

INFERNO!

TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

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Issue 6

INFERNO!

CURSES! I was planning on wishing us all a hearty happy birthday with this, our sixth issue of *Inferno!*, but Marco, our chief slave here at the Black Library, informed me that my sums were wrong. In fact, issue *seven* will be the one that celebrates our first birthday. Which leaves me in a bit of a quandary for a neat spin on this month's editorial (cue sound of head-scratching and thumb-twiddling).

OK, so what's new about this issue of *Inferno!* then? Well, to start with, we have our very first illustrated Warhammer manuscript, from the mighty Ralph Horsley, which is possibly the most in-depth and detailed look at a specific Warhammer hero and his exploits on a particular campaign that we have ever seen. Interested in the typical siege defences of a Kislev city? Want to see how the savage horse tribes keep their ponies' hooves quiet (and warm) on the frozen steppe? Ever wondered what Tzar Vassily looks like immortalised in sculpture? Just turn to page 15 and read on – oh, and there's quite a lot of fighting too!



As he was such a success in issue 4, we've invited Commissar Gaunt back for a second visit. This time he's up against the narrow-minded – some might say downright two-faced and treacherous, but that would be giving the plot away... – officers of High Command, as Gaunt struggles to get the Ghosts through another tortuous battle zone with the minimum of casualties. As a matter of interest, any letters on the subject of characters who you would like to see again in future issues would be very welcome. And in fact we like getting lots of post of any description, it makes us feel all warm and appreciated, so do feel free to write to us.

Ahem, anyway, we also have a cracking story from Tully R. Summers, which appeared out of the blue all the way from the USA – no writer's guides, no formal commission, just an ace story from a brand new author. We expect great things from Tully, prolific writer that he seems to be, and in fact he already has another story scheduled for a future issue.

Other highlights of the issue include a cool pin-up of Sergeant Fortius (who you might remember as the hero from the comic strip *A Good Day to Die* in issue 4), a seizure-inducing five pages of *Obvious Tactics*, plus the closest look at a Tyrannid Warrior anyone is likely to get this side of being absorbed into the hive consciousness – as one would expect, Kev Walker has delivered another absolutely splendid cover.

Which just about wraps it up for this issue. Talking of wrapping things up, our birthday wish list here at the Black Library includes a Jaz drive for Marco, some new rollerblades for Ian, a trip to somewhere sunny for Judy and a new headgasket for Steve (well, for his car anyway). And me? I just want to hear from even more talented writers and artists. Failing that, I'm always happy to hear from lottery winners with some spare cash to hand out. Any takers?

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4 A World Above

It was meant to be an ambush like any other. But for Knife-Edge Liz and her gang of Eschers this one went so very, very wrong... By *Alex Hammond*; illustration by *Wayne England*.

15 The History of Bernhardt the Brave

When Chaos swept across the Empire, new heroes were needed to thwart its evil plans. One such was Bernhardt the Brave; this is his incredible story. Words and pictures by *Ralph Horsley*.

23 Gaunt's Ghosts: A Bleeding

Chaos-infested Voltis City had withstood the Imperial bombardment for more than a month. Now it was time for a very different approach. By *Dan Abnett*; illustration by *Logan Lubera & Craig Yeung*.

35 Obvious Tactics

The foul Death Guard holds an incredible secret – and a much-needed explanation. By *David Pugh*.

40 Mormacar's Lament

Hag Graef, the sinister Dark Elf city, is infamous, and no one has ever escaped from its dungeons... but that won't stop Mormacar from trying. By *Chris Pramas*; illustration by *Wayne England*.

57 Chranos Darksoul, Daemon of Chaos

Illustration by *Jeff Wayne*.

58 Sergeant Fortius

Portrait of an Ultramarine hero, by *Jeff Rebner*.

60 A Day of Thirst

Come in, ganger. Pull up a stool. Sure, help yourself to a glass of WildSnake. Now, have I got a story for you... By *Tully R. Summers*.

65 Dear Inferno!...

More missives from rabid readers.

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A World Above

by Alex Hammond

THE FLOOR RACED before him, yellow guide lights casting harsh shadows across the face of his driver. Thin hum of an electric engine, rubber wheels dashing across the steel, the rush of the air; the connecting corridors were lonely, humanless places. Fingering his las pistol, to a passer-by Aldus Harkon would have seemed to be simply scratching an irritating itch under his coat. Aldus watched the driver closely; an unimpressive-looking man, but his enemies knew Harkon was cautious of hit men and his escort ready for anything.

'Shuttle Bay 5b, sir.' The driver spoke with a mid-hive lilt.

'Come up in the world?' Aldus returned his hand to the cane lying upon his lap.

