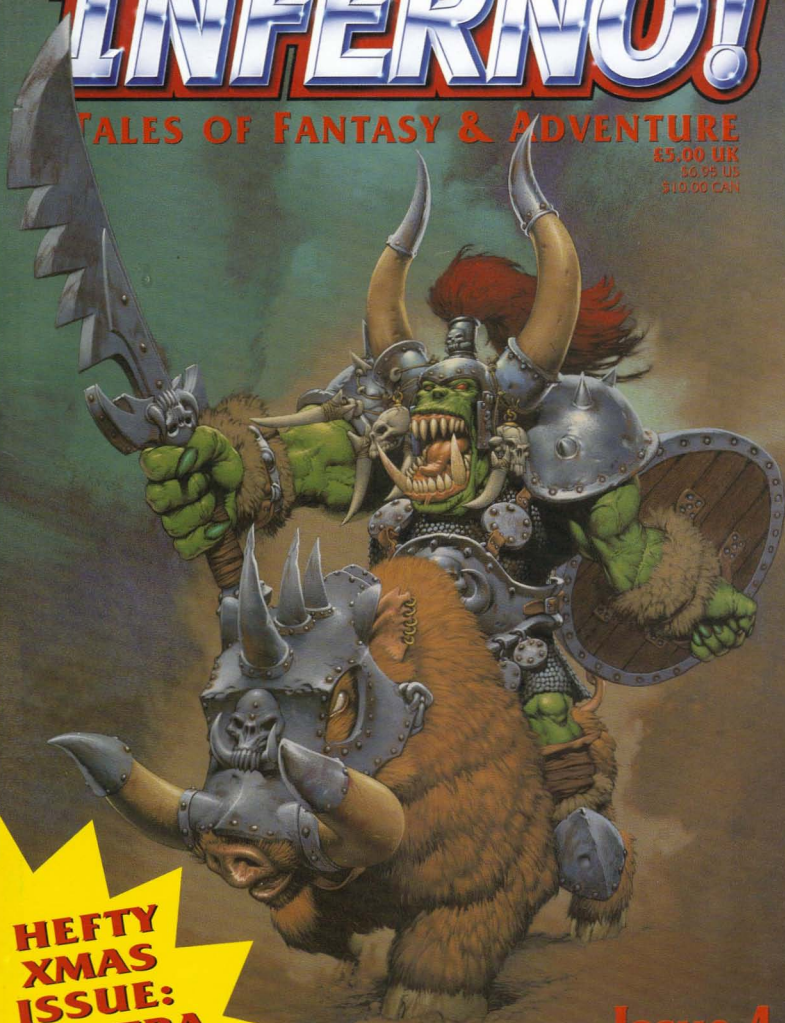


INFERNO!

TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

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**HEFTY
XMAS
ISSUE:
16 EXTRA
PAGES!**

Issue 4

INFERNO!

HERE WE SIT amongst boxes and crates, the detritus of a ruined office. The posters are all down off the walls and the Blu-Tac marks step out regular squares of white against the dirty grey walls.

'What's up?' I hear you cry. 'Has *Inferno!* gone bust? Where will we get our regular diet of action and adventure stories now? Is this the end of all we hold dear?'

Well... (pause for effect) no, not quite. Rather, we are moving to *brand new offices!* Yes, that's right, **NEW!** With a carpet, desks, those little smoke alarm things and blinking PIR detectors, glass in the windows and everything! Why, at the new GW headquarters we even have a bar and social club! **Coo!**

You might expect that with all the inevitable turmoil of packing up and moving,


Inferno! Four might suffer somewhat. You know, what with moving being one of the most traumatic happenings in your life and so on. So surely we can be forgiven if this issue of *Inferno!* should be a bit late. Be a story or two short, perhaps. Re-use an existing painting for the cover to save us some effort. Those sort of compromises. After all, as you can imagine, right now you can guarantee that we're looking for anything which would make our lives easier at this difficult time.

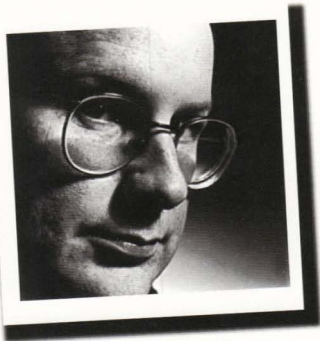
But hey! Hold on a moment! This is *Inferno!* we're talking about. And... and... it's Christmas! Full of verve and dash, and just to make our lives extra difficult – we do *love* a challenge – this special seasonal issue is actually a full sixteen pages bigger, and released three weeks early to avoid that last minute festive rush. Not only that, but we have a wonderful new cover from Kev Walker, *and* a great selection of action stories and comic strips.

If we ever do manage to stop long enough to find our laurels, we will see if we have been resting on them at all. I suspect not. They're probably crushed in a box somewhere. Onwards and upwards are our watchwords. Meanwhile, we just have to check whether our heads and egos fit through the door to our new office.

'Deck the hall with skulls and chainsaws! Tra la-la-la-la, la la-la-laaaa!'

Enjoy!


Andy Jones
Editor



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GAUNT'S GHOSTS
GHOSTMAKER
BY DAN ABNETT



IT WAS THE ELEVENTH year of the Sabbat Worlds Campaign, an Imperial Crusade to turn back a tide of Chaos that had ebbed and drowned eighty human planets along the Segmentum Pacificus. The Imperial Force under High Commander Slaydo had won a famous victory at Balhaut, causing the death-fleets of Chaos to break and run.

But Slaydo had been mortally wounded in the battle. On his deathbed, he personally decorated the handful of officers whose command actions in the battle had been decisive. To each one he also granted the settlement rights of one of the Sabbat Worlds yet to be liberated. It was a grandiose gesture to reward heroism, and encourage them to stand resolute after his death and press the advantage gained at Balhaut.

Slaydo's replacement was Macaroth. The High Lords charged him to take the reigns of the Crusade force and, on the back of Slaydo's victory, to launch a war of liberation into the beleaguered reaches of the Sabbat Worlds into which Chaos had fled. To this end, new Foundings of Imperial Guard were drawn from the worlds at the edge of the warzone...'

— from A History of the Later Imperial Crusades



**DAY ONE,
TANITH MAGNA**

FIRE, LIKE A flower. Blossoming. Pale, greenish fire, scuttling like it was alive. Eating the world, the whole world...

Opening his eyes, Ibram Gaunt, Imperial Commissar, gazed into his own lean, pale face. Trees, as dark green as an ocean at night, rushed past behind his eyes.

'We're making the final approach now, sir.'

Gaunt looked round, away from his reflection in the small, thick port of the orbital cutter, and saw his adjutant, Sym. Sym was an efficient man of middle years, his slightly puffy flesh marked across the throat and cheek by a livid, ancient burn.

'I said we're making the final approach,' Sym repeated.

'I heard you,' nodded Gaunt, gently. 'Remind me again of the schedule.'

Sym sat back in his padded leather chair and perused a data-slate. 'Official greeting ceremony... formal introductions to the Elector of Tanith and the government assembly... review of the Founding regiments... and a formal dinner tonight.'

Gaunt's gaze drifted back to the vast forests that flew by under the window. He hated the trappings of pomp and protocol, and Sym knew it. 'Tomorrow, sir, the transfer shifts begin. We'll have all the regiments aboard and ready to embark before the end of the week,' he said, trying to put a more positive slant on things.

Gaunt didn't look round but said 'See if you can get the transfers to begin directly after the review. Why waste the rest of today and tonight?'

Sym nodded, thoughtful. 'That should be possible.'

A soft chime signalled imminent landfall, and they both felt the sudden pull of deceleration. The other passengers in the craft's long cabin – an astropath, silent in his robes, and officials of the Adeptus Ministorum and the Departmento Munitorum – began to buckle their harnesses and settle back for landing. Sym found himself looking out of the port, watching the endless forests that so intrigued Gaunt.

'Strange place this, this Tanith. So they say.' He rubbed his chin. 'They say the forests move. Change. The trees apparently, um, shift. According to the pilot, you can get lost in the woods in a matter of minutes.'

Sym's voice dropped to a whisper. 'They say Tanith has a touch of Chaos! Can you believe that? Being this close to the edge, you see.'

Gaunt did not reply.

THE SPIRES AND towers of Tanith Magna rose to meet the small barbed shape of the cutter. The city, set here amid the endless oceans of evergreen trees, looked from the air like a complex circle of standing stones, dark grey slabs raised in a clearing in defiance of the forest around. Banners and brazier smoke fluttered from the higher fortress walls, and outside the city perimeter, Gaunt could see a vast plain cut from the forest. Row upon row of tents stood there, thousands of them, each with its own cookfire. The Founding Fields.

Beyond the tent-town, the huge black shadows of the bulk transports, whale-mouths and belly ramps open, squatting in fire-blackened craters of earth, ready to eat up the men and the machines of the new regiments of Tanith. His regiments, he reminded himself, the first Imperial Guard regiments to be founded on this enigmatic, sparsely-populated frontier world.

For nine years, Gaunt had fought at the head of the Hyrkan Eighth, a brave regiment that he had been with from its founding on the windy hills of Hyrkan to the ferocious victory of Balhaut. But so many had fallen and another founding would fill familiar uniforms with unfamiliar faces. It was time to move on. Gaunt had felt grateful to be reassigned. His seniority, his experience, his very notoriety made him an ideal choice to whip the virgin units of Tanith into shape. Part of him – a young, eager but small part, deep inside – relished the prospect of building a fresh name for the Guard's roll of honour. But the rest of him was dull, set rigid, empty. More than anything, he felt he was simply going through the motions.

He had felt that way since Slaydo's death. The old commander would have wanted him here, wanted him to carry on to glory... after all, wasn't that why he'd made his gift? But Gaunt was so tired. Such a reward seemed so far away.

The cutter dipped. Great brass shutters atop one of the cities largest towers hinged open like an orchid's petals to receive it.



IN THE FOUNDING Fields, the men looked up as an approaching cutter purred overhead, banked against the slow cloud and settled like a beetle over the city wall towards the landing tower.

'Someone important,' noted Larkin, squinting up at the sky. He spat on the wirecloth in his hand and resumed polishing his webbing buckles.

'Just more traffic. More pompous off-worlders.' Rawne lay back and turned his face to the sun.

Corbec, stood by his tent, shielded his eyes against the glare and nodded. 'I think Larkin's right. Someone important. There was a big Guard crest on the flank of that transport. Someone come for the Founding Review. Maybe the Commissar himself.'

Corbec dropped his gaze and looked about. On either side of him, the rows of three-man tents stretched away in ordered files, and guardsmen in brand new uniforms sat around, cleaning kit, stripping guns, eating, dicing, smoking, sleeping. Six thousand men, all told, mostly infantry but some artillery and armoured crews, three whole regiments and men of Tanith all.

Corbec sat down by his own cook stove and rubbed his hands. His new, black-cloth uniform chaffed at the edges of his big frame. It would be the very devil to wear in.

He looked across at his tentmates, Larkin and Rawne. Larkin was a slender, whipcord man with a dagger face. Like all the Tanith, he was pale skinned and black-haired. Larkin had dangerous eyes like blue fire, a left ear studded with three silver hoops, and a blue spiral-wyrm tattoo on his right cheek. Corbec had known him for a good while: they had served together in the same unit of the Tanith Magna militia before the Founding. He knew Larkin's strengths – a marksman's eyes and a brave heart – and his weaknesses – an unstable character, easily rattled.

Rawne he did not know so well. Rawne was a handsome devil, his clean, sleek features decorated by a tattoo starburst over one eye. He had been a junior officer in the militia of Tanith Attica, or one of the other southern cities, but he didn't talk about it much. Corbec had a bad feeling that there was a murderous, ruthless streak under Rawne's oily charm.

Bragg – huge, hulking, genial Bragg – shuffled over from his tent, a flask of hot sacra in his hands. 'Need warming up?' he asked Corbec, and Corbec nodded a smile to the giant man. Bragg poured four cups, and passed one to Larkin, who barely looked up but muttered thanks, and one to Rawne, who said nothing as he knocked it back.

'You reckon that was our Commissar, then?' Bragg said at last, asking the question Corbec knew he had been dying to get out since overhearing the man's remark.

Corbec sipped and nodded. 'Gaunt. Yeah, most like.'

'I heard stuff, from the Munitorium blokes at the transports. They say he's hard as nails. Got medals too. A real killer, they say.'

Rawne sniffed. 'Why can't we be lead by our own, is what I want to know. A good militia commander's all we need.'

'I could offer,' Corbec said softly.

'He said a good one, dog!' snapped Larkin, returning to his obsessive polishing.

Corbec winked across at Bragg and they sipped some more.

'It seems funny to be going, though, dunnit?' said Bragg after a spell. 'I mean, for good. Might never be coming back.'

'Most like,' said Corbec. 'That's the job. To serve the Emperor in his wars, over the stars and far away. Best get used to the idea.'

'Eyes up!' called Forgal from a tent nearby. 'Here comes big Garth with a face on!'

They looked around. Major Garth, their unit commander, was thumping down the tent line issuing quick orders left and right. Garth was a barrel-chested buttress of a man, whose sloping bulk and heavy, lined features seemed to suggest that gravity pulled on him harder than most. He came up to them.

'Pack it up, boys. Time to ship,' he said.

Corbec raised an eyebrow. 'I thought that was tomorrow?' he began.

'So did I, so did Colonel Torth, so did the Department Munitorium, but it looks like our new Commander-in-Chief is an impatient man, so he wants us to start lifting to the troopships right after the Review.'

Garth passed on, shouting more instructions.

'Well,' said Colm Corbec to no one in particular, 'I guess this is where it all starts...'



GAUNT'S HEAD ACHED. He wasn't sure if it was the interminable introductions to Tanith dignitaries and politicians, the endless small talk, the aching slow review of the troops out on the marshalling yard in front of the Tanith Assembly, or simply the bloody pipe music that seemed to be playing in every damn chamber, street and courtyard of the city that he walked into.

And the troops hadn't been that impressive either. Pale, dark-haired, undernourished-looking somehow, haggard in plain black fatigues, each with a piebald camo-cloak swept over the shoulder opposite the one to which their lasgun was slung. Not to mention the damn earstuds and hoops, the facial tattoos, the unkempt hair, the lilting, sing-song accents. The 'Glorious 1st, 2nd and 3rd of Tanith', the new regiments; a scrawny, scruffy mob of soft-voiced woodsmen indeed, and nothing to write home about.

The Elector of Tanith, the local planetary lord, himself sporting a cheek tattoo of a snake, had assured Gaunt of the fighting mettle of the Tanith militia.

'They are resolute and cunning,' the Elector had said as they stood on the terrace overlooking the massed ranks. 'Tanith breeds indefatigable men. Our particular strengths are in scouting and stealth. As you might expect on a world whose moving forests blur the topography with bewildering speed, the Tanith have an unerring sense of place and direction. They do not get lost. They perceive what others miss.'

'In the main, I need fighters, not guides,' Gaunt had said, trying hard not to sound too snide.

The Elector had merely smiled. 'Oh, we fight too. And now for the first time we are honoured to be adding our fighting spirit to that of the Imperium. The regiments of Tanith will serve you well, Commissar.'

Gaunt had nodded politely.

Now Gaunt sat in private in an anteroom of the Assembly. He'd slung his greatcoat and his cap on a hardwood chest nearby and Sym had laid out his dress jacket for the dinner that would commence in thirty minutes. If only he could rid himself of his headache, and of the bad taste in his throat that he had landed a weak command.

And the music! The damn pipe music, invading his head even here in the private rooms!

He got to his feet and strode to the sloping windows. Out beyond the cityscape and the Founding Fields, orange fire thumped into the twilight as the heavy transports departed and returned, ferrying the regimental components to the vast troop carriers in high orbit.

That music still! Gaunt walked to a set of dark green velvet drapes and swept them aside. The music stopped. The boy with the small set of pipes sat there looking at his raging eyes in astonishment.

'What are you doing?' asked Gaunt, as threatening as a drawn knife.

'Playing, sir,' said the boy. He was about seventeen, not yet a man, but tall and well-made. His face – with a blue fish tattoo over the left eye – was strong and handsome. His be-ringed fingers clutched a Tanith pipe, a spidery clutch of reeds attached to a small bellows bag that was rhythmically squeezed under the arm.

'Was this your idea?' Gaunt asked.

The boy shook his head. 'It's tradition. For every visitor, the pipes of Tanith will play, where ever they go, to lead them back through the forest safely.'

'I'm not in the forest, so shut up!' Gaunt paused. He turned back to the boy. 'I respect the traditions and customs of the Tanith, but I... I have a headache.'

'I'll stop then,' said the boy. 'I-I'll wait outside. The Governor told me to attend on you and pipe you while you were here. I'll be outside if you need me.'

Gaunt nodded. On his way out of the door, the boy collided with Sym, who was on the way in.

'I know, I know...' began Gaunt. 'If I don't hurry, I'll be late for the dinner and—what? Sym? What is it?'

The look on Sym's face immediately told Gaunt that something was very, very wrong.

GAUNT GATHERED his senior staff in a small, wood-panelled lobby off the main banqueting hall. Most were dressed for the formal function, stiff in gilt collars and cuffs. Junior Munitorium staff watched the doors, politely barring the entry of any Tanith dignitaries.

'I don't understand!' said a senior Departamento Munitorium staffer. 'The nearest edge of the warzone is meant to be eighty days from here! How can this be?'

Gaunt was pacing, reviewing a data-slate with fierce intensity. 'We broke them at Balhaut, but they splintered. Deep intelligence and the scout squadrons suggested they were running scared, but it was always possible that some of their larger components would scatter inwards, looping towards us, rather than running for the back end of the Sabbat Worlds and away.'

Gaunt wheeled on them and cursed out loud. 'In the name of Solan! On his damn deathbed, Slaydo was quite precise about this! Picket fleets were meant to guard all the wargates towards territories like Tanith, particularly when we're still Founding and vulnerable like this! What does Macaroth think he's playing at?'

Sym looked up from a flatplan-chart he had unfurled on a desk. 'The Lord High Commander has deployed most of the Crusade Forces in the liberation push. It is clear he is intent on pressing the advantage won by his predecessor...'

'Balhaut was a significant win...' began one of the Ecclesiarchy.

'It will only stay a victory if we police the won territories correctly. Macaroth has broken the new front by racing to pursue the foe. And that's let the foe through, in behind our main army. It's text book stupidity! The enemy may even have lured us on!'

'It leaves us wide open,' agreed another officer flatly.

Gaunt nodded. 'An hour ago, our ships in orbit detected a massive enemy armada coming in-system. It is no exaggeration to say that Tanith has just hours of life left to it.'

'We could fight...' someone ventured, bravely.

'We have just three regiments. Untried, unproven. We have no defensive position

and no prepared emplacements. Half of our force is already stowed in the troop carriers upstairs and the other half is penned in transit. We couldn't turn them around and get them unlimbered and dug-in in under two full days. Either way, they are cannon fodder.'

'What do we do?' asked Sym. Some of the others nodded as if urging the same question.

'Our astropaths must send word immediately to the main crusade command, to Macaroth, and tell him of the insurgency,' Gaunt said, eyes gunmetal hard. 'If nothing else, they need to turn and guard their flank and back. The rest of you... the carrier ships will leave orbit in one hour or at the point of attack, whichever comes first. Get as much of the remaining unembarked men and equipment aboard as you can before then. Whatever's left gets left behind.'

'We're abandoning Tanith?' gasped a Munitorium aide, disbelief in his thin voice.

'Tanith is already dead. We can die with it, or we can salvage as many fighting men as we can and redeploy them somewhere they will actually do some good. In the Emperor's name.'

They all looked at Gaunt, incredulous, the enormity of his decision sinking in.

'Do it!' he bawled.



THE NIGHT SKY above Tanith Magna caught fire and fell on the world. The orbital bombardment blew white-hot holes out of the ancient forests, melted the high walls, splintered the towers, and shattered the paved yards.

Dark shapes moved through the smoke-choked corridors of the Assembly, dark shapes that gibbered and hissed, clutching whining, chattering implements of death in their stinking paws.

With a brutal cry, Gaunt kicked his way through a burning set of doors and fired his bolt pistol. He was a tall, powerful shape in the swirling smoke, a striding figure with a long coat sweeping like a

cloak from his broad shoulders. His bright eyes tightened in his lean, grim face and he wheeled and fired again into the gloom. In the smoke-shadows nearby, red-eyed shapes shrieked and burst, spraying fluid across the stonework.

Las fire cut the air near him. He turned and fired, and then took the staircase at a run, vaulting over the bodies of the fallen. There was a struggling group up ahead, on the main landing. Two bloodied fighting men of the Tanith militia, wrestling with Sym at the doors to the launch silos.

'Let us through, you bastard!' Gaunt could hear one of them crying, 'You'd leave us here to die! Let us through!'

Gaunt saw the autopistol in the hand of the other too late. It fired the moment before he ploughed into them.

Raging, he broke one's jaw with the butt of his bolter, knocking the man backwards to the head of the stairs. He picked up the other and threw him over the stair rail into the smoke below.

Sym lay in a pool of blood.

'I've signalled the carrier fleet, as you ordered... for the final withdrawal... leave me and get aboard the cutter or-' Sym began.

'Shut up!' snapped Gaunt, trying to lift him, his hand slick with the man's blood. 'We're both going!'

'T-there's no time, not for me... just for you! Go, sir!' Sym rasped, his voice high with pain. From the bay beyond, Gaunt heard the scream of the cutter's thrusters rising to take off readiness.

'Damn it, Sym!' said Gaunt. The aide seemed to reach for him, clawing at his tunic. For a second, Gaunt thought Sym was trying to pull himself up so that Gaunt could carry him.

Then Sym's torso exploded in a red mist and Gaunt was thrown back off his feet.

At the stairhead, the grotesque shock troops of Chaos bayed and advanced. Sym had seen them over Gaunt's shoulder, had pulled himself up and round to shield Gaunt with his own body.

Gaunt got to his feet. His first shot burst the horned skull of the nearest beast. His second and third tore apart the body of another. His fourth, fifth and sixth gutted two more and sent them spinning back into their comrades behind on the steps.

His seventh was replaced by the dull clack of dry metal.

Hurling the spent bolter aside, Gaunt backed away towards the silo bay doors. He could smell the rancid scents of Chaos over the smoke now, and hear the buzz of the maggot-flies. In a second they would be on him.

Autocannon fire blasted into the heathen nightmares, sustained heavy fire from an angle nearby. Gaunt turned, and saw the boy, the piper with the fish tattoo, laying down an arc of covering fire from the portico of the silo bay with a sentry's autocannon that he had rested across the stonework. 'Get in! The last cutter's waiting for you!' cried the boy.

Gaunt threw himself through the bay doors into the fierce whirlwind of the cutter's engine backwash. The side hatch was just closing and he scrambled through, losing the tails of his coat to the biting hinge.

Enemy weapons fire resounded off the hull.

Gaunt was face down on the cabin floor, drenched in blood, looking up at the terrified faces of the Munitorium officials who made up this last evacuation flight to the fleet.

'Open the door again!' he yelled. 'Open it again!'

None of them moved to do so. Gaunt hauled himself up and heaved on the hatch lever. The door thumped open and the boy scrambled inside.

Gaunt dragged him clear of the hatch and yanked it shut. 'Now!' he bellowed down the cabin to the pilot's bay. 'Go now if you're going!'

The cutter rose from the tower bay hard and fast, lifter jets screaming as they were jammed into overdrive. Aerial laser fire exploded the brass orchid-shutters around them and clipped a landing stanchion. Hovering, the cutter wobbled. Below it, Tanith Magna was a blazing inferno.

Forgetting fuel tolerances, flight discipline, even his own mother's name, the pilot hammered the main thrusters to maximum and the cutter fired itself up through the black smoke like a bullet.

Left to die, the forests burned.

Gaunt fell against a bulkhead and clawed his way to a porthole. Just like in his

dreams... fire, like a flower. Blossoming. Pale, greenish fire, scuttling like it was alive. Eating the world, the whole world...

Ibram Gaunt gazed into his reflection, his own lean, pale, bloody face. Trees, blazing like the heart of a star, rushed past behind his eyes.



DAY SIXTEEN, ABOVE NAMETH

HIGH OVER THE cold, mauve, marbled world of Nameth, Gaunt's ships hung like creatures of the deep marine places. Three great troop carriers, their ash-grey, crenellated hulls vaulted like monstrous cathedrals, and the long, muscular escort frigate *Navarre*, spined and blistered with lance weapons and turrets, hooked and angular like a woodwasp, two kilometres long.

In his stateroom on the *Navarre*, Gaunt reviewed the latest survey intelligence. Tanith was lost, part of a conquered wedge of six planet systems that fell to the Chaos armada pincer which Macaroth had allowed to slip behind his over-eager warfront. Now Crusade forces were doubling back and re-engaging the surprise enemy. Sporadic reports had come in of a thirty-six hour deep space engagement of capital ships near the Circudus. The Imperial Crusaders now faced a war on two fronts.

Gaunt's ruthless retreat had salvaged three and a half thousand fighting men, just over half of the Tanith regiments, and most of their equipment. The cruelest, most cynical view could call it a victory of sorts.

Gaunt slid a data-slate out from under a pile of other documents on his desk and eyed it. It was the transcript of the communiqué from Macaroth himself, applauding Gaunt's survival instinct and his feat in salvaging for the crusade a significant force of men. Macaroth had not seen fit to mention the loss of a planet and its population. He spoke of 'Gaunt's correct choice... frank evaluation of an impossible situation', and ordered him to a holding position at Nameth to await deployment.

It made Gaunt queasy. He tossed the slate aside.

The shutter opened and Kreff entered. Kreff was the frigate's executive officer, a hard-faced, shaven-headed man in the emerald, tailored uniform of the Segmentum Pacificus Third Fleet. He saluted, a pointless over-formality given that he had been covering as Gaunt's adjutant in Sym's place, and had been in and out of the room ten times an hour ever since Gaunt came aboard.

'Anything?' asked Gaunt.

'The astropaths tell us that something may be coming soon. Perhaps our orders. There is a current, a feeling. And also, um...' Kreff was obviously uncomfortable. He didn't know Gaunt and vice versa. It had taken Sym four years to get used to the Commissar. Sym...

'What is it?' asked Gaunt.

'I wondered if you would care to discuss our more immediate concern? The morale of the men.'

Gaunt got up. 'Okay, speak your mind.'

Kreff hesitated. 'I didn't mean with me. There is a deputation from the troopships...'

Gaunt turned hard at this. 'A what?'

'A deputation of Tanith. They want to speak to you. They came aboard thirty minutes ago.'

Gaunt took his bolt pistol out of the holster slung over his chair back and checked the magazine. 'Is this your discrete way of announcing a mutiny, Kreff?'

Kreff shook his head and laughed humourlessly. He seemed relieved when Gaunt reholstered his weapon.

'How many?'

'Fifteen. Mostly enlisted men. Few of the officers came out alive.'

'Send three of them in. Just three. They can choose who.'

Gaunt sat down behind his desk again. He thought about putting his cap on, his jacket...

He looked across the cabin and saw his own reflection in the vast bay port. Well over two metres of solid bone and sinew, the narrow, dangerous face that so well matched his name, the cropped blond hair. He wore his high-waisted dress breeches with their leather braces, a sleeveless undershirt and jack boots. His jacket and

cap gave him command and authority. Bare-armed, he gave himself physical power.

The shutter clanked and three men entered. Gaunt viewed them without comment. One was tall, taller and older than Gaunt, and built heavily if a little paunchy. His arms were like hams and were decorated with blue spirals. His beard was shaggy, and his eyes might once have twinkled. The second was slim and dark, with sinister good-looks that were almost reptilian. He had a blue star tattooed across his right eye.

The third was the boy, the piper.

'Let's know you,' Gaunt said simply.

'I'm Corbec,' the big man volunteered. 'This is Rawne.' The snake nodded. 'And you know the boy,' Corbec said.

'Not his name,' Gaunt said.

'Milo,' said the boy, clearly. 'Brin Milo.'

'I imagine you're here to tell me that the men of Tanith want me dead,' said Gaunt simply.

'Perfectly true,' said Rawne. Gaunt was impressed. None of them even bothered to acknowledge his rank and seniority. Not a 'sir', not a 'Commissar'.

'Do you know why I did what I did?' asked Gaunt. 'Do you know why I ordered the regiments off Tanith and left it to die? Do you know why I refused all your pleas to let you turn and fight?'

'It was our right-' began Rawne.

'Our world died, Commissar Gaunt,' said Corbec, the title bringing Gaunt's head up sharp. 'We saw it flame out from the windows of our transports. 'You should have let us stand and fight. We would have died for Tanith.'

