know what I mean.' With that, and the jangling of a hefty bunch of keys, they were in.

The tower was gloomy and dusty inside, betraying the fact that it had not really been occupied for some time now. Most of the doors up to the fifth floor were boarded over and nailed shut, and Johan couldn't help being intrigued and curious. He'd never been in a wizard's den before, not a real one.

Keanu had stayed outside 'To be keeping Guard' but Johan knew that, for all his

muscles, the hulking Barbarian didn't much trust the powers of magic, and stayed well clear unless he couldn't help it. If the stories were to be believed, the only way Keanu liked to deal with wizards was with a sharp blade. However, gold was gold, a job was a job, so the Reaver was 'Votchink for Troubles' outside.

'A wizard's tower, eh, Grimcrag, Jiriki?' Johan's voice was a muted, awe-struck whisper.

'Poor decor, very dusty, not much of a colour scheme,' the Elf muttered, mostly to himself.

'Badly built, needs repointing, I've knocked down better,' Grimcrag added from up ahead. 'Hold on a minute – how come Keanu had five tens anyway?'

'Yes, but still... oh, never mind!'

Eventually they had reached the top level and emerged breathless into the wizard's chamber. There, seated amidst the bubbling vats, stuffed animals, astrolabes, ancient books and all the other accoutrements of his trade, the wizard had explained the mission.

It seemed that he had spent his whole life searching for the Finger of Life, a powerful magical artefact, crafted when the world was young and death but a dream.

'Read that somewhere,' interjected Grimcrag at that point. 'Go on.'

The wizard explained that this item was a power to heal, to restore, and unspecified Dark Forces had conspired for years to keep it from his grasp. Now he had pinpointed where it rested, yet he was too old to go and wrest it from the powers of darkness. He needed heroes, mighty warriors of great renown, to go and retrieve the Finger of Life for him. He had heard of the great deeds of Grunsonn's Marauders, and knew that it was Fate which had brought them to this small backwater, south of the Grey Mountains.

'The way will be hard, but think of the greater good! Think of the children to be healed, the starving to be fed!'

'It's really that good, is it?' Jiriki inquired languidly as he peered out of the window in the tower. 'Hey, Grimcrag, I can see into young Miss Epstan's boudoir from here.'

'That good and better, young man!' exclaimed the kindly old wizard, ignoring the Elf and concentrating on Johan. 'You

see these boxes?' He threw a stout chest open, so that sunlight glinted on the contents within. Johan gasped: he'd never seen so much gold all in one place. The wizard noticed his shock and grinned. 'All as nothing compared to the Finger of Life, believe me.'

Grimcrag coughed and tried to maintain his composure, but when he spoke his voice shook a little. 'Take it off your hands if you like, I can see it's, erm, cluttering the place, and filling all your nice boxes too. If you like, that is...' His voice trailed off as the wizard flung open another chest containing a myriad assortment of gemstones. 'Gggnggh...'

'A pretty speech, Grimcrag, but motivated by gold-lust rather than concern for my storage facilities I fear, eh?' The old man laughed at the Dwarf's obvious discomfort.

'Well, I just thought—'

The wizard swept his arm dismissively around the chamber. 'The Finger sits in such company as makes this little lot worthless, and you, my friends, may have it all. All I want is the Finger.'

'Lots of treasure then?' Grimcrag had that pensive look that usually preceded a new adventure. Johan crossed his fingers behind his back. It looked as if Grimcrag was on board at least. The wizard nodded.

'Plenty of Orcs and other hellspawn to test the mettle of my Ulthuan-crafted blade?' Jiriki leant out of the window, looking straight downwards, his words a careless whisper. The wizard nodded. Johan exhaled with relief; he'd thought that the Elf would be the hardest to convince. Jiriki looked over his shoulder, staring the wizard straight in the eye. The old man nodded again. After a moment, the Elf shrugged and looked out of the window once more. This time he shouted. 'Hey, Keanu, can you hear me down there?'

'Ja! Vot's happenink?' The unmistakable voice drifted faintly upwards 'Is jung Anstein turning into a Toad yet?'

'No, my friend. We just wondered if you fancied liberating a fortune in jewels and gold from some of the greenskins you hate so much?'

There was a brief pause.

'Ja! Of course! Vot schtupid Qvestion!'



THE MINOTAUR bellowed and roared as it charged down the narrow underground passageway. Johan backed away fast, holding his sword in front of him. During his years of schooling to be an Imperial Envoy, he'd obviously missed the 'Minotaurs: Etiquette and Handling Thereof' lessons. His sword looked ridiculously puny, even to himself. Still, if he was going to die, he might as well go down in a way worthy of one of Grunsonn's Marauders.

'Come on then, *come on then!*' he shouted, inwardly preparing for a painful demise.

The Minotaur grunted and slowed to a stop. Its head swung slowly to and fro as it sniffed the air warily. Its teeth were still bared, but it obviously wasn't quite so keen to face Johan as a few seconds previously.

Anstein blinked, and regarded his sword with new respect. Perhaps Grimcrag had given him a magic one by mistake. He waved it at the Minotaur again for good effect. 'You want some? YOU WANT SOME?'

The Minotaur growled loudly and backed off towards the darkness from where it had emerged scant seconds earlier. To the young adventurer, it already seemed as if hours had passed since he'd first seen the beast. Time moved like glue.

'Um... you craven coward, come taste my blade!' Johan took a step forward, much emboldened.

This was obviously too much for the massive beast, as it turned tail and fled into the darkness. Johan heard its cloven hoofs beating a rapid tattoo on the rough stone floor. He was just sheathing his sword, in pride and relief, when Grimcrag, Jiriki and Keanu came hurtling around the corridor.

'Hey, did you see that, I just...' Johan's voice tailed off in terror.

The Marauders were looking at him with open horror and revulsion, and Johan could see what was coming – these were

trained warriors who reacted first and regretted their actions later. Well, sometimes.

'No, it's all right. It's me - Johan!' he shrieked, wondering if somehow he had been enchanted to look like a fearsome creature. This was crazy. It was also much too late. As if in slow motion, Johan saw two arrows flash from Jiriki's bow, even as Keanu hurled a wickedly barbed spear, and Grimcrag's massive axe hurtled through the air. Even under the circumstances, Johan had to admire their reactions.

Still in slow motion, he backed away, dropping his sword in abject terror. The missiles crossed the short space between them. Johan mouthed silent curses. The axe glinted in the air.