'Yes, sir. Used to work on the factory floor. Brother went down-hive, I was recruited up. Saved the foremen from a Delaque assassination attempt.'

'Made your masters proud, no doubt.'

The man saluted. 'Ran Lo shuttle number five should be docking shortly.'

The transport's wheels skidded briefly, only to be muffled by the sound of the rush of depressurising air as the cart entered the landing bay. Almost immediately a throat-searing rush of fumes hit Aldus full in the face. He inhaled deeply, painful though it may be – the shuttle bay would be witness to the biggest deal of his life.

The transport cart scuttled away, small wheels competing to keep up with one another. Aldus dusted down his coat and stood, cane in hand, poised near the edge of the eight mile-high precipice. About him men struggled with fuel pipes, prepared magnetic clamps and clung to the sides of the shuttle bay as though at any second the whole thing would lurch forward and toss them out into the night sky, down through the noxious clouds to land a bloodied pulp in the ash wastes so far below.

Aldus loved Hive Primus. If you were strong-willed there were places for you. Places to find greatness, places to make a life for yourself in a giant city almost bursting with the pressure of millions of souls. If you were cast of iron like the city,

you could go far. Aldus stepped closer to the edge of the shuttle bay's entrance. Winds battered him, slapping him hard in the face, stinging his old, cunning eyes. Peering out into the night air, he breathed deeply. A freshness unknown to his sickening body filled his lungs. The stars in the sky, every one a new solar system, were each a place for those of iron to reach greatness.

Aldus hacked hard into the front of his mouth. Sliding the phlegm about his mouth he manipulated it with his tongue until it met his approval. Large and heavy. He leaned forward. A bay attendant behind him shrieked. Aldus delicately raised his hand and cast the phlegm from his mouth. The dark yellow globule dropped into the rushing winds and was swept around and backwards into the gusts. Now part of him would travel into the wastes, carried, perhaps, for ten miles or a hundred before it dropped upon the dead earth below. Aldus smiled within.

'Sir!' An attendant, arms replaced by machine loading mitts, screamed into Aldus's ear. 'The hunting party... their shuttle!'

Aldus nodded and began the long walk to the end of the runway.

From beyond, from the dark sky, a bright green light burst into view.

'They're going too fast!' A tech-priest looked up at the flickering, ghost-washed display panels before him, sweat running down his green-lit face, tracing the contours of the electronic sight that replaced his eye.

Aldus remained stationary as the bay was suddenly plunged into bright red light, warning beacons alerting fire safety crews to prepare for action.

The jagged shape of the shuttle grew larger. Aldus could make out the Ran Lo signature on its cockpit, the arcane R and L set in their white circle contrasting sharply with the arched windows above.

'Sir, get behind the fire wall!'

Aldus remained still, with the exception of his calm hands fondling the silver cast at the top of the cane.

As the shuttle continued its wayward plummet towards them, attendants began

throwing themselves to the floor, the strobing lights staggering all movement. The tearing of metal screeched about the runway, the shuttle throwing sparks into the smoke-choked air as its wings clipped the sides of the bay. Bulbous wheels screamed like agonised creatures as they struggled to slow the oncoming craft. Small fires leapt up on the floor as the white-hot sparks ignited patches of fuel.

The shuttle sped towards where Aldus stood, noxious fumes pouring from its vents. The shuttle veered off its path for a moment, almost colliding with the wall, only to spin back on line with Aldus.

With an unutterably deafening screech, the wheels finally succumbed to the brakes and the shuttle screamed to a halt, its steel nose cone so close to Aldus' misshapen body he could have reached out and patted its flaking metal prow. The beaming face of a young man smiled down at the stationary figure through the arched cockpit windows. He waved and Aldus shook a hand in recognition.

Attendants rushed about the shuttle bay, pouring foam directly from their augmented limbs onto the spot fires. Meanwhile priests moved in to consecrate the machine's safe landing with oils and unguents. Amidst the flurry of movement, a staircase was lowered from the shuttle's side, its gradual release incongruous with the speed of the men. Four body-suited figures, two boys and two girls, leapt from the access port. Only a robed man, leaving the shuttle last, used the stairs. This, Aldus Harkan knew instantly, was Terrak Ran Lo.

The sage old man walked gracefully towards Aldus, grey hair and groomed goatee painted red in parts. About him the youngsters leapt and shouted, slapping one another on the backs. Their combative prowess was immediately noticeable as they aimed mock kicks and lashed out at one another, pulling short with bladed weapons mere muscle spasms from one another's faces.

'I must apologise-' Terrak Ran Lo began.

'Scared as a cess rat!' The young pilot from the ship grinned at Aldus like a big

dog, nodding his shorn head, revealing it to be tattooed with the kill marks of a seasoned hunter.