'You still can, just somewhere else.' Gaunt got to his feet. 'You're not men of Tanith anymore. You weren't when you were camped out on the Founding Fields. You're Imperial Guard, servants of the Emperor first and nothing else second.'

He turned to face the window port, his back to them. 'I mourn the loss of any world, any life. I did not want to see Tanith die, nor did I want to abandon it. But my duty is to the Emperor, and the Sabbat Worlds Crusade must be fought and won for the good of the entire Imperium. The only thing you could have done if I'd left you on Tanith was die. If that's what you want, I can provide you with many

opportunities. I need soldiers, not corpses.'

Gaunt gazed out into space. 'Use your loss, don't be crippled by it. Put the pain into your fighting spirit. Think hard! Most men who join the Guard never see their homes again. You are no different.'

'But most have a home to return to!' Corbec spat.

'Most can look forward to living through a campaign and mustering to settle on some world their leader has conquered and won. Slaydo made me a gift after Balhaut. He granted me settlement rights to the first planet I win. Help me by doing your job, and I'll help you by sharing that with you.'

'Is that a bribe?' Rawne asked.

Gaunt shook his head. 'Just a promise. We need each other. I need an able, motivated army; you need something to take the pain away, something to fight for, something to look forward to.'

Gaunt saw something in the reflection on the glass. He didn't turn his head. 'Is that a las pistol, Rawne? Would you have come here and murdered me?'

Rawne, grinned. 'What makes you put that in the past tense, Commissar?'

Gaunt turned. 'What do I have here then? A regiment or a mutiny?'

Corbec met his gaze. 'The men will need convincing. You've made ghosts of them, hollow echoes. We'll take word back to the troop ships of why you did what you did and what the future might hold. Then it's up to them.'

'They need to rally around their officers.'

Rawne laughed. 'There are none! Our command staff were all on the Founding Fields trying to embark the men when the bombardment started. None of them made it off Tanith alive.'

Gaunt nodded. 'But the men elected you to lead the deputation? You're leaders.'

'Or simply bold and dumb enough to be the ones to front you,' said Corbec.

'It's the same thing,' said Gaunt. 'Colonel Corbec. Major Rawne. You can appoint your own juniors and unit chiefs and report back to me in six hours with an assessment of morale. I should have our deployment by then.'

They glanced at each other, taken aback.

'Dismissed,' prompted Gaunt.

The trio turned away confused.

'Milo? Wait, please,' said Gaunt. The boy stopped as the shutter closed after the two men.

'I owe you,' Gaunt told him baldly.

'And you could me back. I'm not militia or Guard. I only got off Tanith alive because you brought me.'

'Because of your service to me.'

Milo paused. 'The Elector himself ordered me to stay with you, to see to your needs. I was just doing my duty.'

'Those two brought you along because they thought the sight of you might mollify me, didn't they?'

'They're not stupid,' noted Milo.

Gaunt sat back at his desk. 'Neither are you. I have need of an adjutant, a personal aide. It's dogsbody, gopher work mostly, and the rest you can learn. It would help me to have a Tanith in the post if my working relationship with them is going to continue.'

Before Milo could answer, the shutter slammed open again and Kreff entered, a slate in his hand. He saluted again. 'We've got our orders, sir,' he said.



DAY THIRTY, BLACKSHARD DEADZONE

THE PERSISTENT crump of heavy gunnery drummed the low, leaden sky over the ridgeline. An earthwork had been built up along the ridge's spine and, under hardened bunkers, a detachment of Imperial Guard – six units of the 10th Royal Sloka – were readying to mobilise.

Colonel Thoren walked the line. The men looked like world killers in their ornate battledress: crested, enamelled scarlet and silver warsuits built by the artisans of Sloka to inspire terror in the enemy.

But perhaps not this enemy. General Hadrak's orders had been precise, but Thoren's heart was heavy. He had no relish for the approaching push. He had no doubt at all that it would cost him dearly. To push blind, unsupported, into

treacherous unknown territory in the hope of finding a wormhole into the enemy positions that might not even be there.

The prospect made him feel sick.

Thoren's subaltern drew his attention suddenly to the double file of sixty men moving down the covered transit trench towards them. Scrawny ruffians, dressed in black, camo-cloaks draped over them, plastered to their bodies by the rain.

'Who in the name of Balor's blood—' Thorne began.

Halting his column, the leader, a huge blackguard with a mess of tangled beard and a tattoo – a tattoo! – marched up to Thoren and saluted.

'Colonel Corbec, 1st Tanith. First-and-only. General Hadrak has ordered us forward to assist you.'

'Tanith? Where the hell is that?' asked Thoren.

'It isn't,' replied the big man genially. 'The General said you were set to advance on the enemy positions over the deadzone. Suggested you might need a covert scouting force seeing as how your boys' scarlet armour stands out like a baboon's arse.'

Thoren felt his face flush. 'Now listen to me, you piece of f—'

A shadow fell across them. 'Colonel Thoren, I presume?'

Gaunt dropped down into the dugout from the trench boarding. 'My regiment arrived on Blackshard yesterday night, with orders to reinforce General Hadrak's efforts to seize the Chaos stronghold. That presupposes co-operative efforts between our units.'

Thoren nodded. This was Gaunt, it had to be. He'd heard stories.

'Appraise me, please,' said Gaunt.

Thoren waved up an aide who flipped up a map-projector, and displayed a fuzzy image of the deadzone. 'The foe are dug in deep in the old citadel ruins. The citadel had a sizeable standing defence force, so they're well equipped. Chaos cultists, mostly, about seventeen thousand able fighting men. We also—' he paused.

Gaunt raised a questioning eyebrow.

'We believe there may be other abominations in there. Chaos spawn.' Thoren breathed heavily. 'Most of the main fighting is contained in this area here, while artillery duels blight the other fronts.'

Gaunt nodded. 'Most of my strength is deployed along the front line. But General Hadrak also directed us to this second front.'

Thoren indicated the map again. 'The foe are up to more than simply holding us out. They know sooner or later we'll break through, so they must be up to something... trying to complete something, perhaps. Recon showed that this flank of the city might be vulnerable to a smaller force. There are channels and ducts leading in under the old walls, a rat-maze, really.'

'My boys specialise in rat-mazes,' said Gaunt.

'You want to go in first?' asked Thoren.

'It's mud and tunnels. The Tanith are light infantry, you're armoured and heavy. Let us lead through and then follow us in support when we've secured a beachhead. Bring up some support weapons.'

Thoren nodded. 'Very well, Commissar.'

Gaunt and Corbec withdrew to their men.

'This will be the first blooding for this regiment, for the Tanith first-and-only,' began Gaunt.

'For Gaunt's Ghosts,' someone murmured. Mad Larkin, Corbec was sure.

Gaunt smiled. 'Gaunt's Ghosts. Don't disappoint me.'

They needed no other instructions. At Corbec's gesture, they hurried forward in pairs, slipping their camo-cloaks down as shrouds around them, lasguns held loose and ready. The hybrid weave of the hooded cloaks blurred to match the dark grey mud of the ridgeway, and each man stooped to smear his cheeks and brow with wet mud before slipping over the earthwork.

Thoren watched the last one disappear and then span the trench macro-periscope around. He looked out, but of the sixty plus men who had just passed his position, there was no sign.

'Where in the name of Solan did they go?' he breathed.



GAUNT WAS AMAZED. He'd seen his men practise and train in the belly holds of the big carrier ships, but now here, in the wild of a real deadzone, their skills startled him. They were all but invisible in the stinking mire, just tiny blurs of movement edging between stacks of debris and over mounds of wreckage towards the slumped but massive curtain walls of the citadel.

He pulled his own Tanith camo-cloak around him. It had been part of his deal with Corbec: he insisted on leading them in to assure loyalty, they insisted he didn't give their position away.

The micro-bead in his ear tickled. It was Corbec. 'First units at the tunnels now. Move up close in pairs.'

Gaunt touched his throat mike. 'Hostiles?' he asked.

'A little light knife work,' crackled the reply.

A few moments later he was entering the dripping, dark mouth of the rubble tunnel. Five chaos-bred warriors in the orange robes of their cult lay dead. Before him, the Tanith were forming up. Corbec was wiping blood from the blade of his long, silver knife.

'Let's go,' said Gaunt.



THE ELECTOR OF Tanith, may his soul rest, had not lied about anything, Gaunt decided. The Ghosts had proved their cunning stealth crossing the open waste of the deadzone, and he had no clue as to how they threaded their way through the crazy lightless warren of the tunnels so surely. 'They do not get lost,' the Elector had boasted, and it was true. Gaunt suspected that the foe had assumed nothing bigger than a cockroach would ever find its way through those half-collapsed, death-trap tunnels.

But Corbec's men had, effortlessly, within minutes, rising from the tunnels ends inside the curtain wall of the city, taking long, silver Tanith knives to pallid and

blotchy throats, and burning their way in through the enemy's headquarters. Now the Tanith first-and-only were proving they could fight. Just like the Elector had said.

From behind a shattered pillar, Gaunt blasted with his bolter, blowing two cultists apart and destroying a doorway. Around him, the advancing Tanith lacerated the air with precise shots from five dozen lasguns.

Near to Gaunt, a sharp-faced, older Tanith who Gaunt had heard the men call Larkin was sniping cultists off the top of the nearest balconies. His eye was tremendous. A little further on, a huge man, a gentle giant called Bragg, was shouldering the heavy bolter and taking down walls and columns. The big weapon had originally been mounted on a sled, but Bragg had torn it free and slung it up like a rifle. Gaunt had never seen a heavy bolter carried by an unarmoured man before. The Tanith called Bragg 'Try Again' Bragg. He was a terrible shot, admittedly, but with firepower like that he could afford to be sloppy.

Just ahead, a six man fireteam lead by Corbec gained the entrance to a temple building complex, grenaded the doorway and went in with lasguns, paired off to give bounding cover.

'Heavy fire in my section!' Corbec radioed to Gaunt. 'Some kind of church or temple. Could be a primary target.'

Gaunt acknowledged. He would bring more teams up. Moving down the aisle of the massive temple, Corbec edged through rubble and heavy crossfire. He nodded a pair past him... Rawne and Suth... and then the next. His own cover partner, Forgal, bellied up close in the mica dust of the temple floor, and unslung his lasgun.

'Down there,' he hissed, his eyes as sharp as ever. 'There's a lower storey down behind the altar. They've got a lot of defence around that doorway. The big arch under the stained-glass.'

It was true.

'You smell that?' Rawne asked over the radio. Corbec did. Decay, stale sweat, dead blood. Rank and harsh, oozing from the crypt.

Forgal began to crawl forward. A lucky shot vaporised the top of his head.

'Sacred Feth!' sang Corbec and opened up in rage, bringing the entire stained glass window down in a sheet onto the altar.

Rawne and Suth took advantage of the confusion to grab a few more yards. Rawne unwrapped a tube-charge and hurled it overarm into the archway.

The blast was deafening.



GAUNT HEARD Corbec's call in his earpiece. 'Get in here!' He scrambled into the smoky interior of the temple. At the door, he paused. 'Larkin! Bragg! Orcha! Var! With me! You three, cordon the door! Cluggan, take two teams down the flank of the building and scout!

Gaunt entered the chapel, mashing broken glass underfoot. He could smell the stink. Corbec and Rawne were waiting for him, their other men stood around, watching with lasguns ready.

'Something down here,' Rawne said and led Gaunt on down the littered steps. Gaunt slammed fresh rounds into his bolt gun, then holstered it and picked up Forgal's fallen lasgun.

Beneath the chapel was an undercroft. Dead cultists were strewn like rag dolls around the smouldering floor. In the centre of the chamber stood a rusty, metallic box, two metres square, its lid etched with sigils of Chaos.

Gaunt reached out. The metal was warm. It pulsed. He snatched his hand back.

'What is it?' asked Corbec.

'I don't think any of us want to know,' said Gaunt. 'Some relic of Chaos, some unholy object, an icon... whatever, it's something valuable to these monsters, something they're defending to the last.'

'That Sloka Colonel was sure there was a reason they were holding on,' Corbec suggested. 'Maybe they're hoping support will arrive in time to save this.'

'Let's spoil those chances. I want a systematic withdrawal from this point, back out under the wall. Each man leaves his tube-charges here. Rawne, collect them and rig them - you seem to be good with explosives.'

Within minutes, the Ghosts had withdrawn. Rawne crouched and

connected the firing pins of the small but potent antipersonnel charges. Gaunt watched him and the door.

'Pick it up, Rawne. We haven't much time. The enemy aren't going to leave this area open for long.'

'Nearly done,' Rawne said. 'Check the door again, sir. I thought I heard something.'

The 'sir' should have warned him. As Gaunt turned, Rawne rose and clubbed him around the back of the head with his fist. Gaunt dropped, stunned, and Rawne rolled him over next to the charges.

'A fitting place for scum like you to die, ghost maker!' he murmured. 'Down here amongst the vermin and the filth. It's so tragic that the brave Commissar didn't make it out, but the cultists were all over us.' Rawne drew his las pistol and lowered it towards Gaunt's head.

Gaunt kicked out and brought Rawne down. He rolled and slammed into him, punching him once, twice. Blood marked Rawne's mouth.

He tried to hit again, but Gaunt was so much bigger. He struck Rawne so hard he was afraid he'd broken his neck. The Tanith lolled in the dust.

Gaunt got up, and eyed the timer setting. It was just dropping under two minutes.

Time to leave. Gaunt turned. In the doorway of the room, the warriors of Chaos moved towards him.



THE BLAST SENT a column of dirt and fire up into the sky that could be seen from the Guard trenches across the deadzone. Six minutes later, the defender's big guns stopped and fell silent. Then all firing ceased completely from the enemy lines.

Guard units moved in, cautiously at first. They found the cultists dead at their positions. Each one had, in unison, taken his own life, as if in response to some great loss. In the conclusion of his report on the victory at Blackshard, General Hadrak surmised that the destruction of the Chaos

relic, which had given meaning to the cult defence, robbed them of the will or need to continue. Hadrak also noted the significant role in the victory played by the newly-founded Tanith 1st, which had supplemented his own forces. Although, as Commander-in-Chief of the Blackshard action, he took overall credit for the victory, he was magnanimous in acknowledging the work of 'Gaunt's Ghosts', and particularly recommended their stealth and scouting abilities.

Commissar Gaunt, wounded in the stomach and shoulder, emerged alive from the deadzone twenty minutes after the blast and was treated by medical teams before returning to his frigate. He might have made his way out of the enemy lines faster, had he not carried the unconscious body of one of his officers, a Major Rawne, back to safety.



DAY THIRTY-ONE, ABOVE BLACKSHARD

STIFF WITH drug-dulled pain, Gaunt walked down the companion way of the troop carrier and into the holding bay. Nearly nine hundred of the Tanith were billeted here. They looked up from their weapons drills and Gaunt felt the silence on him.

'First blood to you,' he said to them. 'First blood to Tanith. The first wound of vengeance. Savour it.'

By his side, Corbec began to clap. The men picked it up, more and more, until the hold shook with applause.

Gaunt eyed the crowd. There was a future here. A regiment worth the leading, a prize worth chasing all the way to glory.

His eyes found Major Rawne in the crowd. Their eyes fixed. Rawne was not applauding.

That made Gaunt laugh. He turned to Milo and gestured to the Tanith pipes cradled in his aide's hands.

'Now you can play something,' he told him. ●





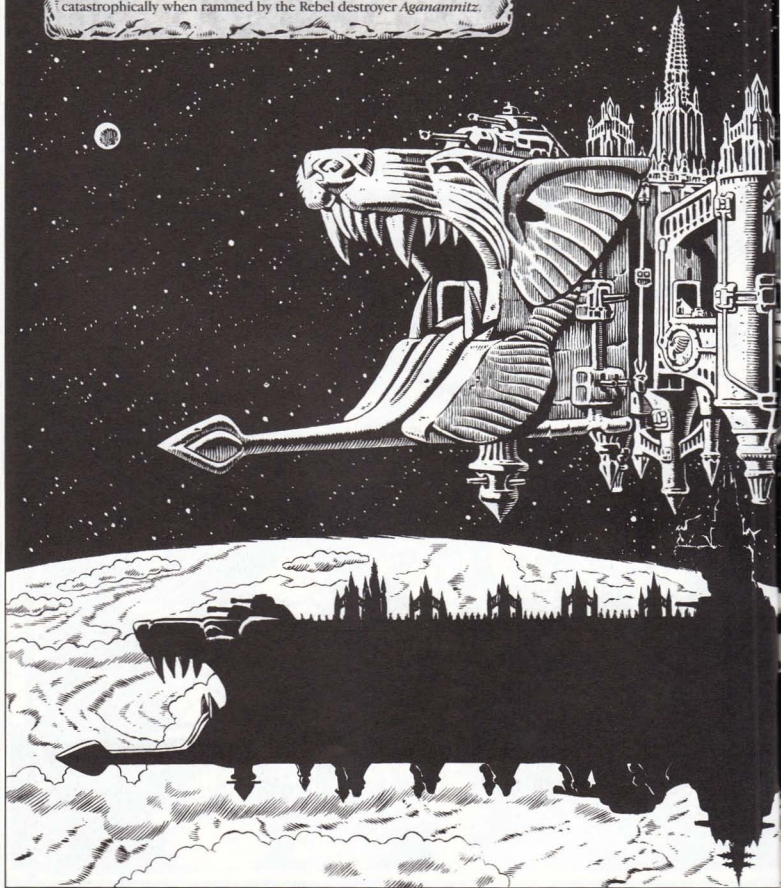
GAUNT'S GHOSTS

BY LOGAN JARBERA
& CRAIG YETTING



ULTIMATE VENGEANCE

One the most famous warships of the Battlefleet Obscurus, this craft saw action during the Richtor Uprisings. Here the mighty battleship stands to during the final landings at Quattahara III. *Ultimate Vengeance*, and her sister ship *Ultimate Wrath* (in silhouette) served for the full 50 years of the campaign, running escort duties on the Fhalian convoy runs for the over-extended Imperium supply lines. *Vengeance* survived sixteen ramming attempts by Rebel destroyers. One such craft is now held permanently in stasis in the vessel's main hold, in memory of the 1,000 dead from reactor core north which ruptured catastrophically when rammed by the Rebel destroyer *Aganamnitz*.







Here begins the taylor of *Grimcrag Grunsonn*, fabled Dwarf Adventurer, and his band of Heroes, other-wise knowne as *Grunsonn's Marauders*, as they set sail for Adventure on the High Seas, in search of

PARADISE LOST

As related by that renowned Scholar and Wit, Master *Andrew Jones* of Altdorf

WELL, JOHAN, y'see, it's like this...! The gruff Dwarf voice hung for long moments in the hot tropical air. 'Sometimes yer has to take the big chance...' The voice trailed off. 'Ain't half hot, though.'

'Snowkapt Mountinz, I see Snowkapt Mountinz.' Indecipherable babble escaped from Keanu the Weaver like steam from a leaky kettle. 'Ja, und schtreams, und kold, kold fountinz...' Even the Barbarian's delirium was thickly accented.

Johan Anstein, ex-Imperial envoy, groaned inwardly and manoeuvred a fragment of sailcloth to shade himself from the merciless ravages of the sun. The young, would-be warrior peered with squinting eyes at the Dwarf sitting stoically at the rowlocks.

'But Grimcrag, what are we going to do?' Anstein's voice was little more than a croak, his tongue thick and furred in his mouth. He could feel the sun hammering down on his head, even through the thick tarpaulin he had draped across his blistered shoulders.

The young man pointed what was (to his mind at least) quickly becoming a skeletally thin arm at the recumbent Elf lying in the

bilges. Jiriki rolled softly with the swell of the sea. 'He hasn't moved all day, and Keanu thinks he's back home in Norsca.'

Johan studied the barbarian lolling in the steersman's seat. Wearing nothing but a loin cloth and horned helmet, the Reaver glistened menacingly.

'Take mich Home, Momma!' the Barbarian gargled, his teeth chattering uncontrollably.

'Don't you be worryin' about yon Elf, lad,' Grimcrag interjected. 'He's always doin' that suspended animation trick of his when things get tricky.' The Dwarf deftly prodded the comatose Jiriki with a boat hook. 'See, nothing!'

Grimcrag scratched at his beard and spat overboard. 'It's old musclehead I'm worried about. I don't think he can take many more days without anything to drink. He's getting beerhydrated, and it'll be the end of him, mark my words.'

'No sign of land?' Johan asked hopelessly.

The Dwarf performed what under normal circumstances would have been an almost comical double take. 'Oh yes, didn't I mention it? We're about thirty yards away from a lovely landing berth. I can see the tavern from here... OF COURSE THERE'S NO BLOODY LAND!' Grimcrag snorted in derision, and continued scratching despondently at his beard.

Johan slumped back under the tarpaulin. 'That's it then, we're done for.'

Minutes later, he had drifted off into a restless, sun-driven daydream.



GOLD, LAD, GOLD! More than you can imagine! The Dwarf voice resonated with barely controlled excitement.

'Yes, but it's not Lustrian, or from the Lost Kingdoms at all: it's in a storm-wrecked Bretonnian galleon.'

'Never mind that, it's ours for keeps now.'

'It's sinking fast!'

'We've got time, lad, and this boat can hold plenty.'

'Wouldn't we be better scavenging water and food?'

'VOT? S'YOU MAD?'

A madly canted deck, so far down in the water that it was not much of a climb at all even in their weakened state. Crazy angles, creaking hawsers, the desolate flapping of ripped and tattered sailcloth. Not so different from their own recent fate.

Keanu barging the others aside impatiently, muscles straining as he pulled at the iron ring on the deck hatch. Nothing... then the screech of swollen wood on rusted metal.

A black square leading down into nothingness. The stench of stagnant death and decay. The slap of lazy waters in the dark bilges below.

Heat-bloated bodies gently bumping against him in the darkness. Fetid water climbing quickly over their waists. Fish swimming blindly about their legs. The discomforting feel of being ghoulish carrion, unwelcome visitors intruding upon the rest of the dead. Heavy crates. A race against time and the horror of joining the bodies in the hold for ever.

A portion saved. Exhaustion. The sad sight of a once-noble vessel slipping ignominiously below the waves, leaving at its last nothing more than bubbling froth and a few shards of timber.

The endless sun by day and the chill blackness of night. Day after day after day in a boat piled high with nothing but gold. Death's shadow never seemed far away. Who would succumb first?

'Sail ahoy!'

Hope!

'You sure, Elfy?'

'Yes, it's some kind of corsair.'

'Wave everything! We're saved!'

'Hide the gold, lad!'

'Where, for heaven's sake?'

'Halloo! Halloo!'

A brine- and barnacle-encrusted tramp. A patchwork of old repairs over older repairs. A grimy grey sail. Tar and smoke-blackened timbers. A ruined figurehead jutting like a broken tooth. The most beautiful ship Johan had ever seen.

A grizzled, suspicious face. A toothless grin, a hooked hand. A swarthy bunch of no-hopers. Angels in disguise, no doubt.

'Well 'pon my soul, if it ain't the great mister lardy-dardy-I-wouldn't-hire-your-ship-if-I-was-in-the-middle-of-the-Great-Ocean-on-a-tea-chest Grunsonn himself...'

'Vot?'

'Grimcrag, you didn't?'

'Not exactly, lad... I think he missed out the bit about the tea chest leaking...'

A diplomatic Elven voice: 'Look here, Hook Black Pugh Beard or whatever your name is, are you going to help us or not?'

'Depends, eh, lads? Shall we help the hoity-toities?'

A chorus of despicable cheers and catcalls.

'Dependink on vot, 'zactly?'

'Got'ny gold in those boxes?'

'Ja!'

'No!'

'For heaven's sake, Grimcrag. Yes, yes, yes, just get us off this blasted boat!'

'You'll be wantin' water then?'

'Ja.'

'Yes.'

'Mmph!'

'Definitely.'

Ropes and grapples snaking down. Chests brim full of Bretonnian gold hauled up on board. A fishermen's net lowered. Salvation in sight. Four sun-bleached souls about to end their week-long torment. Heaven is nigh.



JOHAN STIRRED IN his heat-drenched half-sleep. He already knew the ending of this particular dream. He'd seen it for real, and dreamed it a hundred times a day since. His eyes opened a crack, as he wondered yet again if maybe, somehow, this was all a dream, a very bad one. Perhaps he was really lying on silk sheets at home in Castle Baltenkopf? Pitiful hope seized his heart.

But no, here was the boat, and there sat the disconsolate form of the renowned Grimcrag Grunsonn, unceremoniously stripped down to filthy grey vest and long johns. The lugubrious Dwarf still wore his iron-shod boots and his helmet, but his armour and precious axe were tucked under his bench for safe-keeping. Johan bleakly noticed that today the Dwarf had rolled his sleeves up. Perhaps the sun was finally getting to even him.

Johan turned over and quickly drifted off into fitful sleep again, the endless monotony of the slap-slapping of the sea against the boat's flimsy side a familiar lullaby. After a few hours of blissful oblivion, the dream came on again.



THEY ARE SCRAMBLING up the net, grinning madly to one another. Even Grimcrag has forgotten the thought of his gold in the joy of rescue. Fresh water? A bath? Food? What it is to have friends!

Halfway up and disaster strikes – the net falls away, plunging them down into the sea. Uproarious laughter from above

When they surface, the ship is already drifting away. Their small, sorry boat is dragged alongside by the current for a moment, as if forlornly hoping for a tow.

The corsairs laugh cruelly, jeering at the Marauders from the safety of the gunwale.

'Come back!' Johan gurgles.

'MY GOLD!' shrieks Grimcrag.

Jiriki and Keanu swim with strong, accomplished strokes towards the boat.

The pirates throw down some water skins and a few barrels of salted fish.

The Marauders clamber, exhausted, into their floating prison cell once more. Ironically enough, there is more room without all the gold. At least Johan can stretch his long legs.

Grimcrag is inconsolable, shouting curses southwards long after the pirates' sail has dipped below the distant horizon. The sharks circle. In the boat they all know they are doomed.



JOHAN WOKE WITH a start, a sharp stabbing pain in his heart warning him that finally his time was nigh. He had hoped that he would not be the last to die. He didn't think he could stand that. At least

they hadn't eaten each other. They still had their honour.

It was so hot he could barely breathe. Eyes closed, he groaned softly. What a way to go. The stabbing pain intensified, followed by a repetitive dull thumping ache in his head. After a moment, Anstein opened his eyes.

Grimcrag stood over him, staring open-mouthed at the horizon. Waking up to the view of a Dwarf's badly-sewn long johns crotch revealed secrets to the young adventurer that lesser men had died for merely talking about in casual conversation. The Dwarf was absent-mindedly stabbing him in the chest with a marlin spike, whilst simultaneously stomping nervously up and down on the ex-envoy's head with a heavily booted foot.

'Pack it in, Grimcrag,' Johan croaked through sun-dried lips. 'Just lie down and die quietly like the rest of us.'

The Dwarf mumbled something through his salt-encrusted beard.

Johan thought he had misheard. He painfully raised his head, and pawed feebly at the Dwarf's long johns. His breath came in rasping sobs. 'What did you say?' He was surprised to see that the Dwarf was weeping. Must be a delayed reaction to the loss of so much gold.

Salty tears ran down the grizzled Dwarf's cheeks, mingling with that already tangling his beard. Johan strained to hear his cracked whisper. 'Land, lad. Marvellous, green, grassy, diggable bloody LAND!'



KEANU WAS MOSTLY awake and rowing hard by the time they approached the beach, rounding the rugged headland into the sheltered cove beyond. So far, the island had seemed an impenetrable fortress, with cliffs on every side, but the sight of this sheltered cove took Johan's breath away. A strip of white, white sand stretched for perhaps a quarter of a mile, with projecting horns of rock sheltering the cove from the open ocean. Coral reefs made bizarre living citadels in the clear water, and also created a natural barrier against any heavier swells.

Negotiating towards a gap in the reef, Keanu muttered something about catching a chill, and Johan could see wisps of steam escaping from beneath the Barbarian's helm. Clearly the man needed rest soon.

'See all that green, lad?' shouted Grimcrag, pulling on an oar. 'That shows there must be water on the island somewhere.' The Dwarf was wearing a relieved grin along with his boots and underclothes, and had obviously heroically put the matter of his gold to the back of his mind for a while.

Despite Johan's best efforts, and the crazed shouting and whooping of them all, they had failed to rouse Jiriki from his deep slumber. Grimcrag had explained that it sometimes happened like that – and the Reaver had grunted something about 'Vontink a lie in, praps' – but Johan could see that the Dwarf was concerned.

Johan trailed a finger in the clear waters, watching the myriad schools of fish flash in the sunlight beneath him. He had taken an hour at the oars, rowing around what looked to be a huge lump of jungle-covered rock, and now he was taking a well earned rest. So many fish.