Johan's improvised escape stopped abruptly as he backed into something big and hard. Something that growled. Something whose fetid breath touched him for a split second. Something whose beady red eyes regarded him balefully in the instant before it was simultaneously decapitated by a large axe, pinioned by a spear and spitted by two arrows to its black heart.

With a growling gurgle and a fountain of viscous black blood, the immense troll collapsed and died, one viciously clawed hand dragging Johan down with it. His desperately flailing arms caught a knobbly projection of rock, which came away in his hand. Hitting his head hard on the granite floor, the last thing Johan heard was a dull grating, rumbling sound. Even as he passed out it occurred to him that they may well all be about to die.



A BOOTED FOOT prodded Johan Anstein in the ribs. Callused fingers tugged roughly at his jerkin. Foul, caustic liquid was forced down his throat. A harsh voice shouted at him in a barely understandable tongue, as powerful and (from the smell) none-too-recently washed arms wrenched him moaning to his feet. Even in his groggy haze, and with

his head smarting badly, Johan knew that something awful was about to happen. Maybe everyone else was dead. Maybe he was the last of the Marauders.

He blinked and tried to stand unaided, swaying dizzily but determined not to give his captors the satisfaction of seeing his weakness.

'Vot you think, Grimcrag, not holt his Liquor?'

'He'll be alright, had a nasty knock on the head, go easy on the lad,' Jiriki said.

'Knock some sense into him perhaps.'

'Now now, Grimcrag, the lad's done fine by us so far, give him credit,' the Elf chided. 'We'd not have found the concealed door otherwise.'

Waving away another slug of the noxious brew Grimcrag was toting, Anstein looked slowly about him. He quickly ran his hands over his bruised body, checking that nothing was missing. Apparently not. A thought trickled sluggishly through his battered brain. It eventually came to rest.

'What concealed door?'

As one, the Marauders stepped aside to reveal a large portal, where before there had been only a rock wall. Evidently the piece of stone Johan had grabbed as he fell had been some kind of hidden trigger mechanism.

'Are you sure it's the right one?' Anstein asked nervously. 'I've seen what happens when you lot go poking around for treasure behind secret doors.'

'You've got the map, young 'un,' Grimcrag grunted, still affronted that Johan didn't want any of his beer, 'and all the other stuff from the wizard too.'

'Let's just open da verdampen Door, ja?' Keanu enthused, drawing his sword.

Grimcrag began to smile, and a split-second later he had his savage axe firmly gripped in both hands. 'OK! Let's maraud!'

'Hold it, hold it!' The Elven voice cut the air. 'Johan's right for once.' Jiriki was squinting at the inscriptions on the doorway. 'These are very old and powerful runes, and we don't want to break them without good reason.' He traced their shapes with a slender finger. 'Very good reason indeed.'

Grimcrag peered at the symbols, muttering under his breath. 'Good workmanship this. Old. Powerful.' The Dwarf turned to

Johan. 'OK, young 'un, get the stuff out, let's be 'aving you. Who knows what'll be along in a minute.'

'Ja, Monsters, Dragonz even!' the Reaver chipped in enthusiastically, looking at the dark recesses in the narrow passage, perhaps to spot any lurking behemoths they had missed earlier.

Johan reached into his backpack and pulled out a selection of objects given them by the wizard. One was an old map, which Johan rolled out on the stone floor and weighted down with some bits of troll. The warriors hunched over the map, illuminated by the flickering light of their torch.



JOHAN CAREFULLY packed the objects away again one at a time. He had a bag to hold the Finger of Life when they found it. There was also a simulacrum of the artefact, to be placed exactly in the spot where the Finger rested. Apparently it contained enough power to paralyse the guardians whilst the Marauders made their getaway. This bit had worried Johan a great deal, nervous as he was about powerful artefacts and cursed guardians, but he feared to say anything as the other warriors had taken the announcement in their stride.

Johan had also been given a magical talisman, which would re-seal the runes on the doorway – if the accompanying instructions were closely followed. That bit had worried him too, but the others had pointed out that if push came to shove even Grimcrag could run pretty fast. Finally, there was the agreement signed by the wizard that any other treasure they liberated was theirs to keep: all he wanted was the Finger.

'OK, this is definitely the place, I've got the gear. Let's do it.'

'Vot's da plan then?'

Grimcrag scratched his bearded chin thoughtfully. 'Well, in my experience, places with secret doors – ones which are magically locked by old and powerful

runes, mind – spell two things.' He paused a moment and counted on his stubby fingers. 'The main one is treasure. Gold.' At the thought, his eyes closed wistfully for a few moments.

'And the second?' Johan prompted.

'Ah, the second...' Grimcrag scowled and looked fierce. 'That'll be all the hideous monsters defending the gold, all destined to die by my blade!'

'Und mine also!'

Jiriki looked heavenwards, arms folded. He tapped his foot impatiently. 'And the plan is?'

Grimcrag beamed. Jiriki began to grin. The Reaver's barking laugh cut the dank air.

'We all know the plan, don't we? It's the same one we've always used,' Grimcrag said politely, before lowering his voice to a rumbling, menacing rasp. 'We goes in, we kills 'em all, we takes the loot, we legs it. Gottit?'

'Clear as a bell, my friend.'

'Ja, Kunnink!'

Johan blanched in terror. 'Is that it? Shouldn't we at least—'

But it was too late. Grimcrag and Keanu rolled back the great stone doors, ready to rush the inevitable horde of monsters. Jiriki had an arrow nocked, the string on his fine Elf bow pulled taut.

A moment later and they were all reeling back in shocked surprise. Rather than the expected flood of Zombies, Chaos creatures, Orcs or worse, they were completely blinded by a burst of pure white light. The brightness threw the tunnel into stark whiteness, and the Marauders fell to their knees, their hands covering their eyes. The torches they carried were dropped, to gutter and die on the floor, but no one noticed, such was the intensity of the light streaming from the long-sealed cavern.

Johan hurled himself to one side of the stone doorway, where he lay panting in terror. After a moment he found that he was, surprisingly, still alive.

Johan blinked. 'It's just light!' he called out, standing up warily and dusting himself down. Shielding his eyes and peering around the doorway, he saw the others walking into the light, black silhouettes against the brightness.

'Get in here, manling, sharpish!'