'Aadon, you oaf, you almost ripped the ship to pieces!' A woman in a tight-fitting body suit, dark, lacquered braid curled tight in the customary manner of all of the women warriors of Ran Lo, spat out the words at her companion.

'Does it matter. What about the thrill?' Aadon snapped back.

'Aadon, you're a genius, did you see them run for the barricade?' laughed the other boy. He was huge, a full head taller than those about him. 'Call me Takarr. Thanks for making this hunt possible, Mr. Harkon.'

'Don't mention it,' Aldus replied. 'You should thank Lord Terrak for having the sense to come to me.'

'You can guarantee that everything will be in place by the time they get down there?' Terrak Ran Lo asked, his voice calm and commanding.

'Yes. As long as they keep to the schedule they'll be having the hunt of their lives.'

'You'd better hope so, Mr Harkon,' the dark-haired woman said snootily as she stepped forward. 'You're being paid a small fortune to make sure this is good.'

'I've had ten years' experience dealing with Underhivers. Four miles below us I have over thirty seasoned contacts; at six I have another forty. I'd like to think that my dealings with these scum has provided me with enough insight to know when something is worth it.'

'Excellent,' the young woman purred and spun on her heels. 'The mice will be in trouble tonight.'



HIGH ABOVE *the Underbive, the air is cold. High above the Underbive you cannot breathe for the lack of atmosphere. Ten miles above the savage wasteland of Hive Bottom is where the*

city's peak lies. This where the souls of the dead will travel. This is where they gather. This is where they are blown across the four winds. Scattered like shards of glass. Scattered souls bear no memories. Blood...

Blood ran down Knife Edge Liz's face. She could feel it sliding down her chin, charting a course past old scars, through the valleys of new wounds. Liz reached her hand up to her face. She might as well have been attempting to lift a steel girder. She let the limb fall to the ground again. Slow waves of red washed over her eyes again.

High above the bive the air is cold. Liz no longer felt her legs. High above the bive you cannot breathe for lack of atmosphere. Liz drew a heavy breath into her lungs. It fell short and sunk only as deep as her throat. She dragged her hand across the ground, feeling for something, anything that could help.

Her hand came across something soft and moist. Feeling up it – a small ring piercing stone cold skin, tattered cloth, the small face of a girl, eyes open. Big round eyes like a cat.

Kat.

Kat was dead.

Liz snatched her hand away. Blood rushed to her head. Liz rose to her feet pushing hard so that she fell away from the corpse. She staggered forward and fell upon a cushion of flesh. Arms slick with someone else's blood. Underneath her she could feel the cold grip of death. Someone was beneath her. Dead. Liz rubbed at her eyes, grit tearing at her pupils. For each layer of blood she wiped off, another would arrive – hers or the corpse's, she could not tell.

'Hive daemons take me!' Liz groaned, rolling off the corpse in panic.

Liz's limbs struck at the ground, each fist striking in search of a dry place, a steel place. Somewhere where there was no blood. A fist ricocheted off a steel case. Pain shot up Liz's arm, sending spasms about her shoulder and shooting tendrils of needle-sharp pangs about her. The steel case. Liz ran her fingers over its mesh texture, searching for a sign. She

flipped the case over and felt again. Small cross-hatches, like the mesh of the walkways she knew were above her. The criss-cross ended abruptly; a smooth disk lay in the centre of the case, medical cross engraved into its surface.

Liz flipped the medi-kit open and rummaged inside it with trembling fingers. She swallowed pills, wrapped bandages about her wounds. Took out a hypodermic, shook it and was rewarded by the slosh of the liquid within. She had to stab four times before she found a vein. Arm rushing with warmth, Liz fell back and continued falling.

In the darkness there was beat. In the darkness the sound of the hive drifted away. Liz rolled around. The painkillers, like the hands of a lover, held her tight and ran their fingers about her body. They sank deep into her skin. Deep into her soul. They traced patterns across her back. Spelt words she could not understand. Rubbed thoughts into her tired brain.

Kat was dead. She'd come from the streets. Wanted to join a gang. Looked for a way to find a meaning. A meaning for the Underhive. Couldn't have been more than sixteen. Dead so young. Half a life is more than none. Half a lie.

Liz rocketed into consciousness. A lie. Somewhere there was a lie.

Liz snapped her eyes open and looked about her. Smoke still rose from potholes in the ground. Electric conduits still buzzed and swung from the platforms above her. Beside her lay the medi-kit, plundered of all its contents. A few bright red stims lay scattered about on the ground. Liz carefully picked these up and secreted them down the side of her boot.

Something bit sharply into her ankle. She struggled with the boot and removed a hard, white card. Guilder credits. The lie was unravelling itself. Liz regarded herself in the sheen of an effluent pool. Her leggings were torn. Deep gashes carved their way through her flesh. Her hair, once dyed blue, was a deep brown, nearer her natural colour.