Then Grimcrag shouted for him to grab a boat hook and be ready to fend off. 'We're going through the gap in the reef, lad, and we don't want to hole her.'

As they navigated safely through, the Elf slept on, snoring softly, his feet at the tiller and his head just behind Grimcrag's seat.

A few moments later and they were into the lagoon, five hundred feet or so from the white sands of the beach. Johan had once read a book from Araby about exotic fruits. Surely what he was seeing now were indeed the fabled, erm, barnarnowls or something; the exact name eluded him.

'Looks like we're in for a sojourn in paradise, eh, Grimcrag?' he shouted excitedly, pointing shorewards. 'See, corker nuts.'

The Dwarf grinned deliriously. 'Yes, and jimjam trees too!'

Johan sighed contentedly, sat back at the tiller and peered at the fish again.

A moment later, Anstein, Grimcrag and Keanu made simultaneous exclamations.

'Grimcrag, there's no fish at all in the lagoon! Why d'you think that might be?'

'Hell, lad, what's that coming from the juggle?'

'Achtung! Valkink Lizarts!'

Johan's question was forgotten as all eyes swung forwards. All, that is, except for Jiriki, who was facing the wrong way and asleep anyway. A strange procession was making its way through the jungle and onto the beach. What indeed looked to be four- to five-foot tall, walking lizards were emerging in small groups, carrying bows, blow pipes and crude swords. Others were throwing quantities of fruit and flowers into the lagoon, while slightly larger lizards began blowing on trumpets fashioned from polished shells.

In all, Johan soon estimated there to be upwards of a hundred lizard men on the beach. So engrossed were the reptilians, that they didn't seem to have noticed the intruding boat. In fact, and Johan thought this most peculiar, they seemed to be studiously avoiding looking up or out to sea at all, as if terrified of what they might see.

'They won't be expecting us, make no mistake,' giggled Johan, his fish spotting momentarily forgotten.

'Vot is dey?' Keanu asked. 'Never seeink Nothink like dat before.'

'Dunno, Keanu, but best be on the safe side,' Grimcrag growled, reaching instinctively for Old Slaughterer, his trusty axe. Only once the mighty blade was wedged firmly between his stumpy legs did he recommence rowing. 'Johan, you're an envoy, this should be right up your street,' the Dwarf grunted over his shoulder. 'Do something useful for a change.'

'Ja, Usevul.'

Johan looked at the throng of lizard men they were fast approaching, and racked his brain for the appropriate phrase or saying. Visiting ambassadors he was fine with, or representatives of the merchants' guild, but a hundred apparently semi-civilised lizards throwing fruit into a lagoon on a desert island was something different altogether.

'Well?'

'Ja, say Somzink.'

Feeling that his talents were obviously being called into question, Johan stood up and made his way to the front of the boat with what he hoped was an air of quiet confidence. From the way Grimcrag beamed toothily and nudged the steaming barbarian, he had succeeded so far.

Standing at the very prow, Johan cupped his hands to his mouth.

'HALLOO! HALLOO!! DON'T KILL US – WE, ER, COME IN PEACE!'

Judging by the collective intake of breath from behind him, his speech had a dramatic effect on Grimcrag and Keanu. The lizards on the beach were immediately thrown into a state of high panic. Some buried their heads in the sand, others ran off into the jungle. Others feverishly threw more and more fruit into the lagoon. Johan saw one of them biting large chunks out his trumpet. A few braver souls, who unfortunately all seemed to carry bows, stood uncertainly on the shoreline, arrows knocked and ready.

'Now you've gorn and done it, lad,' Grimcrag muttered. 'At least try and smile, nice, like.'

Johan fixed his best diplomatic grin as Keanu and Grimcrag continued to row.

A moment later, something triggered the lizards into even more frenzied behaviour. Within a few seconds all save a dozen or so lonely warriors had vanished into the jungle. The creatures raised their bows uncertainly. Johan could see that they were still trying to avoid looking directly out to sea, which couldn't do much for their chances of hitting anything.

'Bound to be poison-tipped. I heard once that...,' Grimcrag was rudely interrupted by an unmistakable Elven shriek from the rear of the boat.

'AAAAAARGH! What in Tiranoc and the sunken realms is that!?!?'

'Oh good, Jiriki, you've woke-' began Johan as he turned, but the words died on his lips.

Perhaps fifty feet behind the boat, approaching them in a huge welter of spume and spray, was the biggest, most fearsome looking beast he had ever seen.



CONSCIOUSNESS slowly seeped back into Johan Anstein's wiry frame, like reluctant treacle leaching through the stygian depths of an old gravel bed. Something was tickling his face.

'Two sugars in mine, Grimcrag,' Johan groaned, keeping his eyes screwed firmly

shut as he clutched his head to stop it falling off. Johan's skull felt as if the Dwarf was enthusiastically excavating for gold somewhere behind his frontal lobe. 'Must have been some party,' he thought, groggy from what could only have been last night's excesses of ale. Cosy in his blanket, Johan desperately tried to let sleep reclaim him.

Something slimy and cold began wriggling up into Johan's nose. It was only then it occurred to a sluggish Anstein that he hadn't been to a party for weeks, not since three days before they set sail on that accursed boat. 'Boat...'

Johan frowned inadvertently in his slumber, as dislocated thoughts fell like dominoes through his drowsy brain: 'Boat... shipwreck... pirates... island... lizards... MONSTER!!!'

A swift moment later, Johan was very much awake and cautiously opening an eye, whilst keeping the other screwed firmly shut, just in case. He sneezed to clear his nose of what could only be an inquisitive worm, and blinked his one open eye. Total darkness. Either he was blind, or somewhere black and smelling of sandy earth. Somewhere black, sandy and with worms. Johan briefly wondered if maybe it was better to imagine he was blind.

Cautiously he edged onto his back, immediately encountering another problem. He seemed to be roughly wrapped in some sort of coarse material. It enveloped him in a manner most unlike a blanket. The word 'shroud' drifted through the backwaters of Anstein's stunned mind, on an unavoidable collision course with his conscious thoughts. Struggling free of his 'blanket', Johan gingerly reached upwards with his right hand. Almost immediately his nails scraped rough wooden planks in the dark. Panic struck as quickly as the Dwarf Mineworker's Guild when the pit-head bar ran out of Bugman's.

'Buried alive!' Johan gasped, thrashing out wildly about him in the inky blackness. In every direction he hit wood almost immediately. 'Oh No Oh No Oh No!' he shrieked, before lying very still, like a desperate and cornered beast. 'Think, Anstein, think!' he muttered, teeth chattering uncontrollably. A terrible fear gnawed at his innards, threatening to return the blind panic which had all but overwhelmed him a moment ago.

Johan recapped the situation aloud, in a vain attempt to calm his pounding heart. 'The monster – that's why there were no fish in the lagoon. That's what the strange lizards were making offerings to.' Johan stopped for a moment as a violent trembling fit seized his frame. It passed.

'We almost reached the beach, then it was upon us,' Johan whispered slowly to himself, as the recollection of the dread fanged monstrosity which had assaulted their tiny boat flooded back into his memory.

He remembered it roaring in insensate fury. He remembered its tiny, bestial eyes, staring fixedly at him from a cart-sized head atop a mast-high neck. He remembered the water streaming in frothy torrents from its crustacean-encrusted back. Johan remembered Jiriki loosing arrow after arrow at the beast. He smiled as he remembered Grimcrag's axe, a whistling arc of gold and red in the bright sunlight. He remembered the barbarian's war cry as the Reaver struck again and again with his wicked longsword. He remembered the moment when the beast began to know fear. He even recalled his own blade – a cold sliver of silver pricking at the gargantuan monster's side.

Johan gulped in the darkness of his tomb as he recalled what must have been seen as the moment of his own death. Tears welled in his eyes, tears of sadness and frustration. At least he would be remembered as a hero, killed fighting a great beast. And they had slain it, of that he had no doubt at all.

Even buried alive, on a far distant isle, for that he surely was, Johan allowed himself a grim smile as he remembered the sea monster's death throes. Bleeding from a hundred or more wounds, it had threshed the water to a pinky red froth. Its cries had echoed around the cove over which it must have been undisputed lord for many years.

And Johan remembered its massive tail swinging round as if time had slowed, clearing the water like a fifty-foot yard arm. The others had instinctively ducked just in time, but Johan could clearly see in his mind's eye that he, alone, had not. He could remember a flash of pain and a great many stars, then nothing more, but now he nursed the bump on his head and silently wept salty tears of pain, fear and frustration. Buried alive! Johan desperately hoped he had been given a good send off at least...

Mad, blind panic swept over Johan again, carrying him like a broken twig before a mountain river in flood. He screamed, he yelled, he cried insanities at the darkness as he hammered and clawed weakly at his coffin lid for what seemed like hours.

Eventually he was exhausted, and lay panting in the darkness. It was no good. He was surely doomed to die, probably of asphyxiation when the air in the fetid hole ran out.

Johan slumped, beaten and dispirited in the cool blackness. He was ready, at last, to die. As one of Grunsonn's Marauders.



ON THE BEACH, the Marauders sat around a small fire and devoured chunks of half-cooked sea monster with gusto, as the eventful day drew to a close. On the distant horizon, the sun sank beneath the waves, its angry red orb extinguished for another day.

'Marooned in the middle of nowhere!' Jiriki muttered, picking delicately at a tender morsel.

Grimcrag stared wistfully out to sea, hot fat running down his bearded chin. 'Reckon that was as good a fight as any I've had for a while – thought it had us fer a moment or two.'

'Nah!' spat the Barbarian through stringy haunch, black eyes gleaming in the firelight. 'Ve voss just Veak, dat's all, uddervise ve're killink it pretty damm Qvick, ja?'

'S'pose so,' answered Grimcrag after a moment's chewing, before shaking his shaggy head as if to clear cobwebs away. 'Eeh, though, we're gettin' all maudlin and no mistake, aren't we?' The Dwarf's eyebrows furrowed and he gestured with stubby fingers at the feast which lay before them. 'Look at this lot, 'nough to keep us going for weeks.' He turned to the others and smiled his broken-toothed, bearded grin. 'S'not all that bad, is it lads? Old Grimcrag saw you right in the end.'

Jiriki threw back his head and laughed sarcastically. The silvery note rang clear across the cove. He wagged a slender finger reproachfully. 'Oh yes, Grimcrag,

everything's just fine!' The Elf looked around them pointedly. 'Here we are, stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no boat, no hope of rescue, not even a map!' It wasn't often that the Elf betrayed much emotion at all.

At this sudden outburst Keanu and Grimcrag sat open-mouthed, fat and saliva dribbling from their chins in equal measure. Jiriki sighed and kicked languidly at the sand before looking up and smiling sadly. 'Oh what's the use, we're stuck here!' Looking stern, the Elf continued in an admonishing tone. 'Bear in mind though, Grimcrag, it's no use trying that "I'm your caring father" routine with us any more, you sneaky old miscreant, we've known you far too long for any of that nonsense to work – we're not young Anstein, you know.'

At the mention of Johan, the conversation ground to a halt. Keanu reached a ham-sized fist into the fire and lugged out a huge, crisped slab of meat, sizzling hot and dripping fatty juices onto the sand.

'Johan would like that bit, I'll wager,' Grimcrag grunted, nodding at the hunk of flesh. 'He always did like a nice bit of crackling.'

They paused in unison, the unspoken bond of untold shared adventures and brushes with death uniting the Marauders' thoughts.

A dull thumping and muffled shrieking intruded upon their reverie, and Keanu stood up, rack of monster in hand. He padded lithely across the beach to the spot where their battered rowing boat lay overturned on the sand. The thudding and shouting quite clearly came from beneath the upturned hull. Keanu reached down and carefully lifted up one side of the boat, peering underneath through the small firelit crack. A pair of wild and staring eyes greeted him, accompanied by animalistic growls and mewlings.



JOHAN'S PANIC was rudely interrupted by one edge of his coffin being lifted away. Ruddy light seeped through the crack. A hulking shape awaited, accompanied by the

unmistakable smell of charred and burning flesh.

'This is it then, Hell it is for me,' Johan bumbled, terrified and miserable. At least he wouldn't be stuck in the dark for ever, which perhaps was some small consolation.

'Awake, jung 'un?' The unmistakable voice ripped through Johan's mind, and reality rapidly readjusted itself in his brain.

'Gghhh?' the ex-envoy bumbled, wondering how Keanu came to be down in Hell too. Perhaps he had a visitor's day-pass.

'Head betta? Hungry?' Keanu's voice cajoled, but Anstein knew that devils and daemons could be very convincing if they wanted. He backed off to the far side of his coffin, trying to remember suitable holy signs or gestures. Something outside sighed patiently.

'Kom on out, you're Schleepink too long, ja? Nitemares also, by da look of it. All tangled unda da tarpaulin you are.'

The delicious tang of roasting meat reached Johan's nostrils and his grumbling stomach decided the matter in lieu of his concussed mind.

'Keanu?' he whimpered hopefully, 'Is it really you?'

Whatever stood beyond the coffin seemed to pause and ponder the question.

'Ja, 'f Korse, schtupid!' With one mighty heave, the Barbarian lifted the boat away from Johan, who lay revealed, blinking in the firelight.

Johan shivered uncontrollably, wrapped in his tarpaulin-shroud, dazed and confused. An all-important question rose to the fore of his battered mind, back as he was, from the dead. Before he could stop them, his cracked and swollen lips had formed the fateful words.

'Can I smell... crackling?'



THE PATHWAY from the beach into the jungle was obviously well trodden, but the Marauders trod it with exceptional care. As they wound onwards through leafy glades, one moment they were drenched in tropical sunlight, the next

they were plunged into the greeny darkness of the humid forest canopy.

Jiriki took the lead, gliding with silky footfall along the jungle track. The Elf sniffed the air, listening intently at every turn. It was a source of some contention between Keanu the hulking Barbarian and Jiriki the Elf as to which had the most highly attuned senses. No one would argue that in the natural state, an Elf's senses were keener than those of man or Dwarf, but the Reaver had long proven himself to be something of an exception. His ability to pinpoint danger was second to none (except maybe Jiriki on a very good day), and he too moved catlike in the jungle, but staying perhaps ten feet from the path itself.

Grimcrag was still rumbling about 'All that sixth senses nonsense!' and snorting derisively to himself. He made no attempt at quietness, clattering along in his trusty armour, the clanks and bangings interspersed with frequent hearty belches. This disregard of any possible danger, to Johan's way of thinking, made something of a nonsense of the others' theatrical movements.

'Let me tell you, young Anstein,' bellowed the Dwarf, receiving a recriminating stare from Jiriki and a muffled 'Qviet!' from a nearby bush. 'There's some senses what is 'stremely useful, and others,' the Dwarf pointed at Jiriki's frozen form, 'what isn't.' Johan noticed that for all his brevity, the second part of Grimcrag's utterance was little more than a whisper. The Dwarf belched, shrugging apologetically. 'Pardon me, lad, sea monster. Always repeats something awful, in my 'sperience.' The Dwarf pushed his warhelm back and scratched vigorously at his grizzled scalp. 'Hot, innit?'

Johan nodded, peering cautiously into the gloomy canopy on either side. Everywhere, things were moving; unseen things that flapped, or scabbled, or crawled, or just made atonal cooing noises in the distance. Sword drawn, the envoy felt decidedly uncomfortable as they made their way down the beaten track. He didn't want to go first, as that way lay almost certain first contact with them, and he didn't want to go last, as that way he was almost certain to be picked off without anyone else noticing. In actual fact, he didn't much like the idea of being on the track at all, as it was such an obvious

place to set a trap (even the words trap and track were strangely similar), and the very thought of plunging off into the forest, as Keanu had, filled the young man with queasy unease.

'Anyhow,' Grimcrag carried on, waving his axe vaguely at the vegetation, 'what's the use of being able to creep about in the jungle?' Johan was about to enter a plea on behalf of forest lore, tracking, hunting and so on, but Grimcrag was in full flow. 'No, heightened and truly useful senses relate to real things, things you can touch...' The Dwarf's voice tailed off, and Johan had a pretty good idea what he was contemplating, and it wasn't dusky maidens from Araby.

'Such as... gold?' He ventured, prodding Grimcrag from his reverie.

'Well, I s'pose that's as good an example as any,' Grimcrag whispered hoarsely. 'My senses can detect gold – and beer too, for that matter – from a distance of...' The Dwarf stopped in his tracks and frowned.

Johan looked puzzled. Surely Grimcrag was not about to be overcome by a fit of honesty regarding his claims? Looking over his shoulder at the Dwarf, Johan almost bumped into Jiriki. The Elf had stopped dead still, managing to meld almost invisibly into the background. Only his bright red jerkin gave him away, and the best the Elf could manage under the circumstances was to vanish to the extent that it looked as though someone had left their shirt out to dry on the bole of a tree. Of Keanu there was no sign.

Over his shoulder, Johan could see Grimcrag standing still as stone, eyes closed, nostrils dilated as he sniffed the laden air. Sending darting glances all around in search of trouble, all Johan saw was further evidence of paradise. Yellow-white shards of sunlight flashed through the greenery, catching the heavy moisture in the laden air like glittering gemstones. Nearby, unseen, a stream trickled and gurgled seductively. A multi-coloured bird with huge wings sang sweetly as it glided between treetops far overhead. Water trickled off the mound of stark white skulls sitting by the bend in the pathway.

'Skulls?'

'A village!'

'Qviet, dammit!'

'BEER!'

THE SETTLEMENT appeared deserted – a collection of thatched mud huts, of curiously familiar design, situated in the middle of a sun-drenched clearing. Ringed by palm trees bearing coconuts as big as Johan's head, the village certainly looked idyllic. The tinkling burble of fresh, flowing water sounded from behind the furthest hut, and the only other sounds came from the jungle.

Stepping around the pile of skulls, which on close inspection seemed to belong to an assortment of creatures of all shapes and sizes, Johan peered at the dwellings laid out before him. Squinting in the harsh sunlight, the tatters of his sweat-soaked shirt sticking uncomfortably to his back, he stood stock still and watched for any sign of movement.

Having wisely discarded his scarlet blouse, Jiriki was a shadow amongst shadows. The last Johan had seen of him the Elf had been somewhere to the left, behind a cluster of wooden, shed-like buildings. That had been at least ten minutes ago. Of Keanu there was no sign at all.

'Come on then, lad, no point in hanging about when there's beer to be drunk,' Grimcrag said cheerily. 'Sides, there's obviously no one at home.' With that, the Dwarf strode into the village, his heavy boots kicking up little dust motes in the clearing. Somewhat more hesitantly, Johan followed in his footsteps.

In the centre of the cluster of huts, a small and overgrown pyramid thrust uncertainly towards the sky. Overhead, the palm trees which ringed the clearing sent branches scurrying as if to try and close off the immodest gap carved in the jungle canopy. Johan approached the structure for a closer look. He was troubled by the red-brown stains which marked the age-worn stone. Nonetheless, he tugged at the covering of lianas and vines, a twisted mat of root and leaf which conspired to convince the casual observer that this pyramid was, in fact, simply a strangely shaped bush or tree. Undeterred, the envoy pressed on, ripping and tugging at the tenacious growth. Johan had spotted something which he thought be of considerable interest, and wasn't to be put off easily.

So had Grimcrag, pulling aside a hastily thrown-together shield of palm fronds from alongside of one of the buildings. What he saw positioned in the cool dark of the side

alley made the old Dwarf gasp in surprise.

At that moment, a commotion on the far side of the clearing announced Jiriki's arrival, as the Elf marched a captive lizard-creature into the clearing.

'Writing on stone!'

'Gentlemen, we have a captive.'

'Beer!'

The three adventurers all exclaimed at the same time. Jiriki's prisoner took advantage of the confusion by trying to scuttle off to the safety of a pond on the edge of the clearing. The Elf hauled it back quickly with a tug on the rope which he had tied around its stomach. The creature sank down onto its haunches beside the Elf, looking disconsolate. A long tongue shot out to grab a passing fly, but after a moment the bizarre reptile-man sat still, blinking its big eyes in the harsh sunlight.

'Not so fast, froggie. Stay where you are!'

The Elf tied the other end of the rope around a sturdy post which supported one of the huts, then turned to the others. 'Now, what did you say?'

'Writing!' shouted Johan, scraping furiously at the pyramid.

'Beer!' exclaimed Grimcrag, gesturing at the unmistakable shape of a large vat sitting in the cool shadows of the side alley. The Dwarf had found a supply of hollowed coconut shells that obviously served as mugs, and held one beneath a cork bung on the side of the wooden vat. Removing the bung, the Dwarf was showered in a dark brown liquid. A hoppy smell filled the warm and humid air. Filling the shell, he replaced the stopper, grinning happily.

'See, beer!' Grunsonn chuckled, downing the shell full in one capacious gulp. 'Good too, but maybe could have done with standing f'r a bit longer.'

'Never mind that, come and look at this lot!' Johan was beside himself. He had climbed almost to the very top of the pyramid, where a large clump of vines concealed some kind of ornate stonework.

The others walked over, Grimcrag slurping beer. The Elf shook a warning finger at the lizard thing, which had crawled into the shade offered by the canopy of a nearby hut.

'Rik!' The creature gave a croaking burp, but made no attempt to untie itself, apparently resigned to its fate.

'Did that thing call you "Rick"?' Grimcrag asked, throwing the empty coconut shell away. The Dwarf stood at the base of the pyramid, clenched fists on hips, staring belligerently up at the young man atop the construction. Bits of vine and moss floated down towards the Dwarf. 'Wotcha doing, Anstein? This thing doesn't look too safe!'

'Rik! LsssRik!' said the lizard.

'And you can shut up n'all.'

Jiriki was peering intently at the base of the pyramid, where Johan had uncovered a patch of bare stone. Using a silk kerchief, the Elf dusted some smaller fragments away from the surface, peered for a moment, then stood back in surprise. A clod of earth hit the Elf on the head, but he made no indication of noticing.

'How?' Jiriki began, brows furrowing in surprise and consternation. 'What?'

'See, I told you, and that's just the start!' Johan's voice wavered with excitement.

'LsssRIK! LSSSRIKK!' In the shelter of the hut, the lizard thing was getting quite animated.

'Wot?' Grimcrag called, stomping over to where the Elf stood mesmerised. The Dwarf peered at the stonework. 'Wot is all the fuss ab—eh?' The Dwarf stood as if frozen, a thick and stubby finger repeatedly tracing a carved line in the exposed stonework.

'RIKKRIKKRIKK!! LSSSRIKKK!'

'I ... vill... Return...' whispered Grimcrag, reading the words inscribed on the base of the pyramid. A large clump of vines descended upon him, and he looked up, the spell broken. 'Unh?' grunted the Dwarf, dropping his axe in surprise.

Jiriki was staring, mouth open, pointing at the top of the structure with a slender finger.

Johan Anstein, ex-Imperial envoy, was kneeling unmoving in front of the statue he had revealed at the very pinnacle of the Pyramid.

'I'll be blown!' declared the Dwarf. 'Looks like a statue of one of them Norsey types.' He scratched his head, puzzled, leaving streaks of soil smeared across his brow. 'How'd that get 'ere then?'

Staring down at them from atop the small pyramid was the unmistakable form of a Norseman.

'Actually,' Johan began, 'don't you think it looks a little like—'

A spear thumped into the ground inches from Jiriki's boot, making the Elf jump in shocked surprise.

'LSSSRIK! LSSSRIK! LSSSRIK!' This time, the croak was a chorus of many voices.

Very slowly, the Marauders turned round. They were completely surrounded by perhaps a hundred angry and agitated lizard creatures, all wielding spears, bows or blowpipes.

'Poisoned, like as not,' Grimcrag exclaimed, reaching for Old Slaughterer. A cruelly barbed arrow shot into the sand, a mere hair's breadth away from the Dwarf's reaching fingers. He hurriedly snatched his hand back, and a glassy grin crept over his face. For the first time in years, Grimcrag Grunsonn faced a multitude of foes without his trusty axe in his hand. In his heart of hearts, Grimcrag knew that this did nothing good for their odds of winning. It also made him horribly embarrassed. Caught short, he flushed bright red.

The lizards advanced, hissing noisily and brandishing their impressively sharp-looking weapons.

'Don't worry, Grimcrag, I won't tell anyone... even if this whole tragic mess is your fault!' whispered Jiriki, nodding at the Dwarf's axe.

Their captive lizard nodded knowledgeably and burped almost to itself. 'S'Rikkitz!'



INEXORABLY THE Marauders were being forced up to the top of the pyramid, where Johan stood swaying in the intense heat of the sun. Grimcrag could see his axe at the base of the pyramid, apparently of little interest to the lizard creatures which ringed the pyramid, gesturing with their spears and bows. Their hissed chanting was all but deafening. The Marauders glanced nervously about them, hoping to spy some way out of their hopeless predicament.

'A pretty pickle you've got us into, lad, and no mistake,' Grunsonn grumbled, sitting down on the top step. 'And us with no weapons 'n'all.'

Johan gasped in indignant surprise. 'What do you mean, Grimcrag? It was you who said the place was deserted. It was you that drank their beer.' The young man pointed at the axe the Dwarf clutched. 'And what do you call that thing, a toothpick?'

Grimcrag was clutching his spare axe, Orcflayer, in one scarred paw, but his miserable countenance spoke volumes. 'It's not the same. Just don't feel right. It's all in the runes, y'see.' The Dwarf gestured vaguely with the deadly looking axe at the throng of lizards before them. 'If them things kill me while I'm not using Ole Slaughterer, I'll, I'll...' His voice choked, and a tear crept into the old Dwarf's eye. Grimcrag cast a shamefaced gaze at his boots. When he spoke again, it was with a small and tremulous voice. 'Well, I'll just never live it down.'

Jiriki slapped the Dwarf on the back of his head, knocking his helm down over his eyes. 'Stop being so pathetic, Grunsonn; we've been through worse than this, just.' The Elf stood steely-eyed beside young Anstein, an arrow nocked in his fine Elven bow.

At that moment, their attention was drawn to a commotion on the edge of the clearing. A huge Lizardman, bigger than the others and bedecked in all manner of feathers, bones and other dubious finery, strode towards the pyramid. The creature had almost blue-black skin, and in one scaly clawed hand it wielded a long staff. As the Marauders watched, lightning-blue flames glittered balefully around its tip.

'Uh oh, they've got magic.' Johan manoeuvred himself behind the statue.

A crackling bolt of blue energy surged towards them, but even though it was lying at the base of the pyramid, the potent runes on Old Slaughterer drew and earthed the seething forces emanating from the shaman's staff. After a moment, the Lizardman stopped trying to immolate the Marauders and stood nonplussed, its head cocked on one side like a bird. It studied them intently for a minute or so, then squawked something at its fawning retinue. They scuttled off and returned moments later, bearing some heavy-duty nets. The Shaman nodded up at the warriors, and licked its thin lips expectantly.

On top of the pyramid, Grimcrag stood up and set his lips in a stern pout. 'Ain't going in no net. Sharn't. Ain't no fish!' The Dwarf

looked at Johan and Jiriki, and grinned his familiar grin. 'Dunno what came over me, lads!' Setting his helm to its correct angle, he whispered quietly to himself. 'Me old dad always said "It's not the axe as makes the Dwarf", and 'appen he was right.'

'I hear you, my friend. Now is not the time for carping,' Jiriki agreed. 'Let's do it!'

'Oh heavens, there are hundreds of them, with magic and nets. We're bound to die now, aren't we?' muttered Johan, more in anger than fear. The deathly confidence exuded by Grimcrag and Jiriki was strangely infectious, and the two older Marauders were heartened by the sound of Johan's sword scraping clear from its scabbard.

At the base of the pyramid, twenty feet of very steep steps below them, the lizard things gathered. Looking up, they obviously weren't too keen to climb the steps, nets or no, not into the waiting blades of three belligerent warriors who had such an obvious height advantage over them. They rasped and burped amongst themselves, and a few launched arrows up to skitter and skip on the flagstones of the pyramid.

'Come on then, frog spawn!' Johan shouted. 'Come and get your legs chopped.' He turned to Grimcrag. 'Shame old Grailmad Pierre isn't here, he loves frogs' legs.'

Grimcrag guffawed. Jiriki smirked.

'LSSSRRIKK!' the lizards croaked as one, but they did not advance. The Shaman reached the bottom of the pyramid with bounding steps, and squinted up at the warriors. 'Nrsssssss?' it hissed angrily at them, then rounded on its cowardly compatriots. After a few minutes of frantic hissing and croaking, the black lizard threw off its headdress in apparent disgust, and shook its mottled head resignedly. It shrugged its shoulders and pointed up beyond the pyramid top. The other lizards followed its gaze, and immediately went into a frenzy of excitement, hopping up and down and hissing enthusiastically.