Johan staggered forwards, tentatively entering a chamber where the air was crisp and sweet, and the sound of soft breathing resonated peacefully. As his eyes grew accustomed to the glare, Johan gasped in astonishment. They were in a low roofed, circular chamber at least thirty feet in diameter. The walls were bright white, and radiated the light which had assailed them.

This was not what had caused Johan to gasp. In a circle around the walls of the cavern there was a ring of stone slabs, perhaps twenty in all. On each, bedecked in the finery of princes, was an Elf warrior of such beauty and nobility that it was almost painful to look upon them. They slept, and theirs was the soft breathing which filled the air. Each was in full war gear, each held an elaborately styled sword to his chest. Each looked to be a king.

'Ancient Elf lords, livery of Tiranoc, the sunken kingdom,' Jiriki spoke softly, his voice tinged with awe.

But even this was not what had caused Johan to gasp. At the centre of the chamber, surrounded by the sleeping Elf lords, was a plain yet elegant plinth. Elf and Dwarf runes were inscribed in its surfaces, the spidery grandeur of the Elven sigils contrasting with the powerful majesty of the Dwarf work.

Atop the plinth sat a finger. A black, wizened finger. A wrinkled, mostly decayed, scabrous thing of great antiquity. Despite its obvious age, Johan was under no illusions that this was what these princely lords were here to protect.

Grimcrag looked over at Johan and laughed. 'Don't be taken in, boy, one false move and these charming lads will be revealed in their true shape. Vampires, I wouldn't wonder. Demons even. Don't touch 'em.'

Johan paused; doubt assailed him. Then, with trembling steps, he made for the central dais. Jiriki was already there. The Elf stood by the plinth, reading the inscriptions as best he could. 'These are beyond me, but they are probably powerful runes of protection akin to those on the doorway.'

'Vot Treasure?' Ever down to earth, the Barbarian was scouting the chamber, looking for secret compartments where the great treasure trove might be found.

'Nothink here. Not vun think.'

The Dwarf looked around and sniffed the air, shaking his head in evident disgust. 'Good point, meathead. We've been done!'

'Never mind that now,' whispered Johan. 'Let's get the finger and get out of here – we can sort out payment later, when we get back.' Once more, he was sure that something awful was about to happen. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

They converged on the central dais. The Reaver's sword weaved, testing the air, and his eyes darted nervously about the chamber. Grimcrag stood close by, legs apart for balance, his axe held firmly in both hands. Jiriki reached out for the finger – as he touched it, the breathing of the sleepers faltered in its regular rhythm.

'Leave it, Jiriki!' Johan screeched. 'Remember the instructions: the simulacrum!'

The Elf recoiled from the finger as if struck. He nodded to Johan, eyes wide. Grimcrag guffawed, a nervous cough of a laugh.

Johan carefully unwrapped the simulacrum from his pack. It looked little like the blackened stump on the plinth, but the wizard had assured them that it held magic properties enough to contain the guardians for a while at least. Johan reached carefully with his left hand for the aged finger, his right simultaneously manoeuvring the simulacrum into place. As he grasped the finger, a shudder went through the sleepers. Quick though Johan was to remove the artefact, one of the lords abruptly awoke, sitting upright and reaching for his sword.

'WHO DARES-' he began, but his voice was cut short as Grimcrag's axe removed his noble head from his elegant body. Jiriki winced. Johan placed the simulacrum on the dais. The sleepers resumed their slumber, although now their breathing was disturbed, and they fidgeted restlessly in their sleep, as if in the throes of nightmares.

'Goddit, ja?' Keanu asked.

Johan nodded.

'Let's go,' growled Grimcrag.

They made for the door, half expecting a hideous trap to be sprung as they left. Jiriki paused by the defiled slab, his forehead furrowed by lines of uncertainty.

'Come on, Jiriki, it was him or us,' Grimcrag said softly from the doorway. 'If I'm wrong, at least it's not you 'as been kinslaying, and I'll owe someone due reparation.'

Hesitantly Jiriki joined them outside the chamber. 'We're all in this together, my friend. Let's hope we're right.'

In the passageway, Keanu had a torch relit, and the warriors carefully closed the stone door behind them, shutting out the white light and plunging themselves into gloom once again. Johan handed the magical talisman to Jiriki, who passed it around the doorway, realigning the broken runes once more.

'There you are, see!' exclaimed Grimcrag. 'That wizard knows what he's up to all right - all bar the treasure, that is...' His gruff voice trailed off, and he spat on the floor.

'Somvun get da Treasure first?' Keanu suggested, striding off along the corridor with lantern held high.

'Mebbe so,' grunted the Dwarf. 'And wait for us!' Johan and the grizzled Dwarf followed the Barbarian.

Jiriki joined them a moment later, a puzzled frown still on his face. 'The problem is, if we think for a moment, that the chamber had lain undisturbed for ages. We found it as it was sealed, runes unbroken. No one has been there before us.'

'And that means-' Johan added after the required moment's thought.

'No treasure!' Grimcrag scowled even more ferociously than usual. 'As I thought, that wizard has some explaining to do once he's got 'is precious Finger back!'

Dispirited, the adventurers made their way to the surface and the long trek back to civilisation. It seemed that the quest was, at least from their own point of view, a failure.

'At least ve're gettink da Finga,' commented Keanu, attempting a glimmer of cheer as they trudged out of the broken down cave entrance 'Und ve can see da Daylight vunce more.'

Grimcrag looked around the desolate hillside. It was starting to snow again. 'What good's that to us, eh? Daylight won't keep us warm, nor pay our expenses neither.'

Jiriki laughed. The situation had tickled

his Elven humour. 'And all for a mummified bit of man-flesh that is worth nothing to anyone except our misguided patron. We can't even sell it to anyone else.'

Grimcrag snorted and stomped off into the snow, followed by the Barbarian, now wrapped tightly in his bearskin. The Dwarf's gruff voice floated back towards the Elf, who was stowing his bow to avoid the string being ruined by the damp air. 'Not funny. Not funny at all!'

Bursting into a bright and spirit-raising melody, the Elf ran lightly after his companions, leaving Johan shivering in the entrance. A plan was growing in Anstein's mind, a plan so devious that it might just work.

'Hold on you lot! Hold on!' he shouted, rushing off down the hillside after the vanishing figures. In a few minutes he caught them, waiting for him in the lee of a large boulder which offered a little shelter from the elements.