Liz had fallen close to Bekka, Bekka the Harvester. Liz stared over at her corpse.

Deep pock marks had cracked open that seemingly impenetrable body of hers. Hundreds of hours of weight-built work, cast aside like a child's rag doll. For so many Bekka was the paragon of Underhive womanhood: in control, strong, with a mind as strong as steel.

Beside Bekka lay her weapon, its kill markings still as bright as they were the day they were scored. The day they captured that heavy bolt gun from their rivals, the Sump Pirates, had been one of their greatest. An offworld weapon, and ammunition too; an incredible prize! It was a victory that had led them through every bar in Deep Town. They'd got drunk on Second Best and collapsed on the barroom floor.

From the signs a story unfolded: the blood-sprayed walls, laceration wounds to her dead comrades. They had come to ambush someone. It should have been simple. A mistake? They took it too easy? Something had gone wrong. Desperate faces, terrified eyes – the dead faces betrayed much. Bekka. Her augmented eyes and powerful weapon would have given her the drop on any assailant. By the ruby scores, sunken into her flesh, perhaps she had been the first to go. A trail of light imprints in the earth belied some rapidly moving assailant. Liz slowly rose and staggered forwards, hand clutching delicately at her leg. With each step the wound tore open a little.

The imprints led to the body of a stranger, wired into a still-pulsing fighting suit. Bloodied mat of hair, disorged eye sockets. The mechanical enhancements that had once filled these places lay torn on the ground. The stranger was young, Kat's age perhaps. Bladed gauntlets still moist with blood hung by his side. Liz regarded her leg.



LIZ! A SCREAM from behind her. She spun around, las gun at the ready. Kat was holed up behind a rock, heavy shells like blast caps erupting the rock from about her. Kat kept her head down. Liz scanned the smoke-filled tunnels for her assailant. Somewhere above, at the narrowing of the walls. Text-book bottleneck. They were surrounded.

'Liz, hel-' Kat gargled into silence.

Liz spun to catch sight of her comrade. A dark figure stood over where Kat had been hiding. Unashamed, he held part of an Escher girl above his head like a trophy.

'Sonofa-!' Liz threw herself towards the figure that was now dancing about Kat's shredded remains.

Cracking explosions splintered girders, concrete flinging dust into the air. Liz threw herself through this haze and fell upon the figure, unleashing a fiery beam of death from her lasgun. Hot shells crashed about her, some searing her skin as they bounced about the ground. The figure leapt, lightning fast, and threw itself towards Liz, sharp blades like cleavers dripping wet.

Liz spun about, anticipating her assailant's speed, and clipped him. Right arm a mangled pulp, the figure swept hard with its left. Blades sliced across Liz's leg. A sharp pain and sudden dizziness rushed over her. She rolled through the filth, the dirt clogging the wound, blood rush stemmed to a trickle. Liz unsheathed her chain sword and flicked its spinning teeth into action. The figure darted to one side and tumbled across the ground, its suit pumping stimulants into its dying body.

Chainsword buzzing, Liz lightly swept it in front of the oncoming figure's head. Her timing was on line. Like spearing a sump eel Liz timed the blow to anticipate the movements of her attacker. The chainsword caught on the augmentation about the figure's head. Its weapon suit sputtered into a death rattle as armour plates and implants were ripped from its body. Both Escher and attacker crashed to the ground. Liz readied her lasgun and took aim on the hidden sniper's position.

Using a bent girder to brace her arm she peered into the darkness.

'Help me.' A voice nearby.



HELP ME.' A voice nearby. Liz woke. She had fallen by her bladed attacker's body. Her arm lay draped across his carcass. The battlefield was silent, her head and leg bandaged. Liz reached into her boot and pulled out some more stims, swallowed them. The tiny red capsules almost came up again. Internal bleeding somewhere. Forcing the medicine up again. Liz rubbed her throat, making sure they were digested.

'Olaana?' The voice was weaker now.

Liz staggered to her feet and moved towards the noise. Crumpled at the base of a shell-pocked concrete wall was another suited figure. A woman, young... Kat's age. Dark hair tied in braids hung from her head; a las wound to her chest wept tarred blood.

'The mice, Olaana. The mice fought back.' The woman groaned.

Liz watched silently. The woman flapped uselessly at a respirator hanging limp at her side. Liz followed the stretch of conduit cords as they wrapped their way about the woman's suit back to their starting point at the base of her skull. Her face mask was torn and conduit fluid from the cords ran past her brow, across her open eyes. They did not blink but stared white-pupilled into the air.

'Damn suit's got me so high on stimulants that I'm having trouble dying. Olaana?' The woman looked straight at Liz but her eyes made no sign of recognition.