Atop the pyramid, the Marauders watched, transfixed.

'Now what?' Grimcrag grunted.

'They seem excited about something,' Johan muttered, confused.

Jiriki turned to face the way the lizards were looking. 'Sun's going down. They'll wait for the dark.'

The others turned and looked. There was no denying the fact that the sun was sinking

fast. Already its ruddy red globe fondly touched the top most branches of the trees, and soon it would drop out of sight completely.

'It sinks so fast in these climes,' began Johan.

'No wonder neither, it puts such an effort in all day. It's prob'ly 'zausted.'

'So what shall we do?' the Elf asked.

'Do?' Grimcrag snorted. 'What d'ya think we're going to do?'

'Well,' began Johan, 'I, for one do not intend being butchered in the dark.'

'That's the spirit, young 'un. Let's go get 'em, eh?'

'Yes, well... oh hell, why not!'

Drawing themselves to their full respective heights, the Marauders prepared for battle.

At the base of the pyramid, the lizards realised that something was about to happen, and they began to form formal ranks of shield, spear and bow.

If still undecided in their hearts (and not one of them would ever admit that such was the case) the Marauders atop the pyramid had their minds made up by a familiar heavily-muscled figure who appeared in the dusk light around the path to the village. His voice reached them as a heavily accented bellow.

'Vot you vaitink for - Marauders or Mouses?' The Barbarian was already at a run towards the lizards, the glitter of his sword a deadly sliver of malice in the dying rays of the sun.

'CHAAARGE!!!!' roared Grimcrag, leaping down towards the waiting lizard horde. He didn't even turn to see if the others were following. Battle cries to the fore and now to their rear threw the lizards into total panic. Despite the entreaties of their Shaman, Anstein saw them turn to flee. Their path was blocked by a charging Barbarian. A Barbarian who wielded a two handed sword in his right hand and a heavily scarred iron shield on his left arm. A Barbarian who howled like a wolf as he charged towards the assembled hordes of reptiledom with no apparent concern for his own safety.

Tumbling down the pyramid towards the lizards' backs, Anstein could see that this was going to get very bloody very fast. They obviously didn't take very well to surprises.

Then something very strange happened.

SEENING THE CHARGING Barbarian, the lizards flung their weapons aside, dropped to their knees and buried their heads in the sand.

Grimcrag, Jiriki and Johan came to a halt at the bottom of the pyramid. A carpet of lizard backs stretched away from them.

Grimcrag shrugged and raised his axe. 'Hardly seems fair! Still, never look a gift coin and all that.' he grunted, decapitating three lizards in one blow. Jiriki stopped the slaughter by adroitly tripping the Dwarf over. Black blood was splattered everywhere, but the remaining lizards sat motionless.

'Oi!' exclaimed the Dwarf, dragging himself to his feet. He made for the security of Old Slaughterer.

'Leave it, Grimcrag,' Johan hissed. 'Something's happening.'

Berserk, Keanu charged onwards, dimly wondering where the enemy had gone and why the floor was all lumpy. He slowed to a loping trot, then a walk, then finally stopped. He could see Jiriki, Grimcrag and Anstein all right, but he could have sworn that there was a whole horde of... Jiriki was gesturing at his boots.

'Vot?' he bellowed, still partly berserk, peering down. He was standing on the chest of a large lizard creature, a black-skinned one bedecked in feathers and bone. He raised his sword to strike.

The lizard's eyes bulged, but it managed to croak loudly. Keanu dropped his sword in surprise; the other Marauders did likewise. They all clearly heard the Lizard Shaman speak words - understandable words.

'Velkomss God LosssErikkk. Long haff ve Vaited innit yessssss.'

The living carpet whispered at Keanu with the rustling, hissing squeak of a hundred lizard voices: 'LSSSRIKKK! LSSSSRIKKK! LSSSRIKKK!'

Grimcrag patted Johan on the shoulder. 'I'll be blowed! Maybe this isn't going to be so bad after all!'

*The saga of 'Paradise Lost'
continues on page 68*



BATTLE-BROTHERS,
AS YOU KNOW, OUR ORDERS
ARE TO DESTROY THIS SPACE
HULK AND KILL THE
GENESTEALERS IN
HARBOURS.

OUR COMMAND SHIP HAS
FAILED TO BREAK THROUGH THE
HULK'S SHIELDS. HOWEVER, OUR
TECH-MARINES HAVE DETERMINED
THAT ONE WELL-PLACED FLAMER
BURST AT EXTREME CLOSE RANGE
WILL OVERLOAD ITS UNSTABLE
REACTOR CORE AND DESTROY
THE FOUL VESSEL.

SENSOR READINGS SHOW
THAT THE REACTOR CORE LIES
THIS WAY... AND THAT THE ENEMY
AWAITS. BUT WE WILL STRIKE
FIRST, AND STRIKE HARD!

OCTAVION,
ON MY COMMAND--

--FIRE!

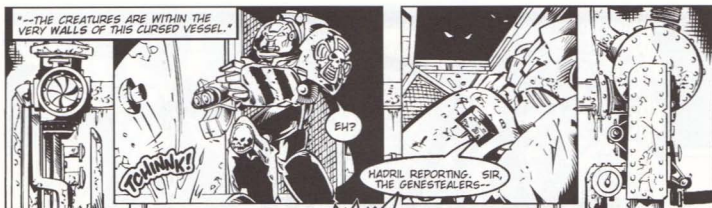
REEEEEE!

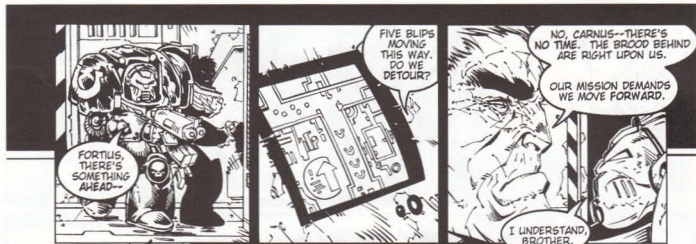
SREEEEEE!

A GOOD DAY TO DIE

STORY: *BILL KAPLAN*
PENCILS: *JEFF REBNER*
INKS: *MARK IRWIN*
LETTERS: *DAN NAKROSIS*













rites of passage

BY GORDON RENNIE

HEREK ROSE PAINFULLY to his feet, trying to rub some sensation into the stump of his left arm. The wound had healed long ago but down here, in the dank air of the deepest tunnels of the Underhive, it continued to trouble him, reminding him painfully of the place where, years ago, a rusted Scavvie blade brought his career as leader of the Orlock-affiliated Steel Skull gang to an end. It was time once more to deliver The Speech.

He cast a shrewd eye over the fearful young faces looking at him in the dim light of the tunnel. Generations of Underhive dwellers had left their marks here, and the walls were covered in ganger graffiti: arcane symbols, faded boasts of warriors now long dead and dire warnings of what lay beyond the ancient blast-doors at the end of the tunnel. 'From here on in, you go alone,' Herek told them sternly. 'Anyone who wants to back out better speak up now. There's no shame in it. You won't be the first, and I don't expect you'll be the last...'

As he had expected, Dorn, the largest and strongest of the pack, was the first to step forward, eagerly seeking his mentor's approval. Dorn was a born warrior, his face already marked with his first battle scars, proudly won in teenage rumbles against fellow gang members in the gang's fortified settlement, a kilometre or so above this desolate place.

'We will not disappoint you, Herek,' Dorn declared loudly, not waiting for the others. 'In two-cycles time, we will return to you not as children, but as warriors! This I swear to you, on the honour of House Orlock!'

To his right, Mikhail, already as tall as his father and potentially as good a fighter, with just a little more experience under his belt, nodded his assent. Alongside him, Lan, as

wiry and intense as a sump rat, did likewise. Both were keen and brave enough, Herek knew, but in all matters they followed Dorn, tying their fortunes to his. As he rose through the ranks of the gangs – as he surely would, if he survived the coming ordeal – he would take them with him as able lieutenants. Herek smiled to himself, fondly remembering other, similarly commanding warriors from previous years who had gone on to earn greater glories for the gang.

Herek turned towards the two remaining youths. 'And you, young Jaal, are you and your brother ready for what waits for you on the other side of those blast doors?'

Jaal Rinn shifted uneasily, barely raising his eyes from his new, ill-fitting boots. As ever, it was his brother, Mallin, who answered for him. 'Aye, Master Herek. Show us our enemies, and we will prove our worthiness to our clan.'

Herek nodded, looking at the pair appraisingly. Such a different pair, not even truly brothers! Mallin was strong and capable, and wise beyond his young years. The other, Jaal, was small and pale-skinned, and bore none of the inherited traits of strength and hardiness normally associated with the House of Iron. The boy's parents had died when he was but an infant, killed in a raid upon the Skull's settlement by Cawdor gangers, and he had been taken in by Mallin's family and raised as their own. Quick and agile as he was, Jaal had never been the equal of his more confident brother and Herek suspected that it was only with Mallin's help that Jaal had made it this far through the training.

'Let the runt speak for himself!' Dorn sneered, his hands clenching into fists. 'Must he always hide in the shadow of his brother?'

Jaal blushed in anger – the runt of the litter, they called him! – and spoke out, his voice shaking with emotion. ‘My clan has raised me and protected me. All I ask is a chance to serve it in return and reclaim the blood debt owed to me by the murderers of my parents.’

Herek smiled in satisfaction, quietly impressed by the young ganger’s resolve. He would need it where he was going. ‘Brave words, young Jaal. Now let us see if you can make good on them. The enemies you go to face do indeed carry the colours of House Cawdor. Let your hatred give you strength, but never forget that we have more need of live warriors than dead heroes.’

At Herek’s signal, the two gangers who had accompanied them down to the entrance to Hive Bottom – seasoned veterans who had once fought under Herek’s leadership – moved to haul open the immense blast-doors at the bottom of the shaft. Beyond these doors, their outer surfaces scarred and pitted by the centuries of ferocious assaults from the things that dwelled on the other side of them, lay a world of darkness and danger.

The young initiates crowded around the open doorway, eager to see what lay beyond. Hive Bottom. A place that, until now, they had only heard tell of in childhood stories tailored to frighten them into obedience. A fearful place populated by mutants and witches, and where deadly traps – toxic waste pools, poisonous mists and grotesque mutant creatures – were always waiting to ensnare the unwary.

Back when he was leader of the Steel Skull, leading raids on Goliath merchant convoys and Cawdor settlements under the flag of House Orlock, Herek had braved the dangers of Hive Bottom many times. Even now, though, he still remembered his very first sight and smell of it during his own rite of manhood, and understood exactly the fear and apprehension his young charges must be feeling now.

The two gangers silently scanned the darkness around the doorway, their weapons primed and at the ready for any sign of danger. Satisfied, one of them waved the young bloods forward with a sharp gesture. Dorn looked around at his fellows with a wide, brave grin and strode into the darkness; the others followed with more nervous steps.

‘Go easy on ‘em, Dorn,’ one of the veterans said, slapping the lad on the shoulders as he passed.

‘Nah, give those Cawdor scum hell, Dorn,’ the other grinned. ‘Get yourself back in one piece and I’ll give you some of my winnings!’

Herek watched the slight figures disappear from view, knowing that there was no more advice he could give them. For two day-cycles he would remain here, waiting to see which, if any, of the young juves returned.

‘Good hunting – all of you!’ called Herek into the gloom, stepping back and signalling for the two gangers to close the doors. He offered up a silent prayer, calling on the Emperor to watch over the young warriors. He had tried to teach them everything he knew. From now on they were on their own.



THE HUNTER MOVED easily through the crumbling ruins, more at home here than it had ever been in the palaces and landscaped parks of the Upper Hive. If it had ever had a name, it had long ago forgotten it. It paused, checking the information relayed to it through its armoured body and savouring the thrill of the replay images being fed directly into its mind from the suit’s memory systems. Steel claws punching through flesh. The feel of laser bolts and bullets ricocheting harmlessly off armoured skin. The screams of its victims and the images of their faces as they died in agony.

It had been too long – scarce two hours – since its last kill. It felt its body’s auto-systems activate into life at the joyous replay of those few bloody seconds. Fibre-bundle muscles twitched with life, armoured plates clicked and flexed together and its claws slowly unsheathed themselves as memory circuits sent an electronic thrill of pleasure through its body. Sensor systems flared into life, invisibly scanning the area and locking on to a distant group of targets moving through the darkness.

The prey was still far off, but coming closer. The Hunter turned and moved silently towards it.



LAN, GO AHEAD and check the way in front of us. Make sure your laspistol is armed and charged,' Dorn insisted. The juve gang crouched near a barely lit glow-globe, taking cover amongst the twisted girders of a long-ago collapsed structure. Dorn barked orders as if it were his given right; he had already assumed natural command of the group. 'Mikhal, stay beside me. Mallin, cover our rear – and see that the runt doesn't get lost in the dark.'

Their destination was the ritual duelling area out in the wastes of Hive Bottom – the ruins of a one-time settlement long abandoned to bands of mutants and outlaw gangs. It was here they would meet their chosen opponents, but this coming battle was but a small part of the test. Any journey through Hive Bottom was hazardous, and the young warriors were only too well aware that anything could be waiting for them in the velvet darkness.

At the rear of the band, Mallin sensed his brother's uneasiness, and laid a reassuring hand on Jaal's shoulder. 'Ignore him,' he said levelly. 'Stay by me, and we'll both survive this together. Remember what Herek taught us. Fear is the greatest killer of all, more deadly than any weapon. Conquer fear, and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

Jaal nodded, realising the worth of his brother's words. He was afraid, but not of the coming battle. He was afraid of this place and the things that roamed its shadows. He pulled nervously at his bandanna. A strange uneasiness filled him – a gut instinct that he had come to recognise as a warning of imminent danger. Such instincts had saved him from a knife in the back more than once, back when he was running with the younger juves of the Steel Skull's settlement, learning how to stalk

and fight in the relative safety of the tunnels around the compound.

Now he felt that same familiar sensation of lurking danger again, coming from out there in the surrounding darkness. Somehow he just knew that something dark and deadly was *out there* – and it was coming closer.



THE HUNTER CROUCHED in the shadows atop a ruined metal shack, watching its prey. The chameleon scales on the surface of its body-suit shifted to blend in perfectly with its surroundings. Thermally sealed inside its body-suit, it was invisible even to infra-red detection. Its armoured suit had been crafted in the finest artificer workshops of a far distant world, and the suit's enhanced adaptation systems meant that it now possessed extra-evolved abilities that not even its creators could have predicted.

The Hunter activated its own infra-red systems, watching the heat patterns of its prey dance through the darkness. Five of them. Five lost children, all alone down here in the dark. It paused to consider its options, strategy simulations composed from the stored memories of previous hunts flickering through its hard-wired consciousness. The Hunter ignored them. Memories of old kills no longer satisfied it. The prey was so close. It hungered for the thrill of fresh combat.

It leapt from its perch like a jaguar, sensor systems allowing it to track its prey's position effortlessly through the landscape of ruins. So confidently they moved, so unaware of the potential terrors that surrounded them down here!

Inside the skin of its suit, the Hunter smiled. They were sent down here to learn, and so it would teach them a lesson in terror. But first, in order for the lesson to begin, they must discover the surprise that lay in wait for them at their destination. After all, thought the Hunter, it had gone to such lengths to prepare the scene, and it did not intend for such effort go to waste...

DEAD! THEY'RE ALL dead!' At Lan's shout, the rest of the gang came running with their weapons drawn. They found their terrified comrade standing in the centre of the abandoned settlement. Its crumbling walls and burned-out dwelling holes were a testament to the destruction that had long ago been visited upon it by the marauding mutie gangs that roamed the wastes of Hive Bottom.

'Dead! They're all dead!' Lan repeated over and over, gesturing at the scene of bloody carnage around him. 'Look at them, Dorn! What kind of thing could have done this to them!'

Dorn looked, stunned by what he saw. He had been prepared for some kind of ambush – the rules of the ritual allowed for almost anything, and victory often went to the first gang to reach the duelling arena and set a trap for their opponents. But this... This was something he could never have foreseen.

So far he had counted five dead Cawdor gangers, although so many body parts were spread across the ground that it was difficult to tell exactly how many of them there may have originally been. One of them hung high above their heads, impaled on a steel beam jutting out of a shredded walkway. They had all been killed at close range – that much, he was certain of – ripped apart and their remains left for the scavengers. But killed by what? he asked himself fearfully.

Dorn glanced around him, checking the positions of the rest of the gang. Mallin and his runt brother were searching amongst the bodies, but he became uncomfortably aware that Lan and Mikhal were looking to him for some sign of reassurance. As the appointed leader of the hunt, he knew it fell to him to assert his authority over the situation. 'An ambush,' he said, not feeling as confident as he tried to sound. 'Something was waiting for them before they arrived here. Scavvies, most likely. No ganger would kill like this, not even Cawdor scum. Whoever they were, they are long gone from here...'

'No. This was no ambush. Look at the evidence, Dorn. It is lying all around your feet.' Dorn turned at the sound of Mallin's voice, seeing his rival bending down over the butchered bodies of the dead gangers. 'There was a full-scale battle here. These

Cawdor gangers died bravely as a warrior should, fighting to the last with a weapon in their hands.'

Mallin stood up, holding up the fused remains of a laspistol marked with House Cawdor battle emblems. He held it out for them all to see, a grim look on his young face. 'The power-pack on this laspistol has been burned out. Whoever was carrying it kept on firing until he'd exhausted its power-charge.'

'And those two juves–' He gestured with his arm at a pair of sprawling bodies. 'The ground around them is littered with spent cartridges from their stub pistols. Jaal and I count at least ten cartridges apiece for each weapon. That means they had time to reload and fire again before they died.'

Mallin paused, looking directly into Dorn's eyes. 'No, Dorn, this was no ambush. These warriors all died fighting an enemy they knew was coming at them.'

Behind Dorn, Mikhal and Lan exchanged nervous glances and raised their weapons. From his position behind Mallin, Jaal surreptitiously released the safety catch on his own laspistol, hearing the reassuring hum that told him it was fully charged.

Dorn stepped forward, locking eyes with his challenger, but none of them could have failed to notice the new note of uncertainty in his voice. 'Not an ambush, then. But I still say this was nothing more than the work of mutie scavengers.' He continued to glare at Mallin. 'Either way, we have nothing to worry about. Everyone knows Scavvie packs never stick around after a raid. Even now, they'll be far away in their lair licking their wounds and counting their plunder.'

All eyes were on Mallin as he crushed Dorn's words with the cold logic of his argument. 'Then where are the bodies?' he retorted. 'All these shots fired, and not one dead attacker? Everyone knows Scavvies leave their dead and even their injured behind them.'

Mallin paused, pointing towards the dead bodies around them. 'And, if it really was Scavvies that did this, why haven't the bodies been stripped of their weapons and equipment? Jaal and I have checked the area for tracks. All we can find are those of the Cawdor gangers.' Mallin stood defiant, awaiting Dorn's answer.

'Then what are you saying?' sneered Dorn, running his hand over his close-

cropped hair. 'That a ghost, a ghost that can walk through bullets and las-blasts, came here and killed them all?'

It was Jaal who answered, stepping forward to name the unspoken terror word on all their minds. 'No, not a ghost.' he stuttered hesitantly. Everyone turned to stare at him. Mallin nodding reassuringly at him to continue. 'It's a Spyrer. A single Spyrer did this. We are being hunted, Dorn. All of us. It killed every single one of these Cawdor juves, and now it's coming after us.'



THE HUNTER WAS CLOSE, closer than any of them dared imagine. From its position high above, perched on the underside of an overhanging walkway, it could look down directly upon them to study its prey. Watching them, selecting which one would be the first of its victims.

Its sensors tuned into the sound of their voices, storing them in memory. The words were unimportant – it had been years since the Hunter spoke or listened to the voice of another human being, save the sound of its victims' screams.

It listened only to the tone of their voices, realising after a moment that two of them, the two biggest, were arguing. Let them argue, it thought. As if the question of which of them led the others would make any difference to the final outcome!

The Hunter chose its target, sensors zeroing in on it to study and record. This one was stronger than the others, and the rest would look to it for leadership. The other one talked bravely, but the Hunter's sensors detected the nervous beat of its heart and the frightened tone in its voice which betrayed its words.

Let these striplings follow their new leader, it thought. It would soon show them just how vulnerable they were, when he would be the first to die.

The Hunter uncoiled itself from its hiding place, scuttling along the underside of the walkway as it moved silently towards its first chosen victim.

SPYRER! EVERYONE GLANCED fearfully at each other as Jaal dared to mention that dreaded name. Spyrers: cruel hunters from the Upper Hive, descending down into the depths of the Underhive in packs to hunt their prey, seeking enough kills to return back up the Spyre to be recognised by their kind as rightful members of the Hive's aristocratic elite.

All of the young Steel Skull gangers had heard fearful tales of the exploits of these most hated of killers, knowing that even the most battle-hardened veterans of their settlement were afraid of such enemies. But, it was whispered, there was one sort of Spyrer even other Spyre Hunters feared. The lone renegades. Those who had developed too much of a taste for death and never returned back to the Upper Hive. Instead, these lone killers remained in the Underhive, adapting to the environment of their new home and mercilessly hunting down all that crossed their path. When such a renegade was discovered, even the most bitter enemies amongst the gangs would join forces to destroy it.

'He's right, Dorn,' said Lan, panic breaking his voice. 'This is the work of a Spyrer!'

Mallin nodded in agreement. 'We have no other choice. We must abandon the ritual and return to Herek. He will know what to do. We have to warn our people that there is a Spyrer on the loose!'

'No!' Dorn snarled, gesturing wildly with his laspistol. 'The test is not yet over! To return now, without any kills, would bring shame upon us all.' He paused, staring hard at the other juves and daring any of them to contradict him. 'Our enemies are dead, but we have been offered a far worthier opponent to face. The test goes on, and when we return it will be in triumph to present Herek with the head of a Spyrer!'

'This is madness, Dorn!' Mikhail interjected, trying to reason with his leader. 'Even the bravest gangers would not choose to fight such an enemy. I say Mallin is right. We should—'

Mikhail's voice tailed off as Dorn silenced him with a single threatening glance. 'I am the leader here – and I say the test goes on. I thought you were loyal to me, Mikhail. Are you siding with this coward and his runt brother?' Mikhail stepped back a pace as if he had been physically struck, staring

shamefacedly at the ground and unable to meet Dorn's eyes.

Unnoticed, at the back of the group, Jaal's head buzzed with sudden pain. That feeling again, a sense of utter dread, only stronger now than he had ever felt before. And, with it, something else: strange alien thoughts – violent and predatory – crowding into his mind from elsewhere. Jaal's vision blurred and the ground span beneath him. Suddenly he was no longer standing with the others. He was hanging in the darkness high above, looking down on them all. His body was not his own. Instead, he felt himself sheathed in a cold metallic shell, powerful fibre-bundle muscles responding to his every move. He could hear Dorn's challenge to Mikhal. See Mallin backing off, his hand moving towards his pistol holster, unaware of this new danger above him. There was a rush of air. Jaal felt himself falling, no, leaping.

He snapped back into his own body. Numbed, he tried to shout out a warning as the thing descended down from the darkness towards its target. 'Mallin! Above you! Look-'

Too late, Mallin looked up to see the Spyrer dropping down towards him. Jaal caught a glimpse of a dark spider-like shape, its outline blurred as though it was a living part of the darkness from where it came, and then it was upon his brother.

Mallin raised his weapon to fire. Something impossibly fast and terrifyingly sharp flashed through the air. Mallin screamed, the las-blast from his weapon discharging harmlessly into the air. Jaal fumbled for his own weapon. In the split-second it took to draw it, Mallin was gone.

More laser blasts lanced through the darkness – Dorn, Lan and Mikhal firing upwards, their shots ricocheting off stonework and girders and illuminating the hellish scene in bright flashes. Jaal caught strobing glimpses of the Spyrer carrying the screaming figure of Mallin with it back up into the darkness. At first Jaal thought the Spyrer was actually floating through the air but, looking closer, he saw the gleam of something thin and silvery reflected in the light of the las-blasts: a metallic web-line anchored to some point in the darkness above and spun out from the Spyrer's wrists, strong enough for it to carry both it and its prey out of range of its enemies' weapons.

Mallin. It had taken Mallin!

Jaal sank to the ground, knowing that the others were wasting their shots and that his brother was already lost to them. With a sickening lurch, Jaal saw the object lying on the ground where, only seconds ago, his brother had stood. Mallin's severed hand, still clutching the useless laspistol in its lifeless grasp.

Jaal doubled over and retched violently, this final horror too much for his shocked senses. He had known that the Spyrer was out there. He had seen it in his mind, known it was coming after them. He should have said something earlier, tried to warn them what was about to happen. If he had, Mallin would still be alive...

Dorn's boot crashed into his ribs, sending Jaal sprawling across the ground. With a shock, Jaal realised that he had been babbling to himself, speaking his thoughts out aloud. 'Traitor!' screamed Dorn. 'What do you mean, you knew what was going to happen?'

Dorn turned towards Lan and Mikhal, pointing in fury at the figure of Jaal lying at his feet. 'You heard him! You heard him say he knew it was out there. He knew, and he led it straight to us! He's one of them. A witchling! He's been in league with this thing all along!'

Witchling. Jaal knew the word. Psykers, some called them. To be so named was a death sentence, the Redemptionists ruthlessly hunting down anyone suspected of possessing such feared powers.

'Then we should take him back, Dorn,' stammered Mikhal, staring at Jaal as if the youth could strike him dead at any moment. 'The elders should judge him. It is not for us to decide...'

'No!' Dorn raged, aiming his laspistol directly into Jaal's face. 'He has betrayed us all and led his own brother to his death! He is a traitor, and I shall judge him where he stands!'

Terrified, Jaal closed his eyes, fearing he was only seconds away from execution at the hands of the wild-eyed Dorn. But the expected shot never came. Instead, he heard the sound of an echoing voice calling out from the darkness around them.

'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' It was Mallin. Mallin was still alive! Weak and in pain, judging by the agonised pleading of his voice, but still alive.

How could that be? thought Jaal. Spyrers never spare their victims. Perhaps Mallin had escaped. Perhaps—

'On your feet, traitor,' said Dorn, dragging him to his feet by his clothes. 'It seems your Spyrer master still values the life of its servant.' Dorn jammed the barrel of his laspistol painfully against the back of Jaal's head and hissed into his ear in a voice full of anger and loathing. 'It has spared the life of your brother. Maybe it wants to trade his life for yours.'



HELP ME, DORN. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' The Hunter looped the recording through its suit's vocal systems, mimicking the voice of its victim. An old trick, but one that had often served it well in the past. The trap was set. Now it would wait and see if the prey took the bait.



THE YOUNG STEEL SKULL gangers moved warily through the ruins, following the distant sound of their comrade's pleading voice.

Mikhal and Lan took the lead, cautiously scanning the overhead ledges and structures for signs of their enemy. It had taken them by surprise once already. They were determined it would not do so again. Dorn brought up the rear, roughly pushing Jaal in front of him, his laspistol trained on his captive's back.

Jaal stumbled, risking another blow from his ill-tempered captor. 'Dorn,' he dared to stammer, 'you're making a mistake. You're leading us into a trap. I don't know how, but that can't be the voice of Mallin out there...'

Dorn silenced Jaal with a painful prod from the barrel of the laspistol. 'Shut up, runt. Try and warn your ally that we're coming, and I'll blow you in half.'

'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help me...'

Dorn signalled for silence, trying to get a fix on the location of the voice. There, up ahead. Through the ruins of a tumbled archway they saw a walkway across a bubbling pool of toxic sludge, its acrid vapours giving off a noxious stench. Through the poisonous mists they could see something waiting for them on the other side of the walkway.

They shuffled closer, covering their mouths to avoid breathing in too much of the fetid air. A couple of paces ahead of his fellows Lan was the first to see it. He stopped dead, barely able to believe the sight that awaited them. It was the body of Mallin, hanging puppet-like from a metal web of razor-edged wire that cut through his body in a dozen places. Mallin's head lay on the ground in front of him, that same mocking voice sounding as if it was coming directly from his lifeless lips. 'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help me...'

The Spyrer exploded out of waste pool. It landed nimbly on the walkway in front of Lan and Mikhal, its armoured body streaming with burning pollutants and corrosive acids. Jaal howled in terror as it reared up before its prey. Its sinuous body was composed of black armoured plating which flexed and locked together as it moved. Jaal was reminded horribly of the stories he had heard of the monstrous spider-things that inhabited the deepest reaches of the Underhive. Cruel diamond-edged claws extended from each of its wrists, their blades glistening with lubricants and deadly venom. Its horn-crowned head swivelled round towards them and, with a sudden lurch of fear, Jaal realised that it had no face. Its human features were hidden behind the blank shell of its armour, guided by electronic senses the extent of which Jaal could only guess at.