'Make it quick, lad,' Grimcrag said through gritted teeth.

'Yes, yes, but listen to this idea,' Johan began, hopping from foot to foot.

'Ideas, pah!' spat Keanu, his breath steaming in the cold. He stabbed Johan in the chest with an iron hard finger. 'Dis hole grosses Dizazta ist 'coz of your verdamten Planen.' Johan had noticed before that the Barbarian's accent thickened to near-incomprehensibility when he got angry.

Even Jiriki shook his head wearily. 'I think you've got us in enough of a mess already with your pipe-dreams, lad. Leave it alone, eh?'

As the three Marauders turned to go, Johan jumped in front of them, eyes gleaming.

'Listen, you miserable beggars. We've got the Finger, right?'

'Ja, so vot?'

'The Vizard, sorry, the wizard wants it, right?'

'Yesss, go on...' Grimcrag was interested. He could see the glimmerings of a plan happening, a plan which might involve some gold.

Johan seized his chance and blurted out the whole scheme. 'We get old Gerry the butcher to make us a finger just like the real one. After all, the wizard has never seen it.' Johan counted the points off on

his fingers. 'Then we take the real finger and bury it somewhere secret nearby.' Jiriki was nodding in approval. Johan held up another finger. 'We take the fake finger to the wizard and try and get an explanation from him. He won't let us in the tower if we don't have something to wave at him.'

'Klevva lad. Be Continuing.'

'Well, as I see it, once we're in the tower, he'll either spin us a yarn, or offer us some gold by way of apology. If we get some treasure, we go back and get the real finger for him. Otherwise, we tell him he's got a fake and sell him the real one. Simple! We can't lose!' Pleased with himself, Johan swelled up with pride.

The others, standing by the boulder on the desolate hillside, assessed the plan.

'Butcher, ja?'

'A simulacrum of a simulacrum, I like that.'

'Treasure and gold after all!'

'Well?' enquired Johan after a minute or so. 'What do you think?'

Grimcrag grabbed him by the shoulders, staring sternly into Johan's eyes. The Dwarf's black eyes gleamed ferociously. Johan thought perhaps now something awful was going to happen after all. The others crowded round, looking over Grimcrag's shoulders to see what was going on. Johan felt his back meet the cold stone of the boulder. He gulped.

'Manling,' Grimcrag began, speaking slowly and with deliberation. 'Of all your harebrained schemes...' He stopped, and Johan cringed inwardly at what was to follow. 'This... is the best so far!' With a whoop of joy, Grimcrag threw his helmet into the air, caught it again and set off down the hillside at the nearest he was ever going to get to a sprightly jog.

Jiriki grinned. 'This is going to work, lad - he's even singing his favourite song!' Puncting Johan cheerfully in the chest, the Elf set off after the Dwarf.

'What song?' Johan shouted, wincing from the blow.

'Komst, lad, let's go.' The Barbarian sprang catlike down the hillside.

Still smirking with satisfaction, Johan began picking his way down the treacherous slope. Even though he was concentrating hard on not falling over, his ears caught the unmistakable sound of the

Marauders in full song as they descended the hill. After a moment's hesitation, Johan threw caution to the wind. Well, no one from the Empire was around to hear him.

'Gold gold gold gold!

Gold gold gold gold!

Wonderful gold!

Delectable gold...'

It was all going to be all right after all. Probably.



THE WIZARD WAS pleased to see them, skipping excitedly as he undid the myriad locks and bolts to his tower.

'You have it, you have it?' he fussed, leading them by torch light up the steps 'Of course you have, I saw it from the window.' The wizard turned around on the steps and reached out a bony hand. Johan thought he saw a rather greedy glint in the eyes which peered out from the shadows of the heavy cowl. 'I'll carry it from here on now, shall I?'

His eyes were mesmerising, and Johan felt his hand reaching unintentionally into his back pack. 'You can carry it now,' he intoned dully. Johan was barged aside by a sturdy armoured figure, who broke the spell with a characteristically gruff outburst.

'Not till the tower, that was the deal. We deliver it to the top of the tower. Always does things to the letter, we does. We've got honour!' Grimcrag's voice was laden with sarcasm, but if the wizard noticed he did a good job of not showing it, running off cheerfully up the steps.

'Very well, my friends. Hurry along, hurry along, I have a kettle on for a nice hot drink.'

'Hrrumph!' Grimcrag added, but they followed the excited wizard up to his den nonetheless. Five minutes later and they were sitting around his table, glasses of a hot, mead-like drink steaming before them. None of them touched a drop.

'Come along now,' the wizard chided,

rubbing his hands together gleefully 'Drink up, we have much to celebrate!'

Johan smiled glassily and made to take up his glass, but the Reaver stopped him with an iron hard forearm. 'Njet drinking!'

'We always keep clear heads when concluding business. Nothing personal, you understand.' Jiriki's silky steel voice decided the issue.

'Of course. You are... professionals.'

Shaking his head to clear what felt like a thick fog, Johan thought he caught the edge of a snarl in the wizard's voice. The Marauders made no move. There was a heavy silence.

'Well?' the wizard exclaimed after a moment, and there was no mistaking the impatience in his tone now. 'Where is it?'

Grimcrag turned to Johan and winked. He was enjoying this immensely, although the canny Dwarf had noticed that there were no treasure chests lying around this time. 'Where's all the treasure then?' he enquired of the wizard, as politely as a hard bitten Dwarf who has been dragged to the perilous ends of the world for absolutely nothing could manage. 'Where's the gold?'

The wizard waved a hand dismissively and smiled. 'I took your advice and moved it. It was a lot of worthless clutter. All locked away safely downstairs, never fear.' He patted the large ring of keys under his cloak. They jangled comfortingly. 'Now, if I might insist, the Finger of Life, power of goodness, please, as agreed. I have waited long enough, and we do have a deal!'

'Ahem!' The Dwarf cleared his throat after a moment's thought. 'Johan, the Finger if you please!'

All eyes were on the table as Johan Anstein, ex-Imperial Envoy and latest accidental addition to Grunsonn's Marauders, unwrapped the prize for which they had fought so hard.

The wizard gasped. Johan thought that they'd been tumbled. But no, the wizard was enraptured by the burned and charred chicken leg that sat before him. 'May I take it?' he whispered, reaching out a scrawny hand. 'Oh, it's a beauty!'