'Yeah?' Liz mumbled, leaning back against a giant girder.

'I- I can't see.' The woman's voice broke into a faint sob.

'I know.'

'Thank the Emperor it's you. Thought you were one of those Underhive freaks.'

Liz paused, mind racing. 'No. They're all dead.'

'We won?' the woman sat forward a little, the effort causing her to gasp.

'Yes.'

'You going to get a head? Take it back?' the woman said, smiling despite her discomfort.

'Why would I want to do that?' Liz crouched before the woman and silently levelled her lasgun at her.

'You've done it after every other hunt.'

Liz blinked. The woman remained still. Liz regarded the nose of her lasgun. Greasy effluent from a walkway above dripped down onto its power cell. The thin hiss of the boiling water was the only noise in the rubble shelter. Tainted rain began to fall. It drowned out the sound of the hissing lasgun. Somewhere in the city above them, the factories were resuming a new shift, emptying spent coolants into the levels below.

'Remember the time we came down and fought those scum at the ash falls? We herded them into that field of razor grass. They were so desperate they ran though it. Remember? Like a pack of mindless sump rats. Only one came out the other end. Lost so much blood he couldn't even pull his trigger. Easiest hunt... we ever had.' The woman's voice was getting weaker.

'This one was bad,' Liz whispered.

'The worst. Wish I'd never come. It was meant to be easier... fun. The plasma's still burning. Olaana. I can feel it through the pain repressors... Olaana? They won't wait at the ash falls for long. You should go... or you'll never get back.'

Liz rocked on her feet. Dizzy.

'Olaana?' The woman reached out towards Liz. 'Hold my hand?'

Liz remained still for a moment. She looked over her shoulder at her dead friends. Her gang. Her responsibility.

'Olaana?'

Liz reached out her hand and took hold of the woman's. It was soft, scarless. Liz stared at it in silence.

'Why was it so hard? They have nothing. No training, faulty weapons. They're animals. Barbarian scum with no right to

kill us. We've got noble blood. We own this damn hive. They should be thankful we come down here and put them out of their misery... Harkon promised us an easy hunt.'

Liz released the woman's hand.

'Olaana? I don't want to die.' The woman broke down into tears.

Liz stood up and cast her eyes back over the battlefield. *Harkon*. Liz remembered that name.



WHO'S ALDUS Harkon? He's our contact from uphive, Bekka.' Liz's voice echoed through the tunnel as they strode towards the site of their planned ambush.

'And it's a House Orlock shipment?' Bekka asked, strapping tape about her thick, tattooed arms. Liz had always admired her strength in the face of the rat scars she suffered as a child.

'That's right. He's paid us in weapons, up front, to take care of the shipment so that he can offer to finance the deal instead. Least, that's what he told me.'

'Sounds complicated.'

'Uphivers tend to be.' Liz wrinkled her nose like she'd smelt a bad stink. 'Kill their mothers if it paid well. They're worse than mutants.'

'We're here.' She turned around to face her gang. 'Take up your positions. We're in a bottleneck, so they won't be able to run.' Liz's colleagues moved swiftly but silently down ladders and ramps into the dried-up canal.

Sometime later, the air still. 'Liz?' Bekka whispered, looked her square in the eyes. 'You trust this Harkon?'

'I-' An explosion silenced Liz. Rubble flew high into the air. Conduits burst and threw gas into the tunnels.

'Ambush!' Kat yelled from down in the bottleneck.

'The Orlocks know?' Bekka screamed.

'No – uphivers! Look!' Liz pointed to a girder high above them. A figure clad in a dark, bladed suit. 'Sniper! Get down!' Liz yelled to Bekka.

Liz's muscled second ignored her. Bekka braced herself against a concrete block and let rip with the heavy bolter. Hot shells spewed from the ejection chamber igniting small chemical puddles about Bekka's legs. The uphiver dashed along a thin girder at full speed. Shells rang after it but failed to make a hit.

'Get down, Bekka!' Liz shrieked over the noise.

Below her Liz could hear the screams of her gangers. 'Harkon, you bastard,' she growled and leapt forward into the bottleneck. She took up cover behind a jutting girder and looked up to the lip of the rise above her.

'Bekka, you coming?' she called over the noise of the heavy bolter. 'Bekka?' The noise stopped. An ammunition belt rolled down the embankment. 'Bekka!'

'Help! Liz!' Kat screamed from across the battlefield.

'Our heavy's down!' Liz howled, trying to be heard above the ricochets. 'Retreat.' Liz looked over to Kat. She was pinned behind a bolder. Liz looked up to the embankment, grabbed hold of the chain of ammunition and used it to pull herself up.