It came at them at an impossible speed before any of them had time to react. With one sweep of its claws, it cut through Lan's throat. The ganger was dead before he even had time to scream, his body hitting the walkway and his blood jetting out of him in one long spray.

Mikhal spun to bring his laspistol to bear, but the Spyrer was faster, thrusting the wrist-blade of its other hand deep into the juve's stomach. Servo-mechanisms tensed

as the Spyrer lifted its still-living victim off his feet, raising him high above its head in a superhuman show of strength. Mikhal did scream, a long agonised howl from the very depths of his soul, as the Spyrer released the blade's venom cells into his body.

With a dismissive gesture, the Spyrer hurled its victim over its head, ripping the blades out from the juve's body. Mikhal landed on the walkway behind, his body already starting to convulse and contort into agonising shapes as the deadly venom coursed through his veins. Then the Spyrer turned to face its two remaining victims.

'You bastard!' Dorn hurled Jaal aside and charged the Spyrer, blasts from his laspistol ricocheting harmlessly off its armour. At the last moment, Dorn dropped the pistol and drew his knife, throwing himself at the Spyrer with a roar of defiance. The ganger crashed into the Spyrer, catching it off-balance and sending both him and his enemy backwards into the waste pool.

Jaal turned and ran, knowing that Dorn's attack had been a brave but hopeless gesture. Behind him, he could hear Dorn screaming in rage and agony as he tried to pull the Spyrer down with him into the corrosive depths of the waste pool. Jaal knew the Spyrer would survive – nothing could kill it – and it would be coming after him next. He snatched up Lan's laspistol, realising the futility of the gesture but wanting to at least die fighting with a weapon in his hand.



THE HUNTER PULLED itself out of the waste pool, leaving the burning and dissolved remains of Dorn behind it. Neural links ran a damage check on its suit systems.

Its armour was corroded in several places and the burning acids had destroyed its chameleon camouflage system. In time, the suit would repair itself, but the Hunter, driven by the need to kill, was oblivious of all thoughts of rest or repair.

Even now, its last victim was escaping, and the Hunter was determined to finish its game.

JAAL RAN THROUGH the maze of ruins, knowing that the Spyrer was close behind him. He could feel its thoughts buzzing in his head; whispering horrors that he barely recognised as coming from anything human. Occasionally, he would feel his mind spiral out from under him. Then he would be inside the mind of his enemy, seeing and experiencing everything around it as it moved across the top levels of the ruins, leaping from structure to structure and scuttling, insect-like, up the sheer sides of walls and shafts.

He found himself running towards a rusting metal walkway, maybe a metre wide, spanning a chasm from some long-past hivequake, its sheer sides dropping away into nothingness. The Spyrer was hunting him, he knew, probably herding him into another of its traps. If only he could control this new ability; focus these visions that flashed through his mind...

His boots made the precarious walkway echo beneath his pounding feet. A voice in Jaal's head suddenly screamed a warning, telling him to stop. Jaal threw himself onto the reverberating walkway, seeing in an instant the deadly trap he had almost run into: strands of the Spyrer's metallic web-line, strung out across the walkway. If Jaal had kept on running he would surely have been sliced apart.

A wave of terror washed through the young ganger. The Spyrer was just playing with him, toying with him like a cat until it closed in for the final kill. What chance did he, Jaal the runt, the weaking of the litter, stand against such an enemy?

A dark shape swooped low over his head and Jaal felt a vibration as it landed on the walkway behind him. He hauled himself up and span around to face the Spyrer, steadying his stance on the walkway and gripping the laspistol in both hands. The nightmare stalked slowly towards him, venom-dripping weapon claws slowly extending from their armoured casings.

Jaal knew he had nowhere to run. Before him was the Spyrer. Behind him, the barrier of razor-wire web. Below the walkway, on either side, a long fall into oblivion. The final trap had been sprung and the game had reached its end. A terrible sliver of ice ran the full length of his spine.

'Fear is the greatest killer of all,' the Spyrer said mockingly, perfectly imitating

the voice of his dead brother. 'Conquer fear and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

At the sound of Mallin's voice, something convulsed inside Jaal's head. Fear gave way to fiery rage and hatred as he heard this creature, this foul thing, speak with the voice and words of his dead brother. His fury opened up something within him, blossoming like a match igniting kerosene. Something that had been there all along, waiting to be set free. Power – pure, unfocussed power now channelled and released by his rage.

Jaal was thrown backwards onto the hard, cold metal, as he felt some uncontrollable energy erupt from his body, a wave of enormous concussive force spreading out from him in all directions. The walkway beneath his feet buckled as the aged metal was rent by the supernatural force Jaal had somehow released. With a scream he realised he was sliding down towards the Spyrer's web of razor-wire.

Jaal scrambled up the slope of the collapsing walkway, grabbing hold of a bent support beam. Turning he saw the Spyrer leap from the shifting platform as it gave way under its feet.

A thin web-line shot out from its outstretched wrist, seeking a secure anchor to the structure at the other end of the vanished bridge. 'No. Not this time,' swore Jaal, determined that the Spyrer would not escape him. 'This time the hunt ends here.'

Unthinking, Jaal raised the laspistol in his free hand, aiming not at the Spyrer but at the web-line supporting it. He reached out with his mind, focusing his expanded senses on the thin strand of metal glittering in the darkness, and pulled the trigger. A searing bolt of laser energy leapt from his gun, his mind flying out with it, leading it, taking it to its target. The shot hit true, vaporising one segment of the web-line in a flash of white-hot energy.

Caught in mid-swing, the Spyrer tumbled down into the darkness, diamond-edged claws throwing off sparks as it tore at the sheer wall of the chasm, vainly striking out to find a desperate handhold.

'Nooooo!' Mallin's dead voice cried as the creature fell. 'Jaaaaaaal!'

And then it was gone, its death-scream amplified by its suit systems, an electronic screech that seemed to echo forever across

the Hive Bottom long after the Spyrer itself had been swallowed by the chasm.



HEREK? FACE IT. If Dorn ain't coming back, none of them are.' The Steel Skull gangers waiting by the open blast-doors looked more worried about losing their wagers than any real sorrow.

The old man sighed to himself, and turned back toward the light. 'Very well. Seal the doors,' he ordered. 'They've had an extra day-cycle. We've put ourselves at too much risk already by waiting here so long.'

Herek watched as his two lieutenants carried out his orders, and silently swore under his breath. He had lost whole parties of juves to the ritual before, but he'd had high hopes for at least some of this group. But, at the last, there would be other tests and other initiates, all of them eager to prove their manhood amidst the dangers that lay in wait on the other side of those doors.

From his hiding place, Jaal watched the gangers haul the blast doors closed. He wanted so much to shout, to run towards them, to tell Herek and the others that he was still alive, that it was over – that he was safe and just wanted to go home. But he knew that would be madness.

Everything had changed. Now that he knew what he was – a Psyker, a witchling – he knew he could never return home. Not that his step-family would mourn him, not when they had lost a real son. He was orphaned again. He was an outcast, a renegade, doomed to dwell in the darkest places with the others of his kind – the freaks, monsters and mutants of Hive Bottom.

After a long moment, Jaal turned and walked away. He did not look back at the final clank of the bolts when Herek's men sealed the doors shut behind him. Silently, he slipped off into the shadows, already welcoming the protection and anonymity they offered. ●

THE WARRIOR AND HIS FELLOW MEN OFFER AN EXHIBIT

IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR THE WARRIORS WILL ADVANCE
AND TO SOMEONE HONORABLE AND FAITHFUL

THE WARRIORS WILL ADVANCE AND TO SOMEONE HONORABLE AND FAITHFUL



KEV WALKER

~ What of it? ~

Your mighty warriors,

Your men of steel.

Your religion of duty and honour.

What of it if a million should
lie unburied and unsung?

Your worthy dogma,

Your inflexible creed.

Your dedication to war and to the
certainty of final victory.

What of it when the pure warm
blood of our innocent sons
still stains the rich soil?

Your indomitable will,

Your endless righteous armies,

Your calm and guiding light in the
cold depths of the void.

What of it, while our world
screams in vain for mercy unfound?

Your immaculate vision,

Your unblemished love,

Your pietistic preachers bringing
your timeless orthodoxy
from above.

What of them now it seems we
face the final days alone?

Your vainglorious warriors,

Your men who trust in steel,

Your religion of mindless duty and
meaningless honour.

What of it? Another million will
not lie unburied.

Your ancient and worthless dogma,

Your dead and inflexible creed,

Your dedication to war where there
can be no victory.

What of it? No more will the
blood of our innocents stain the
rich soil.

Your insane will,

Your endlessly deceived armies,

Your cold and blinding light which
burns madly in the nighted void.

What of it? No longer will our
world scream for mercy
where there is none to be had.

Your senile rotted vision,

Your irredeemably blemished
love of hate,

Your tarnished and witless preachers
uttering meaningless words
from above.

What of it?

Let this be a beginning, not an end.

* * *

— An excerpt from Advern Bendegar's *Book of Visions*. This entry was reputedly written scant hours before Lord Bendegar signed over rulership of his noble house (and thus by proxy all of the Thuban system under his control) to the advance landing parties of emissaries of T'zxlatch'na Baneir, greater lord of Tzeentch.

Only three copies of the vile *Book of Visions* are known to exist. Two copies are locked securely in the vaults of the High Lords of Terra. The last was stolen during the infamous cleansing of the Firevault Bureau.

Overwhelming incriminating evidence points to the involvement of High Lord Goradin IIX – evidence, it must be stated, which has never been fully substantiated.

Nonetheless, the expunging of his entire line is considered wise.

Viriniul

High Lord Viriniul
of the Ecclesiarch

• Trial Exhibit: 2300.09P – Heretical transcript

THE TRUE STORY OF ERIC THE LOST AND HIS WORLD VOYAGE.

NOW THAT ERIC HAS LEFT US TO FIGHT THE ETERNAL BATTLE I CAN TELL YOU THE WHOLE TRUTH OF OUR EPIC JOURNEY AS I, TOSTIG, SAW EVENTS AT THE TIME.

IT WAS EARLY SPRING WHEN ERIC THE RESTLESS, AS HE WAS THEN CALLED, TOOK TO HIS FEET IN THE MEADHALL AND PROPOSED A VOYAGE TO ENCOMPASS THE KNOWN AND UNKNOWN WORLDS, CLAIMING THAT SUCH AN ENDEAVOUR WOULD LEAVE A FITTING LEGACY FOR THE WHOLE NORSE RACE, AND PARTICULARLY HIS NEWBORN SON ERIKSSON. ALIEN INSPIRED OVER ONE HUNDRED OF US ROSE TO OUR FEET TO PLEDGE OUR SUPPORT, EVEN AS I RAISED MY DRINKING HORN I WONDERED IF ERIC'S INTENTIONS WERE TRULY TO HONOUR HIS SON, OR SIMPLY TO ESCAPE THE BRAT'S MEWLING CRIES.

GRASPING A HANDFUL OF EAGLE FEATHERS ERIC PASSED ONE TO EACH OF US TO HOLD AS A TOKEN, CLAIMING GOOD FORTUNE WOULD FOLLOW US AND OUR LONGSHIP, THE "TRAVEFLIGHT". NEVER WAS AN OMKEN BEEN SO ILL-JUDGED NOR A SHIP SO ILL-NAMED.

SETTING SAIL A STRONG WIND DROVE US FORWARD. ERIC CHOSE FIRST TO HOVE TO A LINGYLL ON THE SHORES OF BRETTONIA. HE ENJOYS THEIR WINE AND THOUGHT THAT SEVERAL BARRELS WOULD EASE THE RIGOURS OF TRAVEL, CURSING THOSE "WHO NAME THEMSELVES SAILORS YET HUG THE LAND FOR COMFORT LIKE A LAMB THE EWES TREAT ERIC LED US OUT INTO THE OCEAN.

SOON WE SAW GREAT SHOALS OF WHALES. THESE PROVIDED US WITH MUCH SPORT, AND MANY BIG FISH SUPPERS. ERIC'S PROWESS WITH HIS SPEAR IN THIS FISHING PROMPTLY WON HIM THE TITLE OF 'ERIC FISHBANE'. THOUGH WE NEVER CAUKED HIM SUCH TO HIS FACE AFTER HE SPLIT THORFISG'S SKULL FOR SO DOING. SOME THOUGHT IT STRANGE TO SEE SO MANY WHALES IN SOUTHERN WATERS, THOUGHTS THAT INCREASED WITH THE APPEARANCE OF ICEBERGS. ERIC CURSED THE "MISBEGOTTEN DEVIL-DRIVEN SOUTHERN TIDES" THAT WOULD PLACE SUCH OBSTACLES IN OUR PATH - THOUGH I KNOW OF NO SUCH TIDES.

WHEN AGAIN WE SAW LAND IT WAS DEEMED FORTUITOUS BY ERIC AS IT WAS ONCE AGAIN THE LANDS OF THE SCARED WARRIORS, WHO COVER THEMSELVES IN METAL SHELLS, AND ERIC SAID THAT MORE WINE WAS NEEDED.

FROM HERE WE WENT TO THE COASTLINE CLOSELY, ERIC STATING "ONLY OLD HAGS, BABES IN ARMS, AND VILLAGES WHO WOULD FORGO THE SAFETY OF THE SHORE AND GAMBLE WITH THE WRATH OF THE DEVILS OF THE DEEP". AT LEAST WE WOULD AVOID ICEBERGS, IF NOT THE HIDDEN ROCKS THAT MADE US MIGHTILY GRATEFUL FOR THE SPARE TIMBER ON BOARD WHICH WAS NEEDED FOR SHORING THE HOLES CAUSED.

THROUGH OUR TRAVELS, AND TRAVELS, WE DISCOVERED MANY MORE TOWNS, CITIES AND WAYS OF DRINKING WINE OVER WINE. THIS ENDED TRAGICALLY IN A BITTER FIGHT OVER THE MERITS OF ROOGE TRONK. THE DEAD WERE MOVRNED AND SORE-HEADED WE CONTINUED OUR JOURNEY UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE WHOM WE NOW CALLED ERIC.

LEAVING BEHIND THE LAND OF WINE THE SHORE TURNED ROCKIER AND EVEN MORE INHOSPITABLE. CONCERN SPREAD AS WE RAN LOW ON WOOD FOR REPAIRS. THANKFULLY ERIC SAID "THE WISE MAN TRUSTS NEITHER SHORE NOR DEEP". THERE WAS MUCH AGREEMENT ON THIS SPIRITS ROSE EVEN HIGHER AS A HEAVILY WADEN MERCHANT CAME INTO VIEW, SOON OUR AXES WERE BLOODED, AND THE TRAVEFLIGHT'S HOLD FILLED.

EAGER TO EXCHANGE THE SPOILS FOR FRESH FOOD WE PVT IN AT A CITY I THINK IS CALLED MARGRETA. I HAD NOT TIME TO KNOW FOR SURE - TRADERS WERE MOST UNFRIENDLY, MAYHAP BECAUSE THE GOODS WERE AS OUR OWN. WE FLED THAT INHOSPITABLE PLACE ERIC CURSING THEM IN TERMS THAT REDDEND EVEN MY SALT-HARDENED EARS. MORVNING OUR DEAD WE JOURNEYED ON.

ONCE MORE THE SHORES WERE TREACHEROUS, YET OUR FORTUNES WERE BETTER, PERHAPS DUE TO THE LACK OF WINE ON BOARD. THE LANDS HEREABOUTS ARE DARK AND DISMAY. MEANWHILE VAPOURS FILLED THE AIR. THE MOOD INDUCED BY THIS DARK SEA FAILED TO LIFT AS WE SIGHTED A CITY, PULLING INTO HARBOUR THE STENCH OF VERMIN HIT OUR NOSTRILS, STRANGE RATMEN SCVRRIED ABOUT AND SWEAKY SCRATCHY CRIES RANG OUT.

ERIC CURSED ALL FOUL LANDS WHERE CATS MUST WALK IN FEAR OF RATS
AS WE ROWED FASTER THAN WE HAD FOR MANY A MOON,
AWAY FROM THAT BILE-RAISING PLACE. BY NOW THE
MAGGOTS IN THE BISCVITS PROVIDED OVR ONLY NOVRISHMENT.



GROANING STOMACHS INDUCED GROANING MEN. MANY MISSED THE COOL, FRESH NORTHERN WINDS. ALL SUCH TALK
SOON PASSED ALONG WITH THE HEADLAND AND THE APPEARANCE OF A SHIP BEARING A PIRATE BANNER.
PRIZES RANG OVT TO THE GODS THAT NIGHT FOR A GLORIOUS FIGHT, AND THE DELIVERANCE
OF FRESH FOOD AND ALE, INTO OVR HOLD, WITH WHICH TO MOVRN THE DEAD.



THE FAIR CITY OF LOOCHENY PROVIDED FVTRHER
ONCE MORE WE ENTERED A FORBIDDING GVL.

BARREN, AND ON THE SHORE WE COVD SEE

WHICH ORKS APPEARED TO THREATEN VS WITH SPEARS. THANKS
TRVEFLIGHTS PROW TO THE OCEAN CURSING ALL SVGGISH,
GVFBOWN WATERS. FVTRHER PIRATES PROVIDED MVCH
SPIRITS SOARED LIKE THE DEPARTED'S SOVLS.



WELCOME RELIEF BEFORE
THE LANDS WERE
CRVDE DWELLINGS FROM
BE THAT ERIC TVRNE
SMELENGEDED, SOVR
ENTERTAINMENT, AND

MORE BOVNTIVM TIMES FOLLOWED AS WE CRVISED THE SHORES OF ARABY. THE PEOPLE AND ANIMALS ARE AS
STRANGE AS THE LAND THEY LIVE IN. IT IS ALL SAND, WITH A BLAZING SUN HVRTVEL TO OVR EYES
AND FAIR SKIN. ERIC EARNED ANOTHER NAME: ERIC THE RED. IT CONTINUED TO GET HOTTER AS
WE HEADED SOWTHWARDS. WE ALL FOUND THE HEAT INTOVERABLE, BUT DARE NOT
TO HATE. BY THE FEROCIOUS FINNED FISH, WHICH WE LEARNED



WE HAD LONG SINCE LEFT THE LANDS OF ARABY BEHIND VS. THEY HAD WARNED VS THAT THESE
SOWTHERN LANDS ARE INHABITATED ONLY BY DREADFUL BEASTS, UNTIL ONE REACHES THE FORTRESS OF DANU.
WE HAD LISTENED TO HOW THE ELVES HERE LET NONE PASS. ERIC HAD DECLARED THAT "NO POINTY-EARED, SMUG,
INSCRVITABLE CAN STOP A NORSEMAN FROM SWIMMING WHERE HE CHOOSES." THIS EMBOLDENED BY HIS WORDS WE SET OVT
WESTWARDS TO THE LAND BY THIS CONSTAL FORT, OR SO WE THOUGHT.

STORM CLOUDS QUICKLY OVERTOOK VS, THEN THE HEAVENS ROARED DOWN. IT WAS ALL WE
COVD DO JUST TO STAY AFLOAT, BATTERED BY FEARSOME WAVES AND WINDS WE WENT
THE GODS KNOW WHERE. THEN AS WE BEGAN TO DESPAIR LAND WAS SIGHTED. WAS IT THE MYTHICAL LVSTRIA?

OVR JOVRNEY HAS BEEN BLESSED, THIS FABLED LAND HAS BEEN PVT INTO OVR HANDS
DECLARED ERIC. THE LAND WAS ONE OF IMPENETRABLE GREENERY, HORDS OF HUGE FLEKS THAT DRAINED
OVR BLOOD, AND FERCE CATS AS BIG AS WOLVES. I WAS NOT ALONE IN FEELING THAT SVCH A BLESSING
APPEARED AS A SERPENT. FVTRHER EXPLORATION IN TRVEFLIGHT REVEALED IT WAS SIMPLY ONE OF MANY ISLANDS. ERIC
CLAIMED THEM ALL AS HIS OVN, NONE OBJECTED-HE COVD KEEP THEM.

GRATEFULLY WE LEFT THESE ISLES BEHIND VS, AND WERE THANKFUL TO BE TVRNE NORTHWARDS. BLACK DAYS PASSED BY
WITH ENDLESS MONOTONY, BROKEN FINALLY BY WHAT WAS FIRST MISTAKEN AS A VISION, AN ELVEN GREATSHIP. A TRVIVY
AWESOME SIGHT. PITVING VS THEY GAVE VS FOOD AND FRSH WATER BEFORE GVIDING VS PAST THEIR LAND.
ERIC MOURNED THAT "NO NORSEMAN NEEDS AID FROM ONE WHO CANT WIELD A DOVBEHENDED AXE!" THE
REST OF VS QVETIVLY PRAISED OVR BENEFACTORS, WHO WAVED VS OFF WITH THE ADVICE TO
AVOID THE LANDS OF THEIR DARK COVSINS. WE HOPED TO SEE NORSCA SOON.



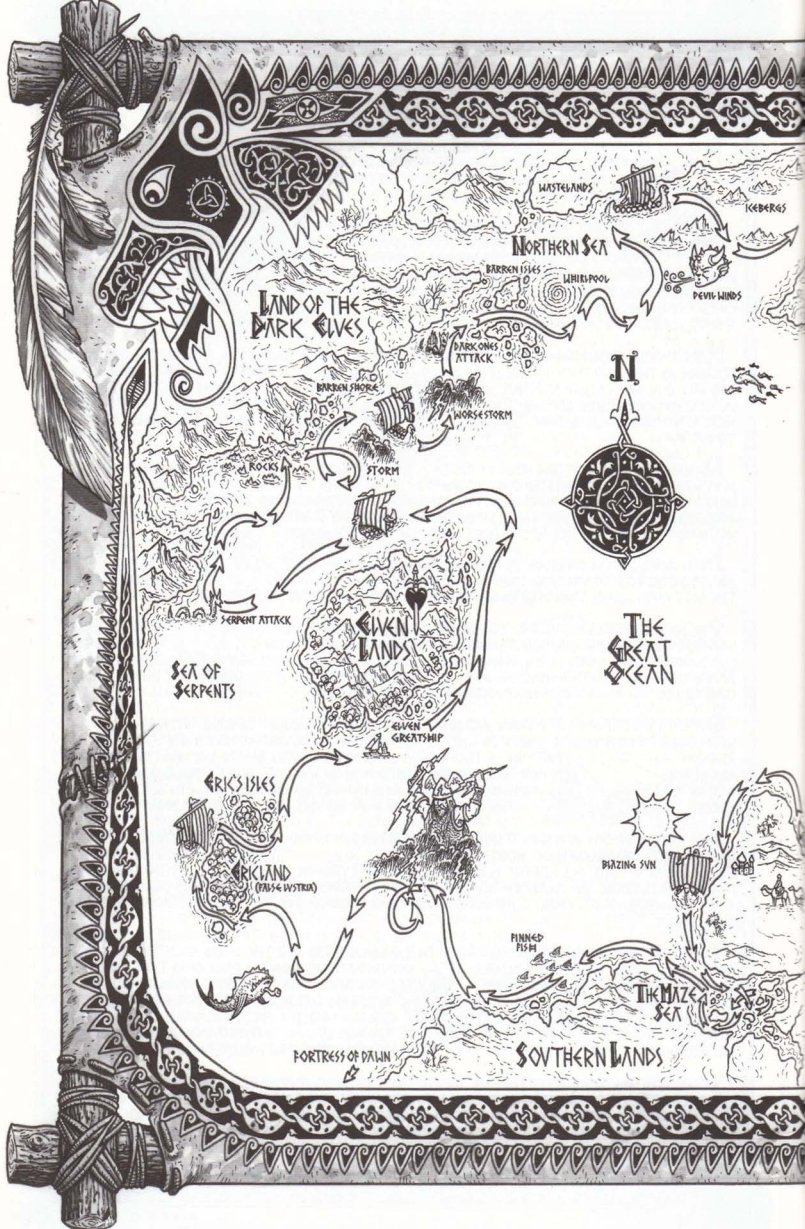
SVCH HOPES WERE CRVELY DASHED AS WE SAW THE MOST FORBIDDING LAND
SHORE OF DEATH AND DARKNESS. OVR HEARTS TVRNE COVD ONLY TO BE OF ALL OVR TRAVELS, A
BY THE ATTACK OF A VAST SEA SERPENT. MIRACVLOVSLY WE ESCAPED, THOUGH QUICKENED INTO LIFE
PELL FIGHTING, MOVRRING AND HEAVY HEARTED WE MADE FOR THE OPEN MANY MIGHTY MEN
EVER MORE LOVDLY. QVETIVLY MANY OTHERS OF VS ISSVED OVR OVN CVRSSES, BUT SET, ERIC CVRSING
OVR LEADER. THESE WERE AGAINST

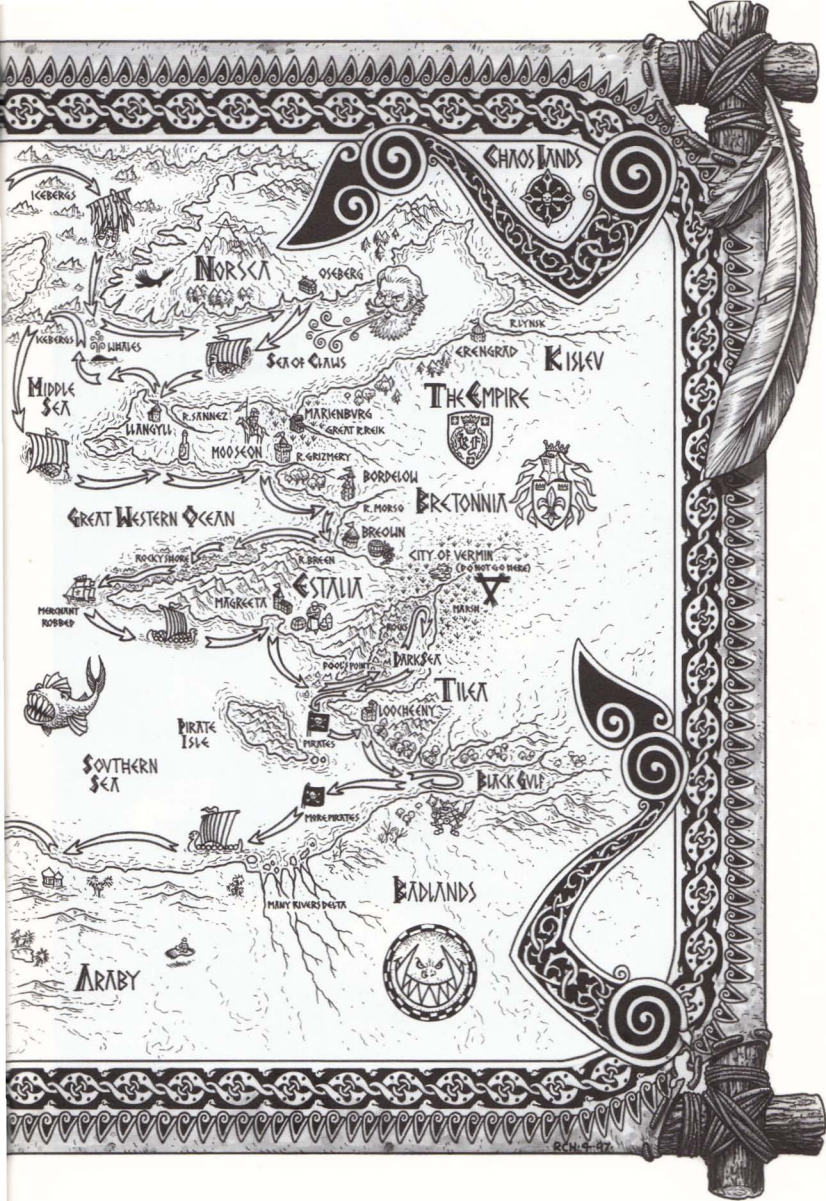


THE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED WERE HELL ON EARTH. WE WOVD HEAD FOR THE OCEAN ONLY TO ONCE MORE
COME VPON A COAST WORSE THAN BEFORE. WE ENDVRED ATTACKS FROM THE DARK ONES THAT ROPE VPON
THE BACKS OF SEA DRAGONS, BLACK STORMS, STARVATION, THIRST, WHIRLPOOLS, DISEASES THAT MADE
OVR GVMS BLEED, AND ERIC'S CVRSSES. NOW ERIC WAS CALLED MANY TERMS VNDER OVR BREATH
MOST COMMON AND FAIRLY EARNED WAS ERIC THE LOST. THE MOVRRING NEVER CEASSED AS THE
TRVEFLIGHT BECAME A FLOATING TOMB. ALL HOPE HAD PASSED FROM OVR HEARTS. GREAT WARRIORS
THOUGHT ONLY OF A SVIFT END FROM THE ICEBERGS THAT THREATENED DRIVLY TO CRVSH VS.