Privately doubting his aesthetic judgement, the Marauders nevertheless nodded in concert. The wizard was almost in their trap. So far so good.

Then, with a speedy move which they would not have dreamed of witnessing from one so apparently old, the ancient wizard swept aloft the 'Finger' and simultaneously gave a loud and triumphantly sinister laugh.

'Mine, it is mine at last!' he roared, holding the chicken leg above his head. As the Marauders looked on in shocked disbelief, the old sorcerer leapt onto the table, scattering maps, charts and wizardly tomes onto the floor of the tower. Discarding his grey robe with a dramatic flourish, the wizard was revealed in a jet black gown, covered in unmistakably necromantic symbols.

'Vot?' began Keanu, backing away. It had taken enough beer to get the Barbarian into the wizard's tower in the first place, and seeing their patron revealed as a foul necromancer did nothing for his nerves.

Fully aware that the evil wizard was wielding anything but a potent magical item, Grimcrag and Jiriki remained seated, grinning to themselves. Johan, a little unnerved, tried to follow their example, and managed an idiotic teeth-clamping grimace.

With a face like thunder, the dark wizard looked down at them. He regarded them balefully. 'Idiots!' he hissed. 'Now you see the truth!' Glancing at the Finger, the sorcerer grinned wickedly. Snake-like eyes glittered in his long, bony face.

'This,' he continued, 'this is one of the long-lost fingers of the Dread King, lieutenant of Nagash himself.' He capered in delight on the tabletop. Johan recognised insanity when he saw it, and by anyone's book this was a whole chapter to itself.

'You doubt me?' shrieked the sorcerer, regarding their placid expressions. 'Why should I lie? I have searched for this for ages. I am old beyond my mortal span, and now, with this, I gain ultimate power and immortality!' Spittle flew from his foam-flecked lips as he ranted.

'Why didn't you retrieve it yourself, old man?' Jiriki asked quietly. 'You've obviously known about it for years.'

The sorcerer threw back his head and cackled maniacally. 'That's the joke, you see, that's the joke.' Doubled up in laughter, tears rolled down his hollow cheeks. Suddenly his squawking laughter stopped,

and he stood straight, regarding the warriors with a baleful glare. Pointing at Jiriki, he laughed derisively. 'Your kin, ages past, locked the claw away beyond my reach. Sealed it so that none like me could enter the chamber. Guarded it with twelve Elf lords for all eternity.' He spat on the floor to mark his disgust. 'But I waited. Oh yes, I was patient. I tracked the resting place of the Finger and I plotted and planned. Many tried and failed whilst I brooded long in my tower. Then you arrived and all was clear. I needed you as pawns to do my bidding, just as my great Undead armies will do!'

He studied the warriors as if they were mindless vermin, all but unworthy of his gaze. 'I needed you to go, unwitting, where I could not. You would unknowingly breach the defences set up by your own kind, and retrieve that which was rightfully mine.' The sorcerer laughed. 'Your lot ever was to be lured by greed and avarice.'

'And now?' Grimcrag asked, nodding for the others to stand up. 'What happens now?'

The sorcerer paused for a moment, head cocked to one side. 'Ah yes, what happens now...' He coughed to clear his throat, and solemnly adjusted his robe about his scrawny body.

'Now I must kill you all. You have been a great help, and it is a great shame of course, but really you have to die!' The wizard chuckled ruefully, and brought the claw down to point at the Marauders. 'Doubtless you will later join my hordes of undeath which will march across the world, but now YOU – MUST – DIE!'

As he finished his speech, he closed his eyes, and portentously threw out his arms, waving the claw at Grimcrag and the Marauders.

Despite knowing the impotence of the device, Johan found himself flinching. He need not have worried.

The sorcerer opened his eyes and frowned, puzzled. The Marauders watched him, transfixed by his performance. The wizard drew in a deep breath and tried the ending again: 'MUST... DIEEEEE!' When this didn't work, and he noticed the grins on the warriors' faces, he began to suspect that all was not well. Tapping the claw on the palm of his other hand, he jumped off

the table and quickly found himself backed up against the turret wall. 'Die...?' he whimpered feebly.

'We weren't born yesterday, mate!' Grimcrag grunted. 'Eh, Johan?'

The Marauders closed in on the pathetic, misguided and evil old man.



THE WHITE RADIANCE faded and vanished as the great stone door slid into place once more. This time around, the Marauders had taken the precaution of bringing two other long-standing sorcerous acquaintances to supervise the resealing of the runes protecting the vault, and to work out how the secret door could be brought back into place. Then, and only then, could they really forget about the whole affair.

There wasn't much Johan could do except stand by with a torch and a sword. Keanu was doing the same: torch to illuminate the others' work, sword to deter any would-be intruders. Johan was mightily relieved that no monsters of any description had turned up yet. In contrast, the Barbarian was staring intently down the rough hewn passageway, and Johan was sure that the Reaver did not share his sentiments.

The two wizards – one bald and portly with fiery red gown and ruddy cheeks, the other tall and gaunt with flowing and sombre purple robes – stood back from the doors to admire their handiwork. After a few minor runic readjustments, they proclaimed their task completed.

Jiriki had already declared that the Elven sigils were largely unbroken, and should stand the test of another few thousand years without any strain.

Grimcrag had enquired, checking over the Dwarf runes on the portal, if that was really the best that could be expected from shoddy Elf work? 'Aha!' he declared, stubby fingers probing the recesses around the stone-wrought door frame. 'I've found the

catch to young Anstein's secret portal.' As far as his stout build would allow, Grimcrag pressed himself flat to the surface of the door, and reached his hand into a dark crack at one side. His eyes were closed to mere slits and his tongue protruded from between his compressed lips in concentration.

'Votch for Skorpion, Grimcrak!' Keanu whispered, all too familiar with the sorts of creatures to be found simply by probing one's fingers into the myriad small nooks and crannies to be found in any hostile dungeon.

'Thanks, musclehead, that's just what I don't need to hear!' grunted Grimcrag. 'This thing was built by Dwarfs, so it must be set up to... ahhh, that'll do it!'

With a muted grating sound, a sheet of roughly surfaced rock began to slide slowly down over the rune-encrusted doorway. In a few minutes the secret chamber would be invisible to all but the keenest search. As they stood and watched the monumental slab descend, they all heard the unmistakable sound of scrabbling coming from within.

'Ee's Voken up then,' the Barbarian stated impassionately.