'Bekka?' Liz lay flat in the dust, parallel with a fallen girder. 'Bekka?' she hissed.

A pack of ammunition lay by the discarded heavy bolter. An explosion ripped open the ground about her. Liz peered through the haze smoke. A large figure was lumbering towards the sniper's position.

'Bekka!'

Liz followed as Bekka began her ascent towards the sniper. Liz pressed her back up against a bulkhead and dragged the heavy weapon towards her. Feeding the ammunition over her thigh, she braced a foot against a boulder. Gripping the bolter between her arms, Liz pulled its trigger. Massive shudders shook through her arms and shoulders. Liz dragged the gun around to the sniper's position. She let its bullets ring about the tower.

'I hope this gives you some cover,' Liz puffed as she struggled to stop the weapon spinning loose. Within a few seconds discarded shell cases had piled in a steaming heap about her.

Liz paused and drew breath, watching stunned as the battle continued. Smoke plumes burst from the battlefield, and more of her companions dropped. Thin bursts traced their life fluid through the air. Chips of rubble rose and fell with each new barrage. They were being taken apart.

Liz's ears stopped ringing, thin trickles of blood gathering in her ears the only reminder of the weapon's ferocity. She looked skyward in an attempt to mark Bekka's position. The girders and walkways rose like an industrial cliff face. Bekka was nowhere. Bursts of light, las fire, flared in a dark recess above her. Liz craned her neck to see further into the darkness. With unearthly poise never granted in life, Bekka burst out of the darkness through a curtain of hanging chains and spun for a brief moment, like a classical dancer, on the precipice. And fell. Bekka's body curled into a ball, childlike, before crashing into the battlefield below Liz.

'Bastards!' Liz screamed as she saw for the first time the face of the sniper: a thin man, wired skull cap linking him to a body suit of angular metal pieces and bladed edges. Liz grabbed hold of a new belt of ammunition and began ramming it into the gun.

The man leapt after Bekka's body. As he fell he unfurled thin metal meshes, joined from his wrists to his arms. Rather than drop like a stone as she expected, he glided rapidly towards Liz, unleashing bolts of burning light in her direction as she struggled to aim the heavy weapon at his slender form.

Links of ammunition fed into the heavy bolter and finally it kicked into life. The winged sniper dropped faster towards her, darting between walkways and platforms. Liz reeled and pulled the trigger, letting the weapon throw her backwards as she attempted to follow the sniper's movements.

White-hot casings rained about her, leaving scald marks on her arms as she tried to keep pace with the sniper. The shells rang about the layers of steel above her, bursting through platforms, cables and piping. The sniper landed gracefully on a platform above Liz and lowered his las rifle in her direction like a viper spying a mouse for the first time.

Liz pushed hard against the girder and threw herself onto her back. The heavy bolter crashed down on top of her. Inside her chest something snapped. A burst of blue-green light impacted where Liz had lain. Aching all over and bleeding on the inside, Liz aimed for the structural supports of a walkway above the sniper. Her weapon thundered into action again, releasing burning hot metal at the supports. A second later and the walkway came crashing down. The sniper looked up for a brief moment. Liz no longer saw him, she didn't have the time. Flipping the heavy bolter onto its end, Liz huddled about its base and prayed. The walkway smashed through the platform on which the sniper was standing and continued downwards towards Liz. The girders and grated walkways crashed about her, knocking hard into the heavy bolter and smashing into her body.

Liz opened her eyes. The bolter remained upright. The sheets of iron, mesh barriers and steel girders had fallen about her, the heavy weapon keeping the heaviest pieces from crushing her. The bloodied ganger pulled on the trigger and let the weapon carve a way out of the rubble.

The battle was going badly in the gorge below. Most of Liz's gang had fallen back into a large crater. Liz scanned the horizon for signs of the gang's assailants as she climbed down the embankment. Crista, one of the gang's veterans, sat spread-legged and slumped upon the ground. Liz reached forward to feel for her pulse. Crista looked up bloody-browed at Liz and shook her head.

'I'll get you outta here,' Liz whispered

Crista shook her head again and her eyes widened. Liz started; reflected in them was a large figure. A trap. Liz snatched Crista's autogun from the

ground and threw herself to one side. In that instant, an explosion burst into Crista's body and the concrete about her. Liz was showered with sharp flints and washed in crimson. Liz rolled over, struggling to remove a steel shard from her side. The figure lumbered forward. A man in a massive suit of meshed-plate armour. Oversized arms and shoulders provided protection to all but his head. Fibre cables were attached to the base of his neck. Massive gloved fists clicked and snapped as he walked forward, like a pianist preparing to play. Liz ripped out the shard and pulled the trigger of the autogun. It was light compared to the heavy bolter before it and she over-compensated for recoil. Her shots ran wide and the armoured man rushed her. Liz pulled the spray back and let several bursts impact into his chest.