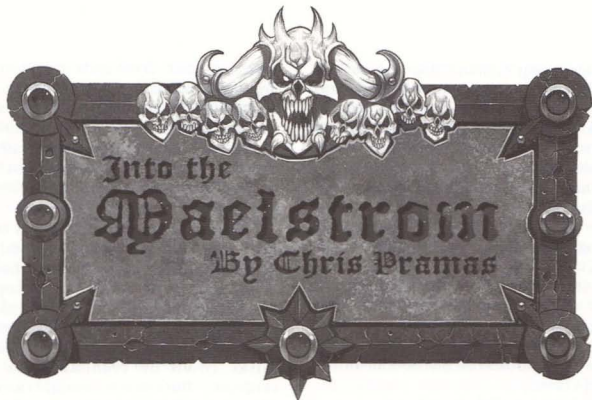


IT WAS WITH VNBELIEVING EYES THAT WE VIEWED FAMILIAR SNOW CAPPED PEAKS RISE ABOVE THE FAR
HORIZON. CRIES CRACKED WITH JOY CALLED TO THE WELCOMING FJORDS OF NORSCA. NEVER CAN
THERE HAVE BEEN SVCH GGLORATION SINCE AS WAS MADE THAT FIRST NIGHT BACK IN OVR OVN
MEADHALL. THOSE LESS THAN DOZEN OF VS THAT RETURNED WERE HAILED AS HEROES, MAYBE
WE WERE, YOU HAVE READ THE TRVTH AND CAN NOW DECIDE FOR YOVRSELF.









WAKE UP, CORSAIR! We're almost there.' Sartak snapped back to consciousness, only to find himself looking down the barrel of a bolter. Beyond it was the disapproving face of Arghun, a Space Marine of the White Scars. Although Arghun had not slept for days, his eyes were alert and his grip on the bolter firm.

'I am not a Corsair, Arghun,' Sartak said with dignity, 'I am like you, a Space Marine, of the Astral Claws Chapter.'

Arghun reached down, grabbed Sartak's shoulder with his left hand and hauled him roughly to his feet. Forcing his bolter against the side of Sartak's head, the White Scar spat in disgust: 'You filth. The Astral Claws betrayed the Emperor! You lost the right to be called a Space Marine long ago. You're nothing but a reaver and a pirate.'

Sartak felt the cool metal of the bolter against his flesh, but somehow he remained calm. He knew the White Scar would not kill him now. There was too much at stake. 'I am here to restore the honour of the Astral Claws,' he said in a level voice. 'My reaving days are over.'

Arghun released Sartak from his grip but kept the bolter handy. 'Yes,' the White Scar growled, 'so you said in your moving speech before Subatai Khan. After years as a murdering cur, you woke up one morning and realised you still loved the Emperor.' Arghun's voice dripped with scorn. 'And now you're going to help us kill Huron Blackheart...' The White Scar's

laughter filled the cramped quarters of the smuggler's ship. 'I've heard more convincing lies from Ogryns.'

'If you don't believe me,' Sartak said, flatly exasperated after days of such exchanges, 'then why in the Emperor's name are you here?'

'If you were a true Space Marine,' Arghun thundered, 'you wouldn't even have to ask me that question! I am here because I was ordered to be. That's all I need to know.'

'Arghun, I'm weary of fighting with you,' replied Sartak with a sigh. 'What I've told you is the truth. Huron Blackheart is planning a massive attack on an undefended Imperial world. If I can find my friend Lothar on Blackheart's flagship, he should be able to tell us where the attack will fall.' Sartak had told his story a dozen times, but it was plain from the look on Arghun's face that the White Scar didn't believe a word of it. Still, Sartak felt compelled to speak the words, hoping in his heart that they were true. 'Then,' the Astral Claw finished, 'we can signal the rest of your Chapter and bury Blackheart forever.'

He paused, before adding, 'If you ever take off this inhibitor, that is.' Almost unconsciously, Sartak ran his fingers over the heavy collar around his neck. As always, he could not find any kind of seam.

Watching him with amusement, the White Scar laughed. 'What's wrong? Don't

you like being Arghun's dog, Corsair? It's the only way to teach you discipline and obedience.' The smile left Arghun's lips as quickly as it had come. 'Besides, I couldn't risk you alerting your friends in the Red Corsairs before our arrival.

'Whatever, we are almost to the Maelstrom,' Arghun continued. 'You'll have your precious powers back soon enough.' The White Scar slung his bolter reluctantly, but kept his eyes on Sartak. 'Just try to remember what it really means to be a Space Marine and a Librarian.'

Sartak locked eyes with Arghun. 'I swear before the Emperor to prove the truth of my words and restore the honour of the Astral Claws.'

'Then may the Emperor have mercy on your soul, Corsair.'



ARGHUN AND SARTAK stood in the vast, reeking metal belly of Huron Blackheart's great warship. Surrounded by the Red Corsairs, renegade Space Marines of a dozen Chapters, they awaited Blackheart himself. Arghun stood proud and upright, staring defiantly at his fallen brethren, while Sartak shifted uncomfortably, searching the crowd for a friendly face. A haze of torch and incense smoke hung over the bay, but could not obscure the leering gargoyles that adorned its walls. From here, amidst twisted iron sconces and blood-spattered altars, Huron Blackheart led the Red Corsairs in their depraved worship of the foul gods of Chaos. Sartak had heard the screams of countless victims in this dark temple, and the memories haunted him still.

Blackheart's men were just as Sartak remembered them. Once the Emperor's elite, full of honour and courage, these Marines had betrayed their oaths and followed Huron into heresy. Where they had once used their strength to protect the citizens of the Imperium, they now used that same savage power to offer up

victims to their cruel gods. Blood, booty and terror were their masters now, and Sartak found it increasingly hard to believe that he had been one of them. Looking down at the fading Astral Claws markings on his power armour, now but a dim trace of their former glory, Sartak wondered if there was any honour left to salvage.

Unwilling to meet the eyes of any of his former comrades, Sartak scanned the great bay. His gaze came to rest on the prone forms of Huron's Dreadnoughts. These massive machines of destruction stood chained amongst the broken pillars of the central temple, as if their lifeless husks could be reanimated at any moment. But it was naught but an illusion, for the sarcophagi which housed the pilots that gave life to the stomping beasts were well away from the Dreadnoughts. Sartak knew them to be housed behind the Great Seal, safely locked away in Huron's temple of temples. Although the Red Corsairs consigned the deranged and insane to lives of living torment inside the metal sarcophagi, they still treated the Dreadnought pilots with an awed respect, perhaps because their irrational power reminded the Corsairs of their own inhuman gods.

A hush fell over the assembled Chaos Marines, and Sartak could hear Huron Blackheart approach. As long as he lived, he would never forget the peculiar rhythm of Huron's thumping footsteps, a product of the meltagun blast which had destroyed half of the man's body. The Red Corsairs parted before their master as he strode into view. Blackheart was a towering figure, half man and half machine. His massive armour, a corrupted mockery of that of the Space Marines, bristled with blades and saws. In place of his left arm, he had an enormous bionic claw that jerked open and closed spasmodically, so eager was it to rend the flesh of the living. Huron's wreck of a face radiated sheer menace, and his eyes burned with an unholy fire. Stopping his thundering advance only a few paces from the two Space Marines, the Blood Reaver sized up his new guests as a butcher might study cattle ready for slaughter.

'Sartak,' Huron boomed, 'I last saw you dead on the bridge of a White Scars' cruiser, yet here you stand. Tell me, how are you alive?'

'Great Tyrant,' Sartak began, 'I was but knocked unconscious during that savage fight. The White Scars took me prisoner, but I would say nothing to them.' The Marine could feel his mouth getting drier as the well-prepared lies came to his lips. Hurriedly, he continued, trying to finish before his voice betrayed him. 'Arghun here helped me escape, and we hired a smuggler to bring us back to the Maelstrom. I told Arghun that you were always looking for men like him.'

Huron's twisted face betrayed nothing as his gaze swept to the White Scar. Sartak felt relieved to be out from his scrutiny. He only hoped the proud White Scar could feign the humility needed to win the Tyrant's trust.

'And you, loyal White Scar,' Huron said, 'you betrayed your comrades to help Sartak escape. Why risk death to help this lowly sorcerer?'

'I care nothing for this wretch,' Arghun spat defiantly. 'I used him because I knew he could bring me to you.' The White Scar bowed his head ever so slightly, for the first time acknowledging the power of the Blood Reaver. 'And you, Great Tyrant, are the only man that can offer me refuge from the wrath of my gutless brethren.'

Blackheart laughed. 'This one's got spirit.' He took two great strides over to Arghun and grabbed the White Scar's neck in his wicked claw. As blood trickled ever so slowly down the pincer, the Blood Reaver continued, 'Tell me, White Scar, what did you do to earn the wrath of your Chapter?'

Arghun stood rock still, lest a sudden movement cause the claw to snap shut. 'Great Tyrant,' he choked out, 'I killed my Sergeant in battle because he ordered a retreat. Cowards like him deserve only death.'

Blackheart stood silently for a long moment, the only sound in the room Arghun's increasingly laboured breathing as the claw squeezed tighter. Then the claw snapped open and the Blood Reaver stepped back. Arghun sighed in relief and drew in great gulps of air.

Sartak also relaxed; the worst was over. He knew how merciless Huron could be with potential new recruits, but it seemed that Arghun had passed the test.

Huron strode over to Sartak and put his good hand on the Astral Claw's shoulder. 'Brother, you have done well. You know how few sorcerers I command and we had mourned your loss.' Sartak, wary of trickery, could detect no falsehood in the Tyrant's words. 'I want to welcome you back to the Red Corsairs.' Blackheart's voice deepened as he continued, 'But first, you must do something for me.'

'Anything, Great Tyrant!' Sartak exclaimed, nodding his head.

Blackheart removed his hand from Sartak's shoulder, unholstered his bolt pistol, and held it out to the Astral Claw. 'Kill the White Scar.'

'But, Great Tyrant,' Sartak stammered, 'he, well, he helped me to escape.'

'He helped you to escape so you would bring him here,' Huron said matter of factly. 'He's a White Scar infiltrator, no doubt sent to kill me. Now take this and execute him!'

The tone of the Blood Reaver brooked no contradiction, not if Sartak wanted to live. The Marine took the pistol and walked slowly over to Arghun. He had no love for the uncompromising White Scar, but nor did he want to be his executioner. He raised the pistol and aimed for Arghun's temple. At least death would be quick.

'What are you waiting for?' roared the Blood Reaver. 'Kill him!'

'Kill the traitor!' the Red Corsairs howled in unison.

Arghun looked at the Astral Claw and Sartak saw no fear in his face. 'Go ahead, Corsair,' Arghun said calmly. 'I always knew you'd kill me in the end.'

Sartak squeezed the trigger twice. The White Scar died without sound or complaint and fell with a echoing thud on to the metal floor of the great bay. Not for the last time innocent blood stained the unholy ground of Blackheart's temple.

Huron Blackheart smiled and his insane joy was almost as terrible as his anger. 'Welcome home, Sartak. You've been away too long.'

SARTAK MOVED QUICKLY amidst the twisting corridors of Huron's warship. It had been two days since his return and at last it seemed safe for him to move about freely. The Blood Reaver's small fleet was even now cruising through the Maelstrom, heading for an unknown destination. Excitement ran high amongst the Red Corsairs, for Huron Blackheart had promised them booty and blood aplenty.

Sartak tried to appear calm as he searched the ship for Lothar. By now his friend should have discovered where the attack was to fall, for he had won a place amongst Huron's inner circle. But the man had not been in his quarters, nor was he in the galley. Now, Sartak was forced to roam the great ship almost at random, hoping to find his friend before it was too late.

The Astral Claw found himself heading deeper into the bowels of the labyrinthine ship. The corridors stank of stale blood and he began to see skulls and bones littering the grilled walkway. This was the part of the ship claimed by the followers of Khorne, and Sartak usually went out of his way to avoid it. But he must find Lothar and this was one of the few places he had not searched.

Sartak had seen no one for almost an hour, and this only added to his agitation. Something was going on, he could sense it. Then he heard distant howls from up ahead and his heart sank. As he approached, Sartak could hear the roar of a crowd and cries of 'Blood for the Blood God!' At last Sartak emerged into a wide cargo bay and stopped in alarm. All of Huron's Khornate followers were assembled in a circle of crimson and gold, surrounding two combatants. Even above the shrieks for blood, Sartak could hear the distinct whirr of a chain-axe. He knew with cold certainty that this was no ordinary combat.

Pushing himself through the frenzied warriors, Sartak finally got a view of the combatants and his worst fears were confirmed. At the centre of the circle was Lothar, stripped to the waist and armed with a chain sword. His opponent was Crassus, a renegade Ultramarine who was

Khorne's chosen champion amongst the Red Corsairs. Dark and wiry, Lothar was an experienced fighter, true enough, but Crassus was a bloody-handed psychopath a full head taller than him, with few equals in hand-to-hand combat.

This is not a duel, thought Sartak grimly. This is slaughter.

'Khorne demands a sacrifice!' the Berserkers chanted wildly. 'Blood! Blood for Khorne!'

'Lothar!' Sartak bellowed and tried to break through the ring of blood-hungry Berserkers, but half a dozen arms held him back. Lothar caught sight of him but was fully engaged in trying to fend off Crassus. The chain-axe of the insane warrior hammered down upon Lothar's chainsword, driving the weary warrior back with every blow. Sartak could see that Lothar was bleeding from many wounds. Each time he parried, the Marine was just a little slower, while Crassus seemed to grow stronger with each blow.

As the howls for blood reached a frenzied pitch, Crassus roared and smashed the chainsword from his opponent's hands, and in the same fluid movement buried the axe in Lothar's chest. The chewing blades of the chain-axe tore through Lothar's flesh and he screamed in pain as his hot life-blood gushed all over the crazed Berserker.

'Blood for the Blood God!' the mob roared, And then, bearing Khorne's chosen one aloft, 'Crassus! Crassus!'

'No!' screamed Sartak, and ran where to his dying friend lay, forgotten. Lothar lay on his back, his chest a bloody ruin. Still, he yet lived.

Sartak knelt next to him. 'Forgive me, Lothar,' he said. 'I couldn't find you.'

'I was... discovered,' Lothar gasped, blood frothing on his lips. 'But the attack...the attack will fall on Razzia. Emperor...redeem us.' His ravaged body convulsed one last time and lay still. Around Sartak, the Berserkers of Khorne howled in savage celebration. Soon they were fighting furiously amongst themselves, driven mad by the sight and smell of freshly spilled blood. Taking advantage of the mayhem, Sartak slipped back into the welcome darkness.

SARTAK SAT ALONE in his chambers, still covered with the blood of his only friend. Now Lothar and Arghun were both dead, and Sartak knew it was up to him to finish Huron Blackheart alone. The Astral Claw shook with barely repressed fury as he thought about the lifeless body of Lothar, and of his own fall from the Emperor's grace.

Sartak's blood burned for vengeance on Blackheart, but a small inner voice crooned to him to wait. A relic of his reaving days, or a clear sign of impending madness, the voice tempted and chided his soul. It would be so easy, the voice told him, to stay with Blackheart and maintain your loyalty.

Yes, so easy, Sartak reflected, but he had followed the easy path for far too many years. Sartak remembered those dark days on Badab, when Huron had poisoned the Astral Claws against the Emperor. Sartak, loyal to his Chapter Master, as a Space Marine should be, followed him into heresy. But the years of reaving had taken their toll on the once idealistic warrior. Like a sleeping man jarred to consciousness, Sartak had opened his eyes to the depravity and corruption of the man once known as the Tyrant of Badab. With this shocking awakening Sartak had realised that there was only one way to make good his betrayal of the Emperor.

'If I must add my own blood to that of Arghun and Lothar,' he snarled aloud, 'then that let that be my penance.' Sartak drew in a deep breath and steadied his beating heart. Now, it was time to finish what he had started.

The Astral Claw knelt on the floor and pulled a small cloth bag from between the folds of his bunk. Reaching inside, he pulled out the Imperial Tarot. The magic paraphernalia cluttered about his chamber was just for show, mere superstitious frippery. Huron was strangely proud of his 'sorcerers' and Sartak had been forced to act the part. Runic wands, talismanic skulls, and ancient icons lay strewn about haphazardly, the accoutrements of his obscene trade.

Now all Sartak needed was the purity of the Tarot to communicate with the White Scar ship which circled the Maelstrom in

eager anticipation of his message. It was time for him to take on once again the mantle of Space Marine, Librarian and Astral Claw.

Sartak knelt and shuffled the Tarot. Focusing his mind, he drew three cards from the top of the deck and placed them face down. Holding his breath, he flipped them over one by one. Horror! Revealed before him were the Emperor reversed, the Tower, and the Ecclesiarch reversed.

Sartak suppressed the shock of such an ill-omened hand, quickly reminding himself that he was not divining but reforging long broken lines of communication. Trying to forget the grim portents thus revealed, Sartak concentrated on the Tower. Chanting quietly, he envisioned the Tower in the distance, across the great tide of the Warp. Casting his mind outward, Sartak fell into a deep trance.

Always he kept the Tower foremost in his mind, as he searched for the spirit of the White Scar librarian he knew to be waiting. The Warp embraced him as it always did, comforting him like a mother as it tried to suck him to its womb. Further and further he reached, beyond the gibbering hordes of demonic creatures which implored him for his soul. Then, at the last, the jolt of contact. Across the warp, their minds came together and in an instant it was done. 'Razzia,' he intoned, 'the attack falls on Razzia.' Information delivered, Sartak broke the contract and fled back across the void to the safety of his own body. It was finished.



BEFORE SARTAK COULD so much as stand, there was a rending crash as the door to his chamber was smashed open. Standing in the doorway was Huron Blackheart, flanked by the tall, cadaverous figure of Garlon Souleater, the Tyrant's most potent sorcerer.

Sartak jumped to his feet, scattering the Imperial Tarot across the floor. 'Great

Tyrant, I had not expected you,' he stammered hastily, knowing with certainty that the Tarot had shown him the future after all.

'No, I don't suppose you did,' Huron laughed. The Chaos leader shrugged towards his twisted sorcerer. 'Garlon tells me that you have been communicating with the White Scars... and I wanted to come and thank you personally.'

'Than me, Great Tyrant?' Sartak let his hand rest on the hilt of his force sword, yet maintained a pretence of servitude a while longer.

'Yes, Astral Claw, most certainly.' The Tyrant grinned maliciously. 'I wanted to thank you for telling the White Scars that I would be attacking Razzia,' Huron continued, his words dripping irony, 'A touching show of misplaced loyalty'. The Corsair's voice rose to a thundering growl and he stabbed his power claw at Sartak. 'Especially when you consider that I've changed my mind!'

'Changed your mind?' Sartak gasped, taken aback 'Wha-'

Huron waved his hand dismissively. 'Well, no, I lie. I haven't changed my mind as such - we never were attacking Razzia'

Sartak began to see the trap which had been set for him, and his grip was firm upon his chainsword. 'You twisted, evil... what do you mean?'

The tyrant laughed widely at this show of bravado, and beside him Garlon clapped politely in mock applause.

'We are, in fact, headed for Santiago.' Blackheart paused to let the awful truth sink in. 'Thanks to you, however, the White Scars will be far away when the Red Corsairs sweep down on that helpless planet.' The tyrant grinned again, obviously delighted with the Astral Claws terrified expression.

Sartak staggered backwards, overwhelmed by the enormity of what he had done. 'Santiago? But why?' he whispered, horrified. 'There's nothing to steal there, it's an agricultural world of no military significance at all'.

Garlon rubbed his bony hands together eagerly, his wet tongue licking his thin lips in anticipation of some future pleasure.

'Ah, but you are mistaken. There's one

thing Santiago does have,' Huron gloated, clapping Garlon on the back. 'Santiago has millions upon millions of defenceless citizens.'

Garlon whinnied in helpless pleasure. The sorcerer's eyes rolled in his head and he silently mouthed, 'Blood and skulls...'

Huron laughed mockingly. Sartak felt cold fury burning in his soul. The Tyrant continued, 'And what do you think would happen in the Warp, my loyal little sorcerer, were I to offer up the blood of a billion victims on one night?'

'You butcher!' Sartak screamed. 'I followed you, I trusted you, and you lead me straight to hell!' In his mind, he commended his soul to the Emperor. He knew what he must do. 'In the name of all that is holy, it stops here!' he yelled, dragging his force sword from its scabbard and charging the Blood Reaver, howling his fury.

Huron Blackheart met Sartak's charge with a cry of delight, parrying the Force Sword with his great metal claw. The sword, pulsing with psychic energy, sparked and shrieked as it strove to tear the claw asunder. But the forbidden technology powering the Tyrant's Claw proved too strong, and after long moments of straining sinew and muscle, Sartak was forced to pull his sword away.

Backing up as far as he could in the cramped confines of the chamber, Sartak quickly uttered a calming prayer, before focusing his mind and unleashing a psychic blast at Blackheart's diseased consciousness. The energy of righteousness roared within him, and the bolt flew clear and true.

But Garlon Souleater, soaked in the black energies of chaos, deflected the blow with a casual flick of a skeletally thin wrist, all the while cackling with perverse pleasure. 'There'll be none of that, Sartak.' His voice oozed mockingly into the Marine's mind. 'Goodbye, our lovely traitor.'

The Blood Reaver closed on Sartak, even as Garlon's twisted laughter echoed inside his skull. There was no more time for psychic trickery.

As the Tyrant attacked with all the power at his disposal, it was all the Astral Claw could do to parry the whirling power axe

and merciless claws. Sartak held his force sword in both hands, trying to keep Huron at bay with great sweeps of the deadly blade.

Huron would not be denied blood. With a scream of rage and bitter satisfaction, the Tyrant slammed Sartak's blade into the wall and pinned it there with his axe. The sword was motionless for just a few seconds, as Sartak tried in vain to wrench the glittering weapon free, but that was enough time for Blackheart to close his great claw over Sartak's exposed wrists.

With a wicked grin, the Blood Reaver snapped the claw shut with a sickening crunch. Howling in pain, Sartak fell to his knees, staring in horror at the bleeding stumps.

Huron stood over Sartak, looking with disdain at the wretch at his feet. 'You'd like to die now, wouldn't you, last of the Astral Claws?'

Sartak would not answer. He watched his lifeblood slowly pump away, knowing that he had failed utterly.

Blackheart walked around Sartak's prone form, crushing the Tarot cards that still lay on the floor. 'But a hero's death is not for you,' he taunted, as he brought his leering face close to Sartak's bloody countenance. Sartak groaned aloud, but he could not bring himself to meet the Tyrant's gaze. 'No, there will be no redemption for you, Sartak.' The Tyrant howled in glee. 'Instead, I will give you the greatest gift an Astral Claw could hope for.'

Laughing with delight, Huron Blackheart turned to the capering sorcerer. 'Take him away, Garlon, and make this sad wretch a hero to be proud of.'

Garlon's mind reached out and smashed through Sartak's weakened defences. The Astral Claw fell into blackness.



SARTAK AWOKE IN total, unutterable darkness. Surprised to be alive, he tried to get up, to move, but found that he could not. Straining his limbs, he

slowly realised that needles invaded his body, and unknown wires were entwined around his limbs. Some kind of mask was clamped to his face. Sartak tried to talk, but he choked on the array of tubes that had been rammed down his throat. In panic, he tried to cast his mind into the Warp, but found that his powers had been suppressed.

After what felt like long, desperate hours of thrashing blindly in the darkness, Sartak lay in the blackness and waited. Huron would come to taunt him soon enough. Sartak waited and waited, cut off from feeling and perhaps time itself. How long have I been so? he wondered. Hours? Days? Time had lost its meaning.

Still Huron did not come. What exactly have you done to me? the panicked Librarian screamed silently.

Have I been jettisoned into the emptiness of space, in an escape capsule? Will I fall forever through the void?

How would that make me a hero?

His mind cast about, trying to find an answer, but to no avail. Nothing made any sense at all.

In a flash of realization it all became clear. Sartak remembered his one walk beyond the Great Seal. He remembered seeing the maddened members of the Red Corsairs encased forever in coffins of adamantium, sealed up in the Great Temple until battle called.

Sartak knew beyond doubt that the life support systems of a Dreadnought could keep a man alive indefinitely. But what if the sarcophagus were never to be hooked into a Dreadnought? What if a man was locked inside and left to rot for all eternity? What then?

Sartak tried desperately to think of another possible explanation for his plight, but the logic was cold and inescapable. The epiphany of horror crashed into his consciousness with unstoppable power. He could not even scream as sanity fled.

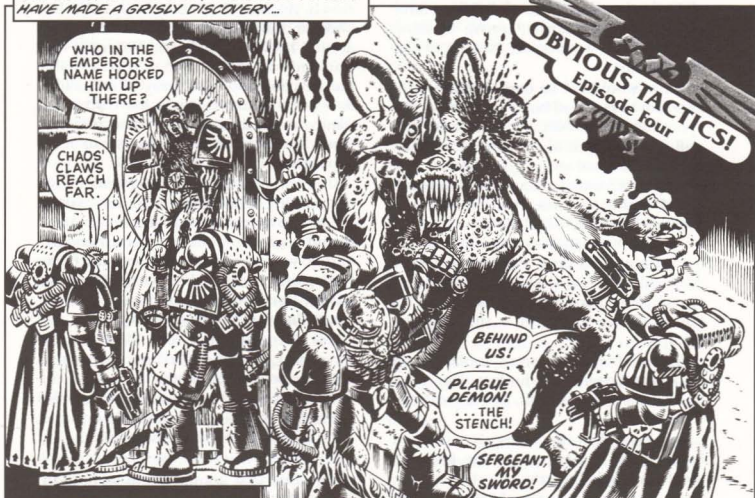
In the frigid darkness of the Maelstrom, the fleet of Huron Blackheart tore through space, destined for doomed Santiago. The Blood Reaver was on his way to offer up a billion souls to the dark gods of Chaos. ●

FAR BENEATH THE CITY, THE BLOOD ANGELS HAVE MADE A GRISLY DISCOVERY...

WHO IN THE EMPEROR'S NAME HOOKED HIM UP THERE?

CHAOS CLAWS REACH FAR.

OBVIOUS TACTICS!
Episode Four



BEHIND US!

PLAGUE DEMON!
... THE STENCH!

SERGEANT,
MY SWORD!

HA: HA! HA!
ANOTHER HOLE
MATTERS LITTLE
IN THIS FLESH,
HUMAN.

WHEREAS MY
PLAGUE-BLESSED
BLADE HAS BUT
TO GRAZE YOUR
SKIN...



LIBRARIAN,
CHANNEL
YOUR POWER
INTO THE
BLADE!



LOOK TO
YOURSELF,
BROTHER,
BEHIND
YOU...

THE
DEATH
GUARD!



RAARRGH!

**PLAGUE MARINES,
AS IF THE DEMON WERE
NOT ENOUGH!**

**I'M DOWN
SERGEANT!
HIS POWER
IS TOO STRONG
... YOU MUST
FLEE!**

NEVER!



**SUDDENLY
FROM THE
SHADOWS...**

DEMON!



**RECEIVE
THE
EMPEROR'S
GIFT!**

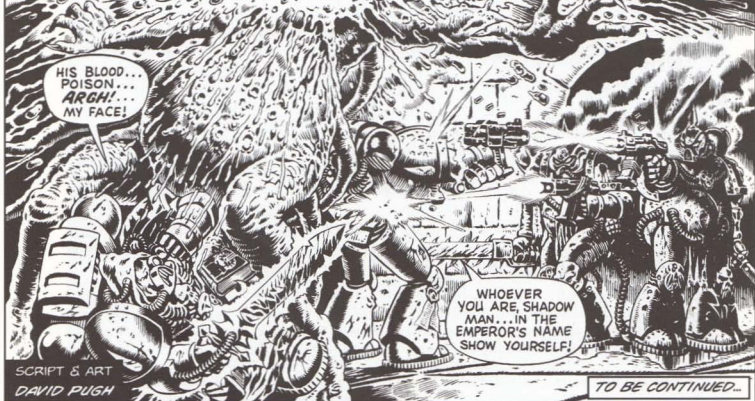
**WHO
DISTURBS
US?**



LINK!

**SHADOW
LURKER!**

SSSBRAMMM!!