'Looks that way,' Grimcrag added.

A barely discernible voice reached them through the stone door, which was already at least halfway covered by the descending slab. Grimcrag strode forward and listened to catch the words.

'Don't leave me here... The light it pains me so... My powers are nothing in here... Please, I implore you!'

Grimcrag rapped on the stone door. 'Hush now, you'll wake 'em up – and I'll wager you don't want that!'

The scrabbling redoubled, but was soon blocked out as the massive slab slotted into its final resting place with a solid booming thud and a cloud of dust.

When the air cleared, they were standing in a nondescript and gloomy passage once more.

Grimcrag rubbed his hands together. 'There now, a job well done.'

'Many thanks to you, Marius, Hollochi,' Jiriki added gracefully, bowing to the two wizards.

'Least we could do after that nasty business with the Crown of Implacable

Woe,' replied the Bright wizard cheerily, whilst the Amethyst mage simply gave a single, sombre inclination of his head.

'Ja, tanks a lot!' added the Reaver. 'Now ve're getting to da Alehaus.'

Without further ado, the party of adventurers set off towards daylight and a well-earned tankard or two.

Grimcrag hung behind and walked alongside Johan, filling the latest addition to the Marauders with pride. 'Well, lad, it could've turned out worse,' the Dwarf stated. 'At least we've done a good service to folk hereabouts.'

'Oh yes, Grimcrag, all-told a jolly successful quest, eh?' Johan agreed happily.

'Well, I wouldn't go that far. We're not dead, and he-' Grimcrag cocked a grubby thumb over his shoulder. 'He's locked up for good'n'all, but...' The Dwarf sighed sadly. 'Not even a snifter of any gold.' His shoulders sagged as far as his battered armour would allow.

Johan grinned and reached into his pack, retrieving a large bundle of keys. They jangled comfortably.

'Oh I don't know about that, Grimcrag. Whilst you lot were busy bundling him up, I took the liberty of borrowing these.'

Recognising the keys, the Dwarf's jaw dropped in surprise. 'I'll be blowed!' he exclaimed. Further up the passageway, heads turned to see what the commotion was about.

Johan lifted up the keys and jangled them merrily above his head. 'It's a big tower, I know, but somewhere there's a heck of a lot of gold going begging – and the way I see it, he still owes us for the job!'

Relieved and uproarious laughter filled the dingy tunnel. In a moment the buoyant adventurers burst into song, Grimcrag leading and the others taking up the refrain:

'Gold gold gold gold!
Gold gold gold gold!
Wonderful gold!
Delectable gold...'

As they marched along, Grimcrag patted Johan paternally on the shoulder. 'Yer one of us now, lad,' he said between verses. 'Ain't it grand when a brilliant plan of mine comes together!' ●

The **TERROR**

of **Death**

DO YOU REMEMBER, I
ONCE ASKED YOU:
**'WHAT IS THE
TERROR OF DEATH?'**

THE TERROR OF DEATH?

**'THAT
WE DIE, OUR
WORK INCOMPLETE!'**
HAS THE SPACE HULK
ENTERED ITS
CORE?

++ NEGATIVE, CAPTAIN...
THE TARGET WON'T
PENETRATE THE
HAZARDOUS LAYERS
OF THE MASS FOR 87
MINUTES... ++

MORGAN,
YOU HONOUR ME.
YOUR KNOWLEDGE
OF THE LITANY IS
ALMOST
COMPLETE.

ALMOST!

WHAT
IS THE TERROR
OF DEATH? THAT WE
DIE OUR WORK
INCOMPLETE. **BUT
WHAT IS THE JOY
OF LIFE?!**

++ CAPTAIN MORGAN,
TELEPORT RITUALS ARE
COMPLETE... 80 MINUTES TILL
PLANET AND SPACE HULK
COLLIDE. INQUISITOR DRAGOS
AND GREY KNIGHTS AWAIT ++

THE
JOY OF LIFE
WILL HAVE TO
WAIT.

IT ALWAYS DOES...

WE CANNOT REMAIN IN THIS SYSTEM MUCH LONGER.

OUR FUEL CORE IS STARTING TO FREEZE.

CAPTAIN?

THE HULK MEASURES IN AT 123 KILOMETRES.

A SHIP THAT BIG MUST HAVE ITS OWN ATMOSPHERE...

INDEED. PRELIMINARY SCANS REPORT IT'S SNOWING!

HOW APPROPRIATE FOR THE *DARK ANGELS* THERE IS BUT WINTER. NO GUIDING LIGHT TO SHINE ON THIS MISSION, MORGAN.

I WELCOME THE DARK. MAY IT VEIL US IN WHAT WE MUST DO. YOU'RE POSITIVE IT'S THEM?

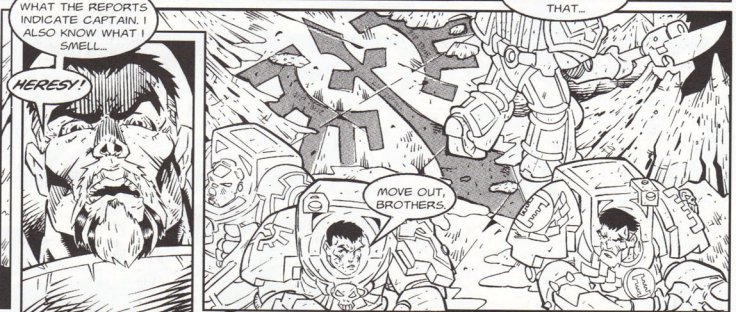
MY INSTINCTS HAVE NEVER FAILED ME. THE *DARK CURSE* RETURNS.

WELCOME, *DRAGONS*. SUCH A ROUTINE MISSION HARDLY JUSTIFIES YOUR PRESTIGIOUS PRESENCE...

AS YOU WISH. WE HAVE A 70 MINUTE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY. SQUAD AVERNUS, SQUAD ETTRUIS...

ALL THE SAME, I *WILL* ACCOMPANY YOU.

— PREPARE TO BOARD THE SPACE HULK!



BLIP... BLIP... BLIP... BLIP...

ELSWHERE, UNKNOWN TO DRAGOS...

INTERROGATOR LEXUS,
THE DOOR'S SEALED
FROM THE *INSIDE!*

SIR.