'Die!' Liz screamed.

The man lumbered on, uninjured.

Liz swung the autogun at his head. Its shoulder stock caught him across the temple, gashing a wound open above his eyes. The man slapped the gun out of Liz's hands and lunged at the ganger before she could fling herself aside. He wrapped his arms about her and lifted her off the ground. He breathed hard into her face. His breath was young, untarnished by years of filtered air. His steel blue eyes were all she could see beneath his combat mask; they blinked at her.

The man's arms flexed, and Liz's spine was racked with pain. She slapped at the pouches on her legs, trying to get a hold. The armoured man bounced her hard to strengthen his position. Liz's hand slapped at her leg again. She had it. Her back spasmed. Her head rushed with blood and the battlefield spun.

Liz looked down into the face of the man, the blood from above his head running into the seamless cracks of his impenetrable armour. His eyes narrowed in strain. She smiled. His eyes widened in surprise. Liz brought her hand into view and opened it to reveal the grenade she held.

With her head spinning Liz punched her hand deep into the fibre cables about the

man's head. She felt her hand slip down past his sweating shoulders. Liz pushed hard with her legs, trying to throw herself to the ground. The man struggled to pull her in two. An explosion burst inside the suit. Liz was flung back against a bulkhead. The suit remained untouched, but the man inside it could no longer be seen.

Liz pushed forwards against the bulkhead, a jarring pain running up the length of her arm. The battlefield was silent. She shook her head; perhaps the explosion had unsettled her. Feet throwing up spent shells, she staggered forwards towards the crater where she had last seen her comrades. Liz lifted her head and in that instant her cover burst apart, dust and smoke replacing her protection.

The Escher lurched forward, running blindly through the smoke towards the position she'd last seen her gang. The ground burst open beneath her feet – her assailant was persistent. Her foot collided with a fallen girder. Half-falling, she crested the crater's lip. Liz tumbled over, fortune rather than precision timing throwing her out of the way of an explosion.

A twisted wrist and broken rib later, Liz reached the base of the crater. Her stomach, already giddy with fluid deprivation, ran molten hot at the sight of carnage before her eyes. Her gang, some of them with their swords only half drawn, lay dead. Lacerations and deep red bruising the signature of their killer. The script was fluid, deep lines intersecting others with deadly precision.

'Liz!' A scream from behind her. Kat lay prone, barely concealed behind a rock. She was now the focus of the barrage of weapons fire. Similar blast pattern, same angle of fire. There was one more assailant. No, there were two: rising up from behind Kat, unfurling like a giant insect, was yet another attacker. Spines stitched in to a lacquered body suit, with two piston pumped blades attached to gauntlets on each arm. The uphiver rose like a mantis about to strike.

The young ganger, pinned down by enemy fire, could do nothing but remain

in her position, fumbling with her long fighting knife. An arc of blood rose slowly into the air. Liz ran forwards, drawing her chainsword at the last minute to engage with Kat's slayer. The battle was brief. Wounds were exchanged. The reach afforded Liz by buzzing, bladed weapon had given her the advantage. The spiny uphiver lay broken on the ground.

Liz scrambled up a crumbling set of stairs, desperately trying to get herself out of the firing line. She scanned the bulkheads, recesses and cables of the walkways and the burnt-out shelters of the bottleneck about her. An air filter ground into action in one of the bulkheads, throbbing dust from the ground up into the air. A slow wind began to pull past her head. Liz paused in silence.

Closing her eyes, she trained her ears first to the noise of the hissing power cell in the weapon in her hand. Small electric sparks, thin and tuneless, rose and fell like ebbing waves. A sophisticated exchange of charged particles, indiscernible to her ears, was taking place in the sword in her hand. The approaching footsteps sounded like a jackhammer in comparison.

Liz remained still. Her head swam and her body ached. She had little time left and would have to make her stand quickly. Hundreds of these seconds would pass every day unnoticed. Now in the stillness of the final conflict they seemed to be glorious hours, dense and full of promise.

Liz waited. There was the crackle of a weapon charging behind her.

Releasing all the tension from her body she dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. At the exact same moment an energy blast rocketed over her head. Liz swivelled on the mesh flooring and kicked a foot into the abdomen of the advancing uphiver.

It was a woman, curving black stealth suit and long braid giving Liz clues to the identity of the masked attacker. The woman's speed was unnatural. Augmented legs kept on pushing, knocking Liz from her precarious balance

and sending the woman flying high over her head. They both collided, hard, with the metal floor.

The attacker released several charges from the plasma weapon in her left hand. Liz rolled across the concrete as it was carved up behind her. Pulling a grenade from her leg, she pulled its pin and let it follow the course carved by the plasma blast that had so recently followed her.