**HIS BLOOD...
POISON...
ARGH...
MY FACE!**

**WHOEVER
YOU ARE, SHADOW
MAN... IN THE
EMPEROR'S NAME
SHOW YOURSELF!**

**SCRIPT & ART
DAVID PUGH**

TO BE CONTINUED...



Dear Inferno!

I personally think that the idea of *Inferno!* is excellent. The stories in the magazine are well done, they deserve a round of applause. The illustrations are unreal. I want to be able to get my pictures published in it, but I'm afraid mine aren't worthy enough. Thanks for the mag. You guys rule!

Marc Campbell, Werribee, Melbourne, Australia

Dear Inferno!

Inferno! seems to be a master stroke! Because I'm the kind of person that finds the mini-story at the beginning of battle reports more interesting than the report itself, the stories in *Inferno!* are wonderful. The 'No Rules' rule (!) is a very good idea.

If readers were to send stories/pictures on a purely casual basis, what would be the chances of them being printed? Maybe a readers' section with this in mind would be a good idea.

The thing which I would most like to see is the technical diagrams for *really* big 40k things, like Titans, or the Gauntlet of Macragge or perhaps blueprints for a Chapter's home planet HQ. There must be someone out there with a talent for this sort of thing!

Nick Allen, Bishops Stortford, Herts

Dear Inferno!

I happened upon Issue 2 by chance, and it's had such an effect that I got as far as unpacking my old models and staring at them longingly - I've no idea how anyone manages to both write and play to any great extent without being abysmal at both. Anyway, I came to Warhammer 40,000 through reading the novels, and have always been a bit more of a spectator than a player. *Inferno!* may be the anchor to stop me floating away from this madness.

As for the stories, if #1 was like #2 I'm not surprised the opinion on the best story is close run. As for #2, while I enjoy a good comic strip, I am very much a words person. So... it's a toss up between 'The Black Pearl', 'Hatred' and 'Tenebrae'. Almost traitorously, I have to pick out 'Hatred'. The sparse writing highlighted the setting and tone admirably, and the plot was well executed. This result was a surprise to me, as I generally don't have much truck with multiple viewpoints in stories this length.

This is definitely all quality writing where it will do the most good.

Wayne Stamford, Frome, Somerset

Dear Inferno!

I believe that *Inferno!* is an absolutely cracking idea. It has enormous potential, which should be exploited to the full. My only question is, why didn't you think of it sooner?!

James Ridgewell, Yeovil, Somerset

Dear Inferno!

I enjoyed 'The Demon Bottle' by Alex Hammond; it showed you exactly what Necromundan life is all about. I think it would be interesting to see into the lives of the Uphivers as well as the Underhivers, showing you a bit of contrast. Maybe you could even introduce some of the Uphive houses!

It would be nice to see some weapon specifications, such as the bolt gun. You could detail ammo types, rates of fire, weight, killing range... The Leman Russ tank plans were great, and I was thinking about an 'Orky' version. How about blueprints for 'Da Gargant' or 'Da Shokk Attak Gun'? They would be absolutely hilarious, and fun to draw.

Keep up the good work!

Andrew Fletcher, Carterton, Oxon

Dear Inferno!

The first issue was great except for 'The Demon Bottle' which was boring, but 10 out of 10 for 'The Terror of Death'.

William Comrie, Achnasheen, Rossshire

Dear Inferno!

White Dwarf, although being this brilliant firework display of all the aspects of the 'hardware' of the GW hobby, lacks - in my humble opinion - something. This something you can now find in the *Citadel Journal* and in *Inferno!*, i.e. the creative feedback of the gaming community and the more liberal use of the immensely expandable background of the games. Now, I am quite content having three distinctive publications available. Use *WD* to keep in touch with the evolution of the hobby, participate worldwide via the *Journal* (I really have to finish those conversions!) and lean back, enjoy the

fiction and get the brain department gently to work with *Inferno!*

Anything else? Ah yes: no need for colour inside *Inferno!*. Works just fine as it is. Attractive design, good editing. What more could one ask for? Keep it up, have fun, thanks for an enjoyable read.

Peter Rutkowski, Frankfurt, Germany

Dear *Inferno!*

What a gobsmacker! I loved it! Thanks to the Trolls at Mail Order I got my copy on the day of release. I bet loads of people won't get their hands on a copy until next week. Tell Logan Lubera that he's got me hooked on 'The Terror of Death'. Will there be a sequel?

I'm pretty sure that *Inferno!* will start a revolution! Brilliant! Smashing! I also hope that you do a strip of the Blood Angels on a strike into a space hulk! Will subscriptions be available? Will electronic version of the publication be available?

Oh, just hurry up and get on with making copies of the next issue!

Jonathan Harris, Plympton, Devon

Dear *Inferno!*

Congratulations! After so many years, a magazine dedicated to stories from the rich Warhammer universes. More – especially WH40K

comic strips! 'The Terror of Death' was great, though you'd have no idea what's going on if you hadn't read 'Angels of Death'! Any chance of Kevin Walker penning a strip or two?

One thing I've always enjoyed are 'historic' accounts of great battles, etc. The brief piece on 'Operation: Stormfrost' was great, but we need more! Not so sure about the pictures, though – the armour looks brilliant, but it must have taken ages to build – is it worth it for a few photos?

I wish you every success and will certainly buy the next one.

Tim Melville-Walker, North Baddesley, Hampshire

Dear *Inferno!*

As a dog handler in the RAF Police, I need something to help me through nightshifts. *Inferno!* worked a treat, read it each night for a week. Even the dog was impressed, and he's known for his taste! Who knows, between us we may even send in a couple of stories for you. We won't do pictures; I can't draw and he eats the pencils! But the word processor will definitely get a bashing; he can type faster than me!

Anyway, keep up the good work. Looking forward to the next issue already. All the best,

Nick Alderman & Air Dog Prince, Coulsdon, Surrey

WRITE TO: *Inferno!*, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS UK

ENTER THE *INFERNO!*

ONE OF THE THINGS that makes *Inferno!* different is that most of its contributors are freelancers, rather than members of the famous Games Workshop in-house design team. What's more, 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 and we'll put you in print!

If you're a writer, we'd like a one-page synopsis of your story, together with a page of sample writing (either from your intended story or a previously published work). Remember that we're looking for fast paced, all-action stories set in one of the current GW worlds. We're looking for self-contained stories, so there's a maximum length of 7000 words (pieces shorter than that are very welcome). We are not looking for colour text like that in the GW army books, nor stories set in past times.

If you're an artist, send us a small selection of your artwork. Ideally, make at least one of your pictures set in a GW world. We are looking for full-page pin-up illustrations, also comic strips, vehicle cutaways, battlemaps and so on.

If in doubt about anything, have a look at what's in this issue. Oh, and we do pay a competitive rate for everything we publish. So if you want to join our merry band, get a package together, then send it off to:

Inferno!, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham NG7 2WS UK



Here continues the tale of *Grimcrag Grunsonn*, fabled Dwarf Adventurer, and his band of Heroes, other-wise known as *Grunsonn's Marauders*, as they try to escape from

PARADISE LOST

~ Act II ~

SIX MONTHS IN paradise was probably enough for anyone. It was certainly enough for Johan Anstein. Much as he enjoyed lying on a beach being feted as a god by proxy – just knowing Keanu seemed to be enough to get you in the club – Johan knew that there was a whole world out there over the horizon, just waiting for the unique influence of Grunsonn's Marauders.

Still, he had had time to write up their adventures in his journal, the food was good, the natives friendly (except for the odd hostile glare from the extended families of those accidentally killed by Grimcrag and Keanu) and the weather beyond compare. As he curled his toes lazily in the warm sand, Johan pondered on his companions.

Grimcrag, certainly, was unusually happy, what with his beer and the cave full of gold which the Dwarf was lovingly transferring to their patched-up and extended rowing boat in his secret cove. Johan sighed contentedly.

Only Jiriki was unhappy with the situation, his wanderlust frustrated by the confines of the small island. The Elf had become quite solitary of late, taking to long sojourns along the cliff-tops on the lookout for ships. He had even built some warning beacons out of dead brushwood. He had

meticulously timed the tides, how long it took to get a fire going, run to the boat and get out to sea. Johan really couldn't see the point, and hoped that Jiriki would perhaps relax a little when he realised that they truly were in the lap of the gods regarding rescue. They had not had so much as a sniff of a sail since their arrival six months ago.

Still, it was sunny and warm every day of the week... maybe they could stay awhile longer yet. Actually, it wasn't as if they had any real choice in the matter. Jiriki should jolly well wake up and– His thoughts were interrupted by a familiar rasping voice.

'Ansssstein, 'vake?' The voice was that of Froggo, Johan's adopted lizard man. The young creature – apparently they called themselves 'skinkz' in their native tongue – followed Anstein everywhere, eager to learn as much as it could of the big, wide world beyond its island home.

'Yes, Froggo, me lad, I'm awake. Just musing.' Johan turned to look at the skink, which as usual sat a respectful distance away from its adopted mentor. On matters of gender, when pressed, the creatures had been ambiguous to say the least, and Johan was none too sure if Froggo was in fact a boy or a girl, or even whether they made such distinctions. Johan had pigeon-holed Froggo (he had quickly realised that he had no way in this world of being able to pronounce the creature's real name, which sounded like a cistern being flushed) as being a boy, for neatness' sake more than anything else.

'Musink?' the Skink enquired, blinking its toad-like eyes and scratching a leathery patch of skin under its long chin. 'Vot meaninksss?'

'Another word for thinking, sort of... You know, your accent is terrible, Froggo; abominable, in fact!' Johan turned over and lazily threw a small stick at the reptile, which dodged nimbly out of the way. In return, it cheekily threw a small pebble which hit Johan square on the forehead.

'But better zan yoursss in my ssspeaks yessssss?' quipped the lizard creature, making the loud hissing noise in the back of its throat that Johan had learned passed for laughter in Skink.

Johan jumped to his feet and chased the small scampering creature back to the village. It was nearly time for lunch.

Behind them, on the furthest visible reach of the ocean, the small black speck of a sail hove into view over the horizon. On a nearby cliff-top, a thin plume of black smoke clawed its way upwards into the heavy air.



IN HIS CAVE, Grimcrag worked tirelessly, piling yet more gold artefacts into the boat and tying them securely down. As he worked, he endlessly muttered to himself under his breath: 'Can't last, got to be a catch. Can't last, got to be a catch.'

The Dwarf's arms and armour were stacked neatly to one side of the cave, glittering from the sparkling reflections cast by the clear water. The mouth of the cave was perhaps a hundred feet distant, a patch of white heat against the shadowy black of the cave. The slap-slap of water kept a constant rhythm by which the Dwarf worked, stacking the gold items one at a time in a strange looking boat which was moored beside a natural stone jetty.

The boat was an odd mongrel contraption, new wood gleaming against older, more battered timbers. Its prow bore a proud dragon head, and there was provision for a small mast. Four old and rusted shields lined each side of the vessel, one to protect each of the oars which dipped into the cool waters of the cave. A bigger, steering oar was mounted at the higher stern, and the boat looked to be just what it was – a mix between the wreck of their rowing boat and a much older Norse longboat.

The soft pattering of booted feet disturbed the Dwarf, and he instinctively reached for his trusty axe. A moment later and Jiriki's sun-tanned face peered into the cave. The Elf had taken the most naturally to the tropical climate, and now looked healthier than the Dwarf had ever seen him. 'Grimcrag?' he called, and from his tone, the Dwarf knew that something was of grave concern. He stepped from the shadows.

'Here, Jiriki – what's up, old friend?'

The Elf strode into the cave, grinning at the boat despite himself. He pointed at Grimcrag's construction and tapped a foot impatiently. 'Will that thing really float out of there?' The Elf nodded towards the cave mouth. 'Weighed down by so much gold?'

Grimcrag spat on the floor, disgusted by the temerity of such a question. 'Course it will! What do you take me for?' The Dwarf stomped up to the Elf and prodded him with a stubby callused finger. 'While you lot've bin living it up with yer froggy friends,' Grimcrag's arm swept around the cave as evidence of his industry, 'some of us 'ave bin working blimming hard!'

The Elf clapped Grimcrag on the shoulder and smiled. 'Splendid, my industrious friend, splendid. You know that, of all of us, I am least happy with our predicament, and now, we may have... an opportunity.' Jiriki headed back to the rear entrance to the cave, before turning once more to face the bemused Dwarf. 'Come on, Grimcrag. We'll be using that boat of yours sooner than you'd imagine, I'll wager!'

'What do you mean?' Grimcrag began. 'I'm not using it for fishing, nor joyrides neither – look what happened last time...'

Jiriki winked conspiratorially as he stepped out into the daylight. His lilting voice drifted back into the cave. 'Come on, Grimcrag, grab your axe too – the tide's rising, the beacon's lit. By my estimation we have no more than an hour!'

'It's the sun, isn't it?' The Dwarf frowned as he grabbed his axe. 'That, and all the time you've spent moping around those cliff-tops.'

But Jiriki was off and running. His last words, echoing around the cavern, persuaded the old Dwarf that something important was happening: 'I've spied a sail. We have company!'



KEANU SAT ON HIS bamboo throne, two Skinks fanning him with the feathers of some particularly large and gaudily-plumaged bird. Swathed in garlands of exotic flowers, the Barbarian

drank warm beer from his helmet; his feet rested in a bowl of cool water, which was replenished regularly by more scurrying minions. He faced out onto the village square, where the now spotlessly clean pyramid reared up into the sky.

On top of the pyramid, Keanu's likeness, or something approaching it, stared back at the barbarian. If he squinted hard, the entire village had a distinctly Norse look. Keanu sighed contentedly. If only it were nice and cold.

The Reaver burped loudly. 'Fang, da Legend vunce more, f'ya pleez.' Keanu gestured languidly at the black-skinned shaman, who stood in his ceremonial place beside the throne. He had named all the Skinks in his 'hearth-guard' after his wolf hounds back home in Norsca.

Keanu fondly thought of the band of heavily-armed reptilian warriors as his very own Berserkers, although none of them had, as yet, betrayed any leanings towards going berserk at all. 'Not got the temperament fer it,' Grimcrag had explained at the last banquet, whilst Jiriki maintained that it was something to do with their blood being cold, or some such typical Elf nonsense.

On a cue from Fang the Shaman, a bigger lizard creature, stripped down to a loincloth, banged heartily on a brass gong strung up on sturdy wooden poles beside the throne.

Within minutes, the clearing was alive with Skinks, all jostling for places from where they could hear the story again. Being a Norse barbarian himself, Keanu appreciated good tales. In his consideration, like a good wine, they improved with age. Not that any wine which came Keanu's way got the chance to enjoy its autumn years, but the principle was, he felt, a sound one.

After a while, the hubbub in the small square died down. Fang cleared his throat to speak the story on which the Skink island civilisation was founded. With an imperious wave of his massive arms, Keanu bade Fang be silent. Standing, the barbarian addressed the assembled throng. Agog, they listened intently.

'Today,' Keanu began, his eyes sweeping the appreciative crowd, 'today I'm tellink da Saga, ja?'

'Ya, yesssss, ya!' the lizards chorused, rocking backwards and forward in delight. Fang smiled benignly and nodded his crested head.

'I'm keepink 'im short, koz nearly Dinna time,' the Barbarian continued, striding to the front of the crowd. Already, a bunch of Skinks stood ready to perform the odd ritualistic actions which always accompanied the story.

Keanu grinned: what a stupid bunch of lizards. He'd heard the story enough times that he knew it off by heart, almost felt it was of his doing. He'd give them a story to remember. He began, his voice echoing loud and strong across the clearing.

'Und so beginz da Saga of da Voyage of Erik da Lost, Great God Warrior of Norsca, und how he brought Kulture und Beer to Paradise.'

The miming lizards were ahead of Keanu already, making rowing actions as they envisaged the ship of Eric the Lost ploughing across the mighty oceans to this small island. Looking around, Keanu could see that the majority of the lizards had their eyes closed, broad grins of contentment splitting their leathery faces.

And so, at least for a few minutes, Keanu escaped from the real world of reaving and death, as he told the age-old story of Eric, great warrior king, and his voyage across the sea. He told of mighty storms and huge sea monsters (several mimers became carried away and bit each other at this point), of treacherous rocks and wicked pirates. He told of strange lands populated by strange creatures, of mighty heroes and deeds of wonder. And he told of how, after many years of travelling, Eric arrived at this fair land, which he took to be the fabled land of Lustria, and named it Erieland.

Keanu looked around the band of Skinks and almost laughed aloud. He still couldn't really believe the next part of the story himself, although there was proof enough for anyone. The Skinks doing the actions were confused by Keanu's expression: normally the story didn't stop here, and they were repeatedly miming planting a flag in the earth. Keanu hastily drew a breath and continued.

Eric and his wise heroes had stormed the island, killing all of the great lizard monsters who had once lived here. (Fang had showed

Keanu the cave full of bones, and the Barbarian had been truly impressed – Eric had certainly known how to fight judging by the size of some of the skeletons.) He liberated the Skinks to true civilisation: true speech, freedom... and beer.

The next part of the story almost stuck in the Barbarian's throat, such was the enormity of the lie. Now he told of how Eric and his noble followers had revealed the true horror of that evil and glittering substance known as 'Golt', and how those brave and selfless Norsemen had liberated the Skinks from the horrid material of which they had so much, and hidden it in a far distant cave, never to trouble their idyllic lives again.

And finally, Keanu told of how the day dawned when Eric and his band of warriors had proven the true depths of their selfless love, by setting sail away from the island in their ship full of the hated gold, simply to get rid of it once and for all. Several of the Skinks were weeping great salty tears at this part of the story, and not for the first time, Keanu marvelled at their gullible nature.

'Ja, but too much Golt was there for vun Schip, so as he vent away, Eric was makink da Promise, ja?' Keanu shouted the words at the throng. They were all staring, a hundred pairs of unblinking eyes fixed on his face, hanging on every syllable. 'Und vot was dat Promise?' Keanu implored, secretly pleased with his performance.

As one voice, the Skinks shrieked the words which ended the story every time it was told. Their voices echoed around the jungle, and several flocks of multi coloured birds took flight in terror. 'I VILL BE BACK FOR DA GOLD – SSSO DON'T TOUCH, JA?'

Exhausted, the assembly fell silent, and Keanu fell back onto his throne, gesturing for beer. The crowd abruptly erupted into applause, as they hooted and hissed and slapped their tails on the ground.

Fang smiled. His prophecies over the years had been borne out. He was the true priest of Erikkk. Everyone now knew that Eric had kept his promise, even if his warriors had changed a bit over the years. Especially the short, grubby, bearded one.

At that moment, the spell was broken as Johan, Froggo, Jiriki and Grimcrag rushed into the village square, panting and out of breath.

'Kean– Eric!' Johan shouted. 'We've got to go!'

'Vot? Going vere?'

'Forty-five minutes now!' Jiriki added.

The Skinks were somewhat agitated, for they were not used to such an abrupt ending. Usually, when Fang was telling it, they got a good hour's sun bathing after such an energetic story, or at last half an hour in the cool water of the pond.

Jiriki ran over to the bemused Barbarian, and whispered in his ear. The effect was electrifying. Like a scalded cat, Keanu was on his feet, weapons grabbed and running across the clearing in one fluid motion. The throng of Skinks blinked and hissed uncertainly. Fang frowned, unsure as to what his lord was doing.

Jiriki ran after Keanu, shoving him in the back to keep him moving. Grimcrag and the others had already vanished down the path to the cave, the Dwarf showing a surprising turn of speed.

Shaking himself free of the Elf's grasp, Keanu glared at Jiriki and turned to face his villagers. 'Not Vurryink,' he hissed at Jiriki, before turning and bellowing at the hundred or so lizards. 'Now is da Time!' he began, raising his sword to the air. 'My Berserkers – Volf pack, Bear soldiers, Schnow Leopards, now is your Time to fight!'

The most inappropriately named groups of Skinks scuttled off to collect weapons, growling and snapping at each other. A nimbus of blue fire already played around the tip of Fang's ceremonial staff.

'What are you doing?' Jiriki snapped, dancing agitatedly from foot to foot. 'We don't have time for this.' Keanu pushed the Elf away and faced the Skinks again.

'Now ve must be goink!' Keanu stabbed himself in the chest with his forefinger. 'Me, Erik, und my Varriors!' He grinned, showing sharp white teeth. The lizards were starting to look crestfallen. 'But not to be Vorryink! No! Ve take all da nasti Golt vith us to da land beyond da sea!'

At this, the Skinks looked mightily relieved, and his 'Berserkers' started to look worried that there might be nothing to fight about after all. Keanu put them right, as he backed slowly away from them down the trail.

'A ship full of evil men is Komink, friends of, er, da big dead Lizart Monsters,' the Barbarian improvised magnificently. 'Ya! S'right! Lizart friends komink to take you away! You stop them, ja? Stop them, my friend Fank! Lead Skinkz to victor, ja?'

At this, Jiriki and Keanu turned tail and fled along the jungle path, heading to the boat and hopefully a slim chance at escape. Behind them, they heard growing chanting and shouting as the Skinks prepared to fight for their island.

'You certainly got them going,' Jiriki gasped as they plunged down the muddy trail, vines whipping their faces as they ran.

'I'm makink da Divershun - they'll have to get everyvun ashore from da ship for da fight!' Keanu answered. 'Vor's da Hurri?'

'Diversion? Excellent plan!' Jiriki abruptly darted down a side trail. 'This way, Keanu. Tide's rising fast and we still have to get the boat out of the cave!'

A few minutes later and they burst onto the stony path which led to the cave. Hearts pounding, they had covered the distance to the mooring harbour in a scant five minutes. Ahead, Jiriki could see Johan dashing into the entry tunnel, and he knew it was a fair bet that Grimrag was there already. Despite his bulk and shape, the Dwarf could put on a ferocious burst of speed when need be. Particularly if time was of the essence, and the reward might be escape to freedom with a vast fortune in pure gold.

They plunged into the darkness of the cave, and headed for the heavily loaded boat. If Jiriki was right, and if they were very lucky, six months of not too arduous captivity were shortly about to end.



A VAST THAT BILGE, mister mate. Bring the mains'l forr'ard and mainbrace the spinnaker!' Looking through the fine bronze telescope with his one good eye, Hook Black Pugh could see the plume of smoke rising from the island. As he studied the idyllic looking landscape, he shouted his orders over his braid-

encrusted shoulder. As usual, old Yin-Tuan, first mate and veteran of a hundred such voyages, sighed resignedly and did nothing of the sort. Instead, the hulking first mate gave out a string of clipped, near-intelligible orders to the cut-throats who leaned eagerly over the port bulwark. As if already stung by the barbed whip hanging at Yin-Tuan's belt, the pirates brought the vessel around with a speed and efficiency which belied their ragged looks.

Pugh turned to his second officer, 'Teachy' Bligh, and sighed loudly. 'Aaargh, Bligh me lad, as fine an island fer a-plunderin as I ever did see!'

Bligh, hailing from Sartosa, was a nasty piece of work, all muscle and psychopathic intent. A grim smile split his normally emotionless face, and a familiar glitter came to his black eyes. 'Only island we've seen this past six month, sir. Lads need a bit of pillagin'. He half-pulled his cutlass from its Orcskin scabbard and looked around as if intending to pillage something right here, right now.

Pugh grabbed Bligh's hand and tutted. 'Now, now, Teachy boy, there baint none o'them Cathay slaves left to a-play with, you've bin and pillaged 'em all.' The pirate captain held his hook under Pugh's nose. The spike glittered menacingly in the sunlight. 'Yer don't want to go a-makin' me cross again, does yer?' Hook Black made a thrusting, twisting action with the hook. 'Or it might be spiky time fer you again!'

Bligh blanched visibly and clenched his legs tightly together. With a disconsolate grunt, he pushed his cutlass back into its scabbard. 'Okay boss, okay. I din't mean nowt. S'just...' Bligh's voice died away and a cunning animal gleam came into his black, dead eyes. 'The lads needs a good pillage, is all - they say it's bad luck as kept us away from land or plunder for the past six month, bad luck of that there Bretonnian gold we stole!'

Bligh stepped back, ready to make a run for it. After a moment's silence, however, his Captain began rocking to and fro, giggling to himself merrily. The braid on his salt-stained jacket swayed with his rocking, and the faded medals on his once-red sash jangled in the sunshine. Throwing his black bearded head backwards, the pirate captain gave out a huge bellow of laughter.

'Curse o'the Grunsonns, is it?' he guffawed.

'Yer, that's right!' Bligh affirmed, looking around the rest of the crew for moral support. None was to be had: they all seemed to be busy swabbing decks or preparing cannons. A good few of them had climbed the rigging of the mainmast and were studiously making long needed repairs to the tattered expanse of a hundred bits of ancient stitched canvas that passed for the sail on the *Dirty Dog*.

Pugh's laughter abruptly stopped, and he stomped his iron tipped peg leg hard on the wooden planking of his bridge. When next he spoke, it was with the deathly calm he usually reserved for the last words his victim was destined to hear. He pointed his hook down at Bligh, who grinned nervously and held up his hands in something approaching an attitude of apology.

'Lissen, Mister Bligh, and lissen good!' Hook Black Pugh pulled his shabby tricorne down over his forehead, and glowered the length of the ship. 'And that goes double fer you lot of scurvy blaggards. Even you, Mr Yin-Tin-Tong or whatever y' name is!' He swept the fearful crew with his steely eye. 'You might be better sailors than I'll ever be...'

The pirates all exchanged confused looks at this frank admission, most unlike their hated captain.

'But!' Pugh turned back to face his crew, and there was fire in his voice. "'Tis *my* ship! *My* letter of marque from our Tilean Lords—' at this, all the pirates, including Pugh, made elaborate mock bows to one another, '—and my leadership what's got us an 'old full o'gold to take 'ome.'

Pugh paused to let the truth sink in. 'And now, me hearties, we have discovered a new island for our gracious lords.' (More mock bowing.) Pugh shook his right hand at the island, fast hovering into full view, his filthy lace cuffs dropping crumbs of bread and other detritus onto the floor.

'So break out the rum, me lads, and make it a double, fer today we makes our fortunes from our proud and noble patrons!' This time the pirates' bows were most sincere. Pugh held a finger to his lips as the cheers began to swell. 'ain't finished yet.'

He turned and pointed once more at the island. 'We'll call it Pughland, and it'll be a most profitable watering 'ole and stop off point for the fleets of Tilea, Bretonnia, Estalia, maybe even the Empire toffs.' He closed his eyes and a blissful smile split his raggedly bearded chin. 'Oh yes, me lads, and a bounty we will collect from each and every one. So no more bloody yellow talk of bad luck! That Dwarf is dead and gone this six month back!'

The ship erupted into cheers and whoops as the avaricious gang envisioned the glories and riches to come. Bligh smiled menacingly and wondered how he could get rid of Pugh for good.

At that moment, the foppish voice of keen-eye Dando in the crow's nest rang out: 'War canoes, loads of 'em... and they're full o'bloomin' frogs!'

As one, the pirates rushed to the side of the ship and peered towards the island. Sure enough, a score or more slender canoes were heading straight for them. As Pugh focused on the lead vessel, he could make out a dozen or so fiercely betoothed lizards working hard at the paddles. Standing in the prow of the boat was a mean looking black-skinned lizard, wielding a large staff, about which a nimbus of light flickered ominously.

Hook Black Pugh snapped his telescope closed and turned to face his crew. He grinned maliciously. 'Tides a'risin' fast! Yin-Tin, turn her about. Grog-boy, open the gun ports. Teachy, get ready fer boardin'. Looks like we got us a fight!'

Like a well oiled machine, the pirates went straight to battle stations, the *Dirty Dog* heeling around so that her port guns faced the oncoming canoes. In short order, the barrels were run out of the gun ports, ten lethal iron-cast eyes staring grimly out at the frail craft of the Lizardmen.

Pugh raised his scimitar, sunlight glinting off the oiled blade. On the foredeck, Yin-Tuan frowned and gestured with a brawny arm.

'Cap'n—'

'Not now, Yin-Tin!'

'But the elevation—'

'FIRE!' Pugh's blade swept down, and the world erupted in a roaring cloud of smoke and fire, as ten cannon balls hurtled towards the hapless Lizardmen. Already

several canoes were turning about to head back towards the relative safety of the cove.

They need not have worried. As the wily Yin-Tuan had realised, the small canoes were already inside the arc of fire of the great cannons, and their deadly cargo crashed over the heads of the desperately paddling Skinks to turn the sea beyond into a welter of threshing foam.

'Fire lower, you idiots!' Pugh screamed, but the great cannons were already at their lowest elevation.

'Cap'n, no need to waste any more shot – the toads is runnin' away!' Yin-Tuan grinned toothlessly, his scrawny arm gesticulating excitedly over the side of the ship.