SEND
A *SUBCHANNEL*
MESSAGE TO CAPTAIN
MORGAN, APPRAISING HIM OF
OUR LOCATION.
INFORM HIM.

MISSION
INTEGRITY HAS
NOT BEEN
COMPROMISED. WE
ARE ACCESSING THE
BRIDGE NOW.

IP.. BLIP.. BLIP.. BLIP.. BLIP..

YES, BROTHER.

VALERIS,
CUT THE
DOOR
DOWN.

THEY APPROACH!

RODARGH!

OUR ENEMY
EXCELS IN
DARKNESS.

BLIP. BLIP. BLIP. BLIP. BLIP. BLIP. BLIP.

... WE SHALL
BRING THEM
INTO THE
LIGHT!!

**BUDDA!!
BUDDA!!**

STEALERS!

DESTROY THE
HERETICS!!

BUDDA!!
BUDDA!!
BUDDA!!

INQUISITOR,
WE HAVE PICKED UP
AN UNIDENTIFIED
SIGNAL FROM THE NET...
LOCATION, APPROXIMATELY
TWO CLICKS NORTH OF
HERE... SHOULD WE
INVESTIGATE?

BLIP... BLIP... BLIP... BLIP

... BLIP...



RUURRGHHH!!

VOORGH!!!

DIE, ABOMINATION!

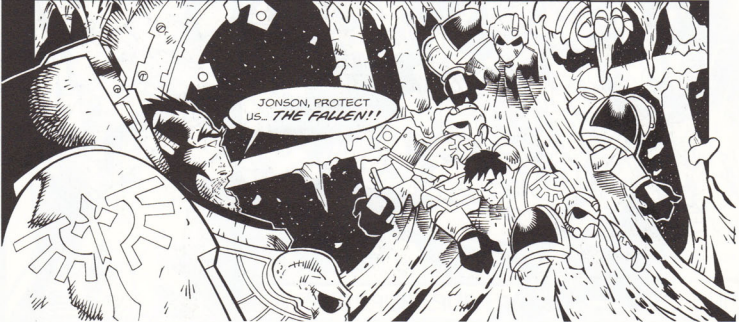
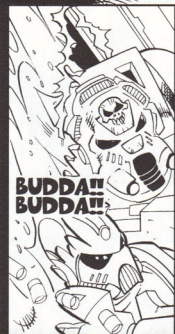
VERY WELL, CAPTAIN. I EXPECT A FULL REPORT...

BUDDABUDDA!!
BUDDA!!

P... BLIP... BLIP... BLIP... BLIP



I'M THROUGH THE DOOR, SIR!





HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN, EH?

MORGAN!



THE SPACE HULK HAS ENTERED THE OUTER MASS OF THE DYING PLANET. LEXUS, LEAVE THEM TO THE EMPEROR.



THHZAKK!!



IT IS TOO RISKY, BROTHER! WHAT IF THEY ARE FOUND AGAIN?

DARK ANGELS, RETURN TO THE SHIP. LET IT GO, BROTHER!



WHAT IS THE TERROR OF DEATH?!

WE DO NOT HAVE TIME FOR THIS, LEXUS. THE SHIP IS COMING APART!



'WHAT IS THE TERROR OF DEATH?!

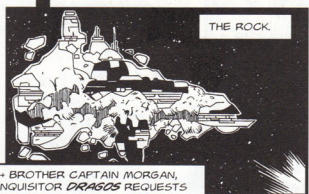


THAT WE DIE, OUR WORK INCOMPLETE.



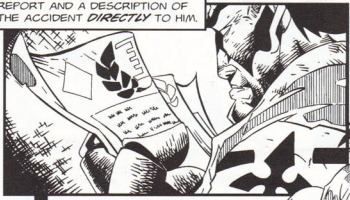
'BUT WHAT IS THE JOY OF LIFE?'

SHKATZZZZZ!!!



THE ROCK.

== BROTHER CAPTAIN MORGAN, INQUISITOR DRAGONS REQUESTS THAT YOU SEND THE BATTLE REPORT AND A DESCRIPTION OF THE ACCIDENT *DIRECTLY* TO HIM.



== CAPTAIN MORGAN?



IN MEMORIAM
BROTHER LEXUS

WHAT IS THE
JOY OF LIFE?
TO DIE, KNOWING
OUR TASK IS
DONE.

== CAPTAIN MORGAN?

THE END?

• FEEDBACK •

THIS FIRST ISSUE is something of an experiment. We all think it's great, of course, but we'd really like to know what you think too, so that we can be extra-smug and pat ourselves on the back even more. Seriously though, it would be most appreciated if you would take the time to answer a few questions for us. This is your chance to get your oar in, so take this opportunity to influence our direction.

Incidentally, you'll have noticed that there is no 'Letters Page' in this first issue, because we haven't received any letters yet. If there is sufficient interest we might well start one next time – particularly if loads of people write and tell us how good *Inferno!* is.

So read through this issue, tell all your mates how great it is, retrieve your prized copy back off your skin-flint mates and tell them to buy their own copies... then ring the answers below, fill in your personal details and send it back to us. If you don't want to mutilate this priceless debut issue of *Inferno!* feel free to photocopy this page or write your answers on a different sheet of paper.

The idea of *Inferno!* is Great Okay No good
The first issue was Great Okay No good
The stories were Too long Just right Too short
Will I buy the next one? Yes Maybe No

I like to read stories about:

Warhammer More Same Less
Warhammer 40,000 More Same Less
Necromunda More Same Less

I want comics based on:

Warhammer More Same Less
Warhammer 40,000 More Same Less
Necromunda More Same Less

And I also want:

Maps More Same Less
Artwork More Same Less
Character features More Same Less
Photographs More Same Less

I have so many other things to tell you about *Inferno!* that I'm going to use this box:

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• ROLL OF HONOUR •



KEV WALKER used to work for Games Workshop as a full-time artist, so has a great understanding of *Warhammer* imagery. He was the concept artist on the *Judge Dredd* movie, has drawn everyone from the ABC Warriors to Judge Anderson, and is working on his own computer title, *Perfect Assassin*. Kev's interested in 'anything that should only be expected to appeal to the under-16s', 'reading, playing with and looking at anything science fiction and fantasy', listening to anything from Dvorak to Alice in Chains, and will eat anything so long as it does not look like a lump of snot in a shell.

WAYNE ENGLAND had spent a dull millennium or two working in advertising, when he had a revelation called *White Dwarf*. Fired up with enthusiasm for fantasy worlds and gothic SF, Wayne

packed his bags and headed due south out of Barnsley, on a quest to find the GW Design



Studio. Once there he resolutely refused to leave until he was given a job. He is fed on a diet of loud music and brilliant imagery that Wayne incorporates into his work on a daily basis.



WILLIAM KING was born in Scotland many moons ago. He worked as part of the Adeptus Scriptorum in the GW Design Studio for several years, until he went rogue on a mission to Prague and never returned. When he's not gibbering insanely and chanting

the praises of Khorne, he's a freelance writer and game designer. He's hard at work on a new SF roleplaying game and a series of fantasy novels set in the Viking Age.

LOGAN LUBERA is from Ontario, Canada. 1990 saw him set for a sporting life, drafted to play Pro Football. Subverted into the world of drawing by a three-week sojourn at the Games Workshop design studio, all thoughts of football flew south. Since then, Logan has drawn for Image Comics, is now setting up his own studio, Frozen Ink, and is soon to publish his own comic books. 'The biggest thing to remember is you can never stop learning!'

JONATHAN GREEN is GW's colour text writer, with pieces in the *Dark Angels* and *Wood Elves* army books, and the *Tyrannids*, *Angels of Death* and *Cbaos Codices*. He's also written five adventure gamebooks. In real life he's a full-time teacher in West London. His interests are wide and varied, but top of the list is sleeping, when he has the time, and readying a mighty Wood Elf host.



RALPH HORSLEY has been obsessed with doodling and playing games from a tender age. He has kept those infatuations, adding many more including comics, loud music and red wine along the way. If he's not rolling dice he can be found hunched over his drawing board, surrounded by piles of paper, pens, brushes, the accursed spilt ink and a couple of pumping speakers, sketching away happily.



ALEX HAMMOND lives in Melbourne, Australia, where he's enrolled in a Law/Arts degree. In his spare time, Alex

enjoys arguing semantics with his friends and loved ones, writing satirical plays, indulging his eclectic music tastes and cheering the villains at the cinema. He enjoys a spot of *Blood Bowl* and converting the guns on his *Necromunda* miniatures to make them even more ridiculously large. Alex has written for White Wolf Games and is currently co-writing the Skaven book for *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*.

DAVID PUGH

started drawing comics in 1977 while working in advertising, and in 1984 started drawing Pat Mills's *Slayne* for *2000 AD*. He continues to draw comic strips, including *Shadowdeath* by Bryan Talbot, and illustrates adventure gamebooks. He lives in the Welsh valleys



with wife Pauline, daughter Esme and son Sam, and he enjoys long walks and country music.

IAN

PICKSTOCK was not born in Borneo, has never received an Oxford Education, and knows nothing about the laws of Quantum Gravity (but neither does anyone else!). He does not enjoy basket-weaving and has never tried BASE jumping (although he says he wouldn't mind having a go). However, he does know how to play the French horn (it's an instrument).

BRIGHT LIGHT STUDIOS

are led by Tom Lauten, special effects hero. Tom has worked on *Night Breed*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Poltergeist 3*, *Critters* and most importantly (of course) all the video footage for Games Workshop. Tom loves all types of music and loads of cool movies. He is married, and has 'the best daughter ever born'. Aaah!



ANDY

JONES is a Games Workshop 10-year veteran with the scars to prove it, having a hand in such

auspicious products as *Space Fleet*, *Man O'War*, *Warhammer Quest*, any Games Workshop computer games... and the Troll Games. Andy likes science fiction, fantasy, Tom Sharpe books, loud music, old guitars, old cars, travel, cats (hello Nurgle), Scalextric, chicken dhansak, beer, and dry ice machines.

MARC

GASCOIGNE is a writer with his name on 24 books on a variety of subjects, and editor of several more. He's also the author or editor of loads of gaming stuff, also a web site designer, trendy typeface creator, record reviewer, amateur wine-taster, occasional dj and rubbish guitarist. He's copy-edited, designed and typeset all of this great stuff and now he needs a lie down.

ENTER THE INFERNO!

SEE ALL THOSE famous names and scary photos? Next issue you could be amongst them! We're looking for more talented people who can write or draw, and who have a good knowledge of the Games Workshop worlds. If you think that's you, get in touch.

What we'll need from you in the first place is a synopsis (words) or some sketches (pictures). A synopsis should be long enough to tell us the plot of your story or comic script; one full page should be enough. Don't just send us two lines of the 'I want to write about some Orcs who find a Chaos artefact' variety! We're looking for self-contained stories, so there's a maximum length of 7000 words (pieces shorter than that are very welcome). The emphasis of *Inferno!* is very much on fast-paced adventure, and your story must be set in one of our current game worlds. Sketches should be like that too. We're looking for illustrations, comic strips, campaign diagrams and technical cutaways. If in doubt about anything, have a look at what's in this issue.

We'd also like some evidence of your talents. This might be a published story or a page of Games Workshop-related prose, or a selection of pertinent pictures from your portfolio. So if you want to join our merry band, get a package together, then send it off to:

Andy Jones, *INFERNO!*, Games Workshop Ltd., Chewton St., Hilltop, Eastwood, Notts, NG16 3HY, UK

INFERNO!™

The Mutant Master by William King

'Gotrek frothed at the mouth and lashed out in a great figure of eight with his blood-stained axe. Nothing could stand in his way. With the chains still hanging from his wrists, he carved a path of red ruin through the howling mob.'

Salvation by Jonathan Green

'Genestealers! Rius thought. His worst fears had been confirmed. Before he could train his weapon on the Tyranid construct and blow its vile carcass apart, the monster plunged a taloned claw through the back of Julius's armour.'

The Demon Bottle by Alex Hammond

'...And there will be fire from the heavens and righteous bolt guns will quicken and purge even the deepest crevices of the underhive. All that is foul and pestilent will be washed away! For this is the teaching of House Cawdor of the Redemption.'

Grinsonn's Marauders by Andy Jones

'The wizard gasped. Johan thought that they had been tumbled. But no, the wizard was still enraptured by the burned and charred chicken leg that sat before him.'

Also featuring

The Terror of Death, a nine-page Dark Angels comic by Logan Lubera; The Siege of Gisoreux, an incredible 3D battle map by Ralph Horsley; plus magnificent artwork from Kev Walker, Wayne England and David Pugh.

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