Pugh spun around, telescope raised to his eye. 'Aaargh, it be so!' The captain continued staring down the tube, scratching his beard with his hook. 'And they be putting a fair old distance between us and them 'n'all... are we a-drifin' with the tide, Mr Mate?'

With a timeworn sigh, Yin-Tuan gently prised his captain's fingers from the telescope and turned the brass tube around. Pugh visibly started, and his hat fell off, revealing a balding pate surrounded by a scraggy mop of stringy black hair.

'Aaargh! We can catch the scurvy frogs!' Pugh folded the telescope and secreted it in the voluminous folds of his jacket. Grabbing hold of a bell rope, he gestured with his hook over the port side of the galleon. As the action stations bell rang loud and clear over the still waters of the lagoon, Pugh squinted at the receding canoes. The manic glint which normally preceded grand slaughter was in the pirate's eye, and his thin lips were wet with spittle. 'Aaargh, me brave lads! Lower the boats, drop anchor, boarding all crew, women and children first, take no prisoners!' His cut-throat crew made for the boats, carrying marlin spikes, muskets and cutlasses.

Pugh shoved with a spur-booted foot to encourage any laggards to embark in the boats. 'Last one ashore is the lily-livered son of a toothless bar-crone from Marienburg!'

'So you'll be last aboard then, sir – shall I save you a seat?'

'Less of that, me lad or you'll feel the business end of me 'ook!'

'Err, are we *all* going?' Yin-Tuan frowned.

'Aaargh! That be so – not fair to deny some of me fine crew the pillagin' they deserve!' Pugh grinned, showing surprisingly white teeth.

'But *all* of-'

'Don't be so wet, Yin-Tong, it's not like the Bretonnian navy is about to show up, is it?' Pugh made a great show of scanning the horizon with his telescope. 'We ain't seen another sail for months!'

'But-'

'Get in that there boat NOW!'

Moments later and the long rowing boats splashed down into the warm, clear waters. Moments after that, some fifty cut-throats were rowing hard for the beach amidst much shouting and jeering. In the lead boat, Pugh could see that the lizard things had already disembarked, and the last few were disappearing into the jungle, leaving their canoes on the beach.

'Lily-livered sons of frogs!' he shouted 'We'll be eating thee afore sundown!' . Turning to face his crew, he grinned maliciously at Belly Fat Dave, the ship's cook, his tongue licking his lips in eager anticipation. 'I hope you've got that there Tilean Mustard you're so keen on, Mr Cook. I foretell a grand feast in a few hours' time!'

The fat and sweating cook was already sharpening several deadly-looking cleavers on a whetstone he always carried with him. 'Cap'n, theys going to taste bootiful!'

The pirates' boats surged towards the prey, like hunting dogs hot on the scent of a wounded beast. In Pugh's estimation, the isle was not so large, and once the lizards' canoes were burnt, the things would have nowhere to go, except into the pirates' waiting cooking pot.

'Faster, me lads, faster – I'll warrant there's gold an' jewels fer the pickin' too!' As one voice, Hook Black Pugh's scurvy crew cheered lustily and pulled harder on the oars. A few moments later, the prow of the lead boat ground against the soft sand of the beach, and a dozen hard-bitten pirates leapt eagerly ashore. They were confident that their great captain was going to deliver booty, treasure and grog in

abundance to the dark holds of the *Dirty Dog*. He always did.

One way or another.



‘A NNSSTEIN, SSSSTOP!’ A sibilant hissing filled the cave as the Marauders rushed into the welcoming darkness, Johan in front and just a little out of breath. He almost ran into a spear in the darkness, and they skidded to an abrupt halt, scant twenty paces from their boat.

‘Go easy!’ Grimcrag grunted, nearly tripping over his axe. ‘Is that our friendly reptile?’

‘Froggo?’ Johan asked, confused by the flinty point which dug sharply at his chest. ‘What’s all this about?’

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, Johan could make out perhaps a dozen shadowy figures, dappled reflections flickering on the wall in the dim light from the cave mouth. Lizardmen, hand-picked ‘Berserkers’ by the look of it – wielding spears and other dangerous-looking weapons. This felt an odd time for a goodbye committee, and the lizards’ general demeanour suggested agitation.

‘Maybe quarter of an hour left, Anstein. Look at the water level: the cave mouth will soon be impassable!’ Jiriki’s silky voice was edged with impatience, sounding like it was emerging despite clenched jaw and grated teeth. ‘I – will – not – miss – this – chance!’ The threat in the Elf’s voice was clear.

‘Well, Froggo?’ Johan demanded, trying to size up the situation. Glancing ahead, he could see that the rising tide had indeed already ensured that it would be a tight fit getting their outlandish boat out of the cave; in a few minutes the task would be impossible. He knew that they had very little time if they wanted their plan to work, otherwise they would be stuck on the island in the middle of a war between pirates and lizards, with no means of escape. The clock was ticking, and Johan knew that the last thing they could afford

now was an unexpected run in with their lizard ‘subjects’ over some misinformed breach of tribal etiquette. Johan could see that the other Marauders had already made their decisions, and were imperceptibly moving into full combat readiness. More hissing and angry spear-gesturing, however, stopped them in their tracks.

From the shadows, Froggo stepped forward, with what passed for a sinister grin on his reptilian features. ‘Anstein, you teach too well. I lissstten yessss, lissstten wellll...’ The creature bared sharp teeth and brought up its spear to point accusingly at the Marauders.

‘What’s it mean, Johan?’ Grimcrag demanded gruffly. ‘We haven’t time for this...’

‘SSSSHUTTUP!!’ one of the Berserkers barked at the Dwarf, whose stubby fingers were already twisting restlessly at the haft of his axe.

Froggo upended his spear and prodded Johan hard in the chest with the haft. ‘Not godsssss no!’ He prodded again for emphasis and Johan stepped back a pace. ‘Not freindssss no! Not LossRikk no!’

A faint ripple of ‘Losssrikklosssrikk’ echoed around the cave. Froggo nodded and continued.

‘Robberssss yes! Liarssss yes! Thieves yesssss!’ the lizard man hissed, pointing at the boat. ‘Gold! Richesssss in ressst of world!’

Johan rubbed his chest and sighed. ‘Look Froggo, you really don’t understand—’

‘Yessssss, do undersssstand!’ the creature interrupted, tongue flicking rapidly in and out. ‘Undersssstand too well!’ Froggo took a step forwards and gestured towards the Marauders. His fellows shuffled forwards after their leader, not looking too sure of themselves but taking comfort in their superior numbers. Spears and dart guns were levelled at the Marauders, and a dozen pairs of reptilian eyes stared with unblinking ferocity.

The tide rose implacably in the watery cave. The atmosphere of urgency was almost tangible in the cool damp air.

Johan instinctively knew that this could get very nasty, very fast. Even under the situation, he briefly marvelled to himself that a few months ago he wouldn’t have known anything instinctively at all, except

perhaps how to serve wine to a visiting burgomeister or Tilean ambassador. Danger is a marvellous teacher, and Johan had recently been undergoing some very practical remedial tuition at one of the most infamous cramming schools around.

'Now, Froggo,' he began, backing leisurely in the direction of what looked to be a fairly safe alcove in the cave wall, arms raised in supplication. 'Don't do anything rash...'

'Noo, Ansssstein, this isss the time of Firsst Lord Froggo!' The Lizard expanded its throat sac and croaked emphatically. If lizards are capable of a mad glint in their eyes, Johan rather fancied that he could see one right at this moment. 'King Froggo!' the Skink croaked, raising its spear above its head as the others nodded and bobbed enthusiastically.

'Eh?' Grimcrag muttered, axe half-raised.

'Vot?' scowled Keanu, his sword somehow mysteriously out of its scabbard.

Jiriki seemed to have vanished completely, to the surprise of the lizards. Maybe the cold of the cave was getting to them, but compared to the lithe movements of the Marauders, they seemed to be distinctly slow. Then again, Grunsonn's Marauders in action did seem to have the ability to make time run like treacle. Whatever, there were a dozen of the enemy, so Johan decided to take no chances and quietly slid behind the rocks in his alcove.

'Yesss! You go! Now! Leave disss boat! Go and fight piiiirattssss!'

Froggo seemed to be getting quite agitated, and Grimcrag seemed to be getting the drift of what the skink was suggesting.

'You what?' the Dwarf grunted, a dangerous edge creeping into his voice. Clearly Froggo wasn't listening too carefully.

'Leave now and live, meesssstta Grimcrag,' he hissed, and his retinue prodded angry spears towards the Dwarf's rock solid and disconcertingly squat frame. 'You go! We takessss da gold and sssship, and ssssil away yesss!'

The lizards hissed and burped appreciatively, clearly pleased at the prospect of sailing the high seas in their new found ship full of gold.

'*What?*' bellowed Grimcrag. 'Did I hear you right? Did you say "take the gold"?''

Blinded by his recently acquired confidence, Froggo nodded and licked his lips. 'Yesss!'

A moment's silence descended upon the cave, broken only by an urgent Elf voice whispering, 'Do them, do them now!'

The Skinks shuffled in the sand. Grimcrag looked like he might be about to explode. Johan peered at the scene through his fingers, almost daring not to look. Beyond the gaggle of Lizardmen, the cave mouth looked awfully small. Water was lapping over the top of the jetty, and Johan doubted whether the bow or stern of the boat would clear the entrance already.

'We're going to be too late,' he mumbled to himself, aghast, 'and it's all my fault!'

In the event, Froggo decided the matter. The lizard hissed at Grimcrag and pointed to the tunnel at the back of the cave. 'You are not sssso tough! Take your beard and go!'

'Right, that's enough of that! That's enough of that! That's fighting talk and I'm your Dwarf!'

The cave abruptly exploded into violent and bloody action, largely composed of a swinging axe, a lunging sword, a flurry of deadly arrows and a dozen screaming lizard men.

Johan closed his eyes tightly, and covered his ears too, just for good measure. This of course meant that he completely missed the arrival of another twenty or so hand-picked and heavily armed Lizardmen via the back tunnel to the cave.



'GO EASY, LADS, they'll be around here somewhere.' The pirates edged through the jungle, following the path from the beach. So far they had quickly despatched the few lizard creatures who they had caught. They hadn't had it all their own way, though, three of their number falling to poisoned darts, and one being dragged into the jungle by something big which roared and hissed as

it carried the screaming man away into the undergrowth. Four dead pirates for a half dozen dead lizards seemed poor trade to Pugh's boys, used as they were to attacking ships carrying nothing more hostile than a few easily-bribed guards and a hold full of shackled slaves.

They were getting nervous. They knew the island wasn't very big, yet they had been marching for what seemed like hours. And they had left their ship completely deserted in their bravado and eagerness to kill.

Pugh recognised the restlessness amongst his men, and knew that he had to think of something fast. He knew that his lads weren't above following his own past example of slitting the captain's throat and making a quick getaway, no doubt led by a new leader rapidly self-promoted from the ranks. Pugh licked his lips and fidgeted with his hook, beady eyes scouring the jungle for signs of life. The path was well trodden, that was sure enough, but whether it actually went anywhere...

'Cap'n, here!' Yin-Tuan's excited voice broke the oppressive silence. Pugh spat on the sand and smiled, wiping a grimy cuff across his sweaty brow. He hurried up to where the first mate and 'Teachy' Bligh stood at a bend in the path with swords drawn and wolfish grins. A small stream could be heard running over rocks somewhere close by, and a pile of skulls indicated some kind of warning. The pirates ignored it, staring ahead around the bend.

'Aaargh!' exclaimed Pugh, beaming roundly and slapping his first mate on the back. Yin-Tuan coughed and swallowed a chunk of chewing tobacco, grimacing at the vile taste. 'Aaargh! Didn't I say as how we would catch em?'

Yin-Tuan and Bligh nodded, raising cruel swords as their captain gestured for the rest of the pirates to catch up. Soon a gaggle of cruel-eyed thieves and cut-throats peered around the corner, grinning and chuckling at the sight of the lizard man village laid out undefended before them. The pyramid in the centre of the village did not attract a second glance as the pirates spread out to begin the looting.

'Lets burn it to the ground, boys!' shouted Pugh. 'That'll bring the newts a-runnin', I'll warrant!'

Within a few minutes the first huts were burning, black smoke rising straight into the still dead air, no wind to disperse or blow it away. A few minutes later, the pirates discovered the beer vat, to evil cheers of great delight.

Amidst the carnage, Pugh stood on the bottom step of the pyramid with Yin-Tuan and Bligh. 'Very good, me lads, this'll do nicely! Reckon they'll be back any minute now, eh?'

Bligh just grinned wickedly and held up a razor-sharp cutlass until its silver blade glinted in the sunlight, reflecting the warm blue of the sea behind them through a break in the jungle canopy. Something caught his eye, and he suddenly looked away, across the clearing. 'What the-' he began, well-honed murderous instincts immediately to the fore, but his fears were quashed as a multi-coloured bird broke cover with a raucous atonal squawk which belied its beautiful red plumage. It fluttered and flapped clumsily to another tree, where it perched nervously on a topmost branch, obviously readying itself for more prolonged flight.

'Losing yer nerve, Mr Bligh?' Pugh enquired, and all the pirates in earshot laughed appreciatively. Pugh secretly thought that perhaps Mr Bligh was getting a little too big for his stolen gentry boots, and it wouldn't hurt if they were one less officer when they rejoined the ship. He grinned condescendingly at his second officer, who scowled back at him. Hook Black Pugh was happy. Things looked to be turning out just right after all.



JOHAN DUCKED DOWN, both so that his head would not scrape against the roof, and also to avoid the slashing blade of the sword wielded by a lizard who was frothing at the mouth with uncontrolled rage. Keanu had taught the Skinks only too well 'Da Vay off da Berzerka'. The boat rocked alarmingly, and Johan grabbed at the bulwark to stop himself going overboard into the cold water.

The hissing groans of dead and dying lizards reverberated chillingly around the cave as the Marauders desperately tried to cast off. Blowdarts, spears and arrows hissed through the air all around them, and several struck the boat with dull thunks as they splintered the wood.

Grimcrag held the stern, his axe carving a glittering figure of eight in the damp air, an arc which no lizard man had so far stepped into and survived. Jiriki was at the dragon prow, shooting with deadly precision into the mass of reptiles which heaved around the small dock where the boat's stern was still tethered. Every so often, the elf turned and squinted at the diminishing arch of light which was the cave mouth.

'Cast off, for pity's sake, Keanu, cast off now!' Jiriki screamed, loosing another arrow into the throng. 'I have few arrows left, and we have no time at all!'

In the stern, ducking to avoid spears and darts, Keanu fumbled with the knot with which Grimcrag had secured the boat. 'Left unta Right und through... nyet, dammit! Right ova Left und bak... Nyet!'

Glancing down from his position at the stern, Grimcrag sighed as he saw the mess Keanu was making. 'For heavens sake, meathead, its a simple bendshank!' The Dwarf tried swinging his axe one-handed and leaning back to undo the rope, but his gnarled and stubby fingers could not quite reach. As the Dwarf looked away, momentarily distracted, the Skinks took their chances and swarmed towards the stern. Three were instantly decapitated, the glowing runes on Old Slaughterer hissing and flashing as the awful blade did its bloody work. The blade snagged on bone deep in the fourth Lizardman's body, and Grimcrag almost toppled over as his momentum was abruptly stopped. Blood boiled from the Lizardman's mouth as it collapsed on the killing blade.

'Bugger!'

'Kill them yessssss!' the lizards screamed as they swarmed up the side of the boat. There were so many of them now that they threatened to overturn the small craft, overloaded as it was with carefully boxed-up gold and jewels.

Grimcrag tried desperately to fend them off from his kneeling position in the bilges, as Keanu redoubled his efforts with the

knots. The fight was now too close in for arrow work, and Jiriki's blade was a cold streak in the dappled light.

'By all the gods *let's go!*'

'Unnh! These floorboards ain't well made, them's all splinters. Not so quick, frogface!'

'Left unda Right unda back unda dammit dammit DAMMIT!'

Without really thinking what he was doing, Johan plunged into the fray, sword stabbing to left and right. Needle teeth snapped at him, scant inches from his face, and he seemed to be surrounded by a wall of steel and claws and sharpened stone axe-heads. The sharp smell of lizard washed over him, a mix of rubber and fish-heads, and scaly arms reached out to drag him from the boat.

Not to be stopped, Johan stabbed and thrust, peering into the gloom until he saw what he sought – the rope at the point where it passed over the rim of the boat side. His sword raised over his head before descending in a flashing arc. A burly Lizardman blinked in comprehension and tried to stop the wicked blade, only to have his arm severed cleanly below the elbow. Black-blue blood fountained over Johan. The sword parted the rope and thwacked into the bulwark with such force that it was stuck fast. Even with a two-handed grip, Johan could not drag it free.

All around him, lizards hung onto the boat to prevent it drifting into the cave, and cold eyes stared at the ex-Imperial envoy. A forest of blades inclined towards him, and time slowed to a standstill. A face he recognised grinned evilly, twisted into a malevolent parody of the creature he had once counted as a friend. It wielded a spear in both hands, and as it thrust forward, Johan saw his death in the glittering black orbs of its eyes.

'Froggo, noooooo!'

'Anssssstein oh yesssssss!'

At the last moment, Johan felt himself thrown backwards by the scruff of the neck by what could only be described as heavily muscled fingers. A massive sword cleaved the air, barely slowing as it cleaved Froggo too. In the same gracefully deadly movement, and with barely a shift in his stance, Keanu reversed the blade and swept its razor edge along the side of the

boat. A great hissing wail resounded, and a moment later the boat began to drift into the middle of the cave. Sitting up in the bilges, Johan was almost sick as he saw the row of perhaps a dozen clawed lizard paws still clutching the side of the boat like the broken sutures of a macabre wound.

'Get rowing!' Jiriki yelled, and Johan grabbed vaguely at an oar. Grimcrag was already pulling with a vengeance, and the heavily laden boat surged gamely towards the rapidly diminishing entrance. Even Johan could see that the water in the cave was almost at the high tide mark, and he doubted whether there was already any room for the miniature Norse longboat to clear the cave.

A rasping, scraping grinding sound assured him that he was right, when the proud dragon prow caught on the craggy rock of the cave roof. The boat ground to a halt immediately, throwing Keanu hard onto a heavy crate and ripping the oar from Jiriki's hands.

The Elf lowered his head and closed his eyes. 'We've lost!' he whispered 'We're really stuck here now... and even we can't beat *all* the lizards on this forsaken island.'

Johan looked around wildly. Jiriki was right, there was no way that the boat was going any further. The cave roof sloped down towards the entrance, and their boat was firmly wedged in place by the ornate dragon headed prow. Glancing shoreward, he could see that the water was boiling as the Lizardmen hurled themselves into the water and began swimming towards their frail craft. Johan knew in his heart what the Skinks intended: they would turn the boat over and drown the Marauders by sheer weight of numbers and their superior aquatic fighting skills.

'It can't end like this!' Johan shouted, looking around for some way of escape. There was none. Despair clutched at his heart.

'Unngh!' grunted Keanu, clutching weakly at his sword, the wind knocked from his lungs by the impact with the heavy crate.

'Heads down, everyone!' Grimcrag shouted cheerfully, leaving barely a second for the Marauders to act on his sage advice, as once more Old Slaughterer was pulled back for a mighty swing. As he dove for the deck, Johan could see the sheer, grim,

bloody minded expression which belied the dwarfs easy words. As the blade swung back, Johan could have sworn that he caught the words, 'Shan't - have - me - gold!' expelled through gritted Dwarf teeth, and then the axe was hurtling towards its target. And Johan understood Grimcrag's intent the split second before the axe ripped through the proud dragon prow, sundering four feet of very solid and seasoned wood as though it was the pulpy flesh of an overripe fruit.

From his position on the crate, Keanu could only gulp appreciatively, heaving air into his lungs as he recovered his breath.

'That'll do nicely, eh?' Grimcrag gasped, gesturing over his shoulder with a callused thumb. 'Now we'd best get a move on, as we have company on the way!'

Johan and Jiriki needed no second bidding, and were already at their oars, pulling for all their might. Together, their efforts just matched those of Keanu, who heaved mightily on the opposite oar, corded muscles standing out on his neck and shoulders. Freed from the grip of the rocky roof, the boat leapt forwards almost eagerly, and Johan reckoned that with their lower profile, they might make it after all. Just. If they ducked.

'Pity; that figurehead was the best bit of the boat I reckon, good solid timber crafted by a skilled carpenter!' Grimcrag's voice drifted wistfully across the cave.

'Shut up and grab an oar!' came the chorus back.



A AARGH! YES, ME LADS!' Hook Black Pugh beamed, surveying the burning village 'This'll do very nicely indeed!' Well satisfied with the pillaging so far, Pugh grinned broadly, scratching at his stubbled chin with the business end of his hook.

A few yards away, invisibly merged with the jungle, several hundred Skinks looked on with murder in their cold eyes. Sharp daggers, spears, bows and poisoned darts awaited the signal, for they were

determined that none would escape. 'When red bird flysssss away...' a feather-bedecked lizard man with blue-black skin hissed ominously.

If Bligh had not been so distracted by the flight of the brightly coloured bird, he might have noticed movement in the reflection in his highly polished blade. But even if he had seen it, he would probably have thought he was seeing things. For who could believe a smallish, makeshift mongrel boat, piled up with crates and so low in the water that it looked near to sinking... or the tiny reflection of the Dwarf waving rudely at him from the tiller?

As it was, he saw nothing but an ugly red bird which caused his mates to laugh at him. And if there was one thing he hated, it was being made fun of. So he just stood at the base of the pyramid and fomented murderous plans for his captain. 'No one makes fun of Arbutnot Bligh,' he muttered, and death was in his eyes.

With an ungainly flapping of scarlet wings, the strange bird took flight.



YOU KNOW,' began Grimcrag, lounging on a hammock strung up on the poop deck of what was up until very recently an abandoned pirate ship, 'I don't think this could have worked out much better if I'd planned it.'

'You mean you didn't?' Jiriki chided in mock surprise, from his place in the shade of the mainmast.

Grimcrag ignored the Elf and continued ticking off their successes on the callused fingers of his left hand. 'We've got a ship, lizard gold, our Bretonnian gold back, had a holiday...' The Dwarf glanced around the poop deck. 'Have I forgotten anything?'

'Vot 'bout da Frogmeat stew?' Keanu shouted from the crow's nest. 'Dat vas gut!'

'I still can't believe you actually cooked him,' Johan muttered sulkily. 'Just 'cos he tried to force you to crew the ship with lizards.'

'You saw what he was going to do with that there spear, lad, let's not forget, eh?'

He wagged a finger remonstratively at the ex-Imperial envoy. 'Him or us lad, him or us. And you do like a bit of crackling as much as the next man!'

Johan brightened up a little at the mention of crackling, and looked over the stern of the vessel. The sun glittered on the wake of the ship, and seagulls danced in the air, no doubt hoping for any detritus from the Marauders' last meal. 'You won't find any crackling!' Johan shouted through cupped hands, but his voice was lost in the wind in the sails.

The *Dirty Dog* sailed serenely away from the island into the setting sun, and a new chapter in the legend that is Grunsonn's Marauders drew to a close.

Well, almost...



ON TOP OF the small pyramid, grouped around the noble statue, Hook Black Pugh and the remaining pirates nervously eyed the throng of angry lizard kind gathered menacingly below them. To the pirates' consternation, the leading lizards were wearing what looked like Norse helmets. At least one of them was frothing at the mouth and rolling its eyes in its scaly head. A disconcerting bellowing and hooting reached the ears of the beleaguered pirates, as arrows clattered about the pirates' booted feet.

'Getting dark.'

'They're... berserks, ain'ts they?'

'Carn't be - can they?'

'Remember, their arrers is poisoned.'

'Looks like that one's got some kind of magic.'

'We're doomed and no mistake.'

'Aaargh! I'm sorry, me lads, looks like me luck's run its course this time.'

'Hold on, what's this 'ere statue?' Pugh's deafening shout of pure frustration and despair echoed across the clearing.

'I don't believe it! It's that accursed Barbarian! I knew THEY had to be at the bottom of this somewhere! Aaaaargh!' ●

• FEEDBACK •

WE WANT YOU to enjoy reading *Inferno!* as much as we do writing and drawing it. Your opinions are very, very important to us. So if you have something to tell us, please send in this Feedback form. We read every single one of them as they come in, and we may well run a Letters Page every few issues to feature the best of them.

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• ROLL OF HONOUR •

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE OF INFERNO!

BILL

KAPLAN used to be a hard-working editor for DC and Image Comics in the US, but he's currently enjoying life as a beach bum in sunny Southern California. He still does the occasional bit of work as a gesture towards paying the bills, though he claims his sole motivation is his enjoyment of the Games Workshop universe and the desire to get all sorts of freebies in the mail. He's particularly fond of *Space Hulk* and personally owns even more little plastic Genestealers than show up on page 38 of this issue. And he's sure to get around to painting them any day now.

JEFF

REBNER From the wastelands of north-east Ohio, the rogue Jeff Rebner staggered his way across country to San Diego.

There his many challenges included the *Cybernary* series from Image, *The Incredible Hulk* from Marvel, *Werewolf the Apocalypse* from White Wolf, and battling Tyrants for the Emperor in this very issue of *Inferno!*. His continuing quest to conquer new realms more recently led him to Los Angeles, where he works in animation for Columbia-TriStar Children's Entertainment.

KARL

KOPINSKI, known to his pals as Karlos the Jackal, has lived in Nottingham all his life, except for a period of self-discovery travelling across Poland, where he became involved with a brutal street gang. He was later arrested after a dispute over two pigs and an illegal chicken turned nasty. The result

was a three-



year stretch on a Fine Art course in Sunderland. He was later transferred, on the grounds that his drawing skills were subversive and undesirable. So, pens and inks, BB gun and Fender Strat in hand, he returned to Nottingham, where he now spends all his days manically doodling in a maximum security, hermetically sealed loft.

CHRIS

PRAMAS is a freelance writer and publisher who recently emigrated across country from Boston to lovely Seattle. He has written for numerous role-playing games, including *Warhammer Role-Play*, *Feng Shui*, *Over the Edge* and *Underground*. Nearly two years ago he started Ronin Publishing, who produce the supernatural horror role-playing game *The Whispering Vault*. He began his tempestuous affair with Games Workshop products a decade ago with

Warhammer Role-Play and quickly found himself sucked in by *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* and later *Warhammer 40,000*. When not writing or gaming, he can be found scouring record stores for obscure punk records and trying to finish his Master's thesis. His long-term



addition to punk has led him to sing in two bands, roadie his way across Europe, and spend five years helping to run ABC No Rio, a non-profit punk club and arts center in New York City.

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What a great team! If you'd like to join 'em, get in touch. We're looking for short stories, comic art and single-page portraits. Just write to the new address on page 2 and ask for a copy of our *Writer's or Artist's Guidelines*.

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INFERNO!

Ghostmaker by Dan Abnett

'Gaunt entered the chapel, mashing broken glass underfoot. He could smell the stink. Dead cultists were strewn like rag dolls around the smouldering floor. In the centre of the chamber stood a rusty, metallic box, two metres square, its lid etched with sigils of Chaos. Gaunt reached out. The metal was warm. It pulsed.'

Paradise Lost by Andy Jones

'Keanu the Reaver stopped. Jiriki the Elf was gesturing at his boots. He peered down. He was standing on the chest of a large lizard creature, a black-skinned one bedecked in feathers and bone. The Lizardman's eyes bulged, but it managed to croak loudly. "Velkomsss God LosssErikkk. Long haff ve Vaited innit yessssss."

Rites of Passage by Gordon Rennie

'The Hunter moved easily through the crumbling ruins. It had been too long – scarce two hours – since its last kill. Sensor systems flared into life, invisibly scanning the area and locking on to a distant group of targets moving through the darkness. The prey was still far off, but coming closer. Five of them. Five lost children, all alone down here in the dark.'

Into the Maelstrom by Chris Pramas

'The Astral Claw knelt on the floor and pulled out the Imperial Tarot. The Warp embraced him as it always did. Further and further he reached, beyond the gibbering hordes of demonic creatures which implored him for his soul. Then, at the last, the jolt of contact. Across the warp, their minds came together and in an instant it was done. "Razzia," he intoned, "the attack falls on Razzia."

Also featuring...

'A Good Day to Die', a storming Space Hulk comic strip from Bill Kaplan and Jeff Rebner; the actual, genuine 'True Story of Eric the Lost' from Ralph Horsley; more demon-blasting 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh; and mind-blowing illustrations from Logan Lubera, Karl Kopinski, Kev Walker, Wayne England and more.

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