The woman leapt high over the grenade's path. The timing was off. The grenade exploded and Liz was thrown back, the uphiver flung after her. In an awkward moment, afforded only by chance, Liz hit the ground seconds before the woman, then the woman from uphiver landed on top of her. Their combined weight caused the broken mesh on which they lay to creak alarmingly. A sudden movement and they'd both plummet to the ground.

Liz stared into the eyes of the woman from above. In another life they may have been sisters. For a brief, alien moment they were cast together, their blood intermingling, the danger of the situation something they shared.

The woman did not speak, a quick intake of air the only noise she made. Liz looked to her side. Through the mesh she could make out the smouldering battlefield below. A rivet popped out from the joint where the mesh was anchored to the walkway and spun away for the ground below. The woman gingerly raised herself off Liz. Her eyes darted from Liz to the popping rivets.

The Escher looked back at the ground, calculating. Deciding. She flicked her chainsword into action and severed the mesh in one sweeping thrust. They both dropped through, accelerating as they plummeted. Liz lost her grip on the woman. Neither screamed as they hit the ground.



'I THOUGHT THE FALL would kill me.' Startled, Liz turned to face the woman from uphiver with a grunt. 'I thought the fall would kill me, Olaana. I fell with one of the prey. No regard for her life. Like an animal. Let us both fall to our deaths.'

'You're... you're going to die...'

'Yes.' The woman's voice was unnaturally calm. 'The suit will try and repair what it can but it's fighting a losing battle. Soon the stimulants will no longer stop the pain. If it's damaged, it will try and knit my skin to its circuitry. It's happened to others down here.'

'I've heard the stories,' Liz lied.

'The pain is meant to—'

'What is it?' the Escher blurted out.

'It's starting.' The woman punched her own arm in agony.

'The suit's damaged?'

'The pneumatic pistons on the right arm. Damn! Nghh!' The woman punched harder, frantic.

'Let me see.' Liz pushed the uphiver's fist from her wound. A deep wound had cut deep into the arm of the uphiver. The arcane offworld circuitry was attempting to repair both flesh and steel. Stitching bone to gears.

'Nnaaaagh!!' The woman's scream was something unnatural, alien.

'Get out of the suit!' Liz shouted, hands fluttering over her.

'Olaana!'

'Out!' Liz pulled the woman forwards and began tugging at the magnetic locks that fastened the suit together.

'My access code! It won't open without it!'

'Call it out! Free yourself!'

'That's against the laws.'

'You're going to die.'

'Olaana, promise you nng—' Pain forced the woman's words to stop. 'Alpha-two-five... ugh... twelve.'

The magnetic claps hissed open. Liz unwrapped the cords, pulled the skin-tight fittings and unplugged implant interfaces. The woman slid out of the bloody suit like a newborn from its placental sack. Her right arm was a mess of machinery and muscle.

'Olaana...' the woman moaned.

'Here. Take these.' Liz pushed some of the stims into the woman's mouth. 'They'll help with the pain.'

The woman went still. For a moment the Escher thought she was dead. Then the uphiver spat the stims out again. The red colouring from the pills was indistinguishable from the blood in her spittle.

'What?' Liz looked down to the blinded uphiver.

The woman said nothing.

'You know,' Liz said grimly. Her words hung in the silence.

'You're the woman that fell with me. Their leader,' the woman sneered in a wracked voice.

'That's right.'

Suddenly the uphiver flapped her hand about the ground for a moment and came up with a stretch of pipe. She swung wildly at Liz. Stunned for a moment Liz didn't move. The pipe caught her on the knee. Liz fell backwards.

'Stinking Underhive rat!' The woman strained, blood coursing from her wounds. She the veins on her temples ran hot, her face contorting in pain. 'You're nothing better than an animal. You're filth to be trodden on by your betters. Thought you could buy your salvation with kindness?'

'No,' the Escher snapped back. 'I'd rather you died like the rest of your kind. Slowly. Let you bleed to death, alone and in the dark. You killed my friends!'

'As did you.'

'We were set up.'

'You thought the ambush would be yours. How are you different to me? I hate your kind and you hate mine!' The woman flopped back in the dirt, spent.

Liz stood slowly. She regarded the woman's damaged body. She looked at the machine-melded arm. At the suit. At her dead friends.



ALDUS HARKON stood on the edge of the shuttle bay, staring out into the night sky for the second evening running. The city below him was lit up by thousands of lights from twenty-four hour furnaces. Higher up, the lights of each landing bay, jutting out from the hive like gargoyles. City lights. Star lights. There were almost as many tiny points of light emanating from Hive Primus as there were stars in the sky. Aldus could almost imagine he was staring into a lake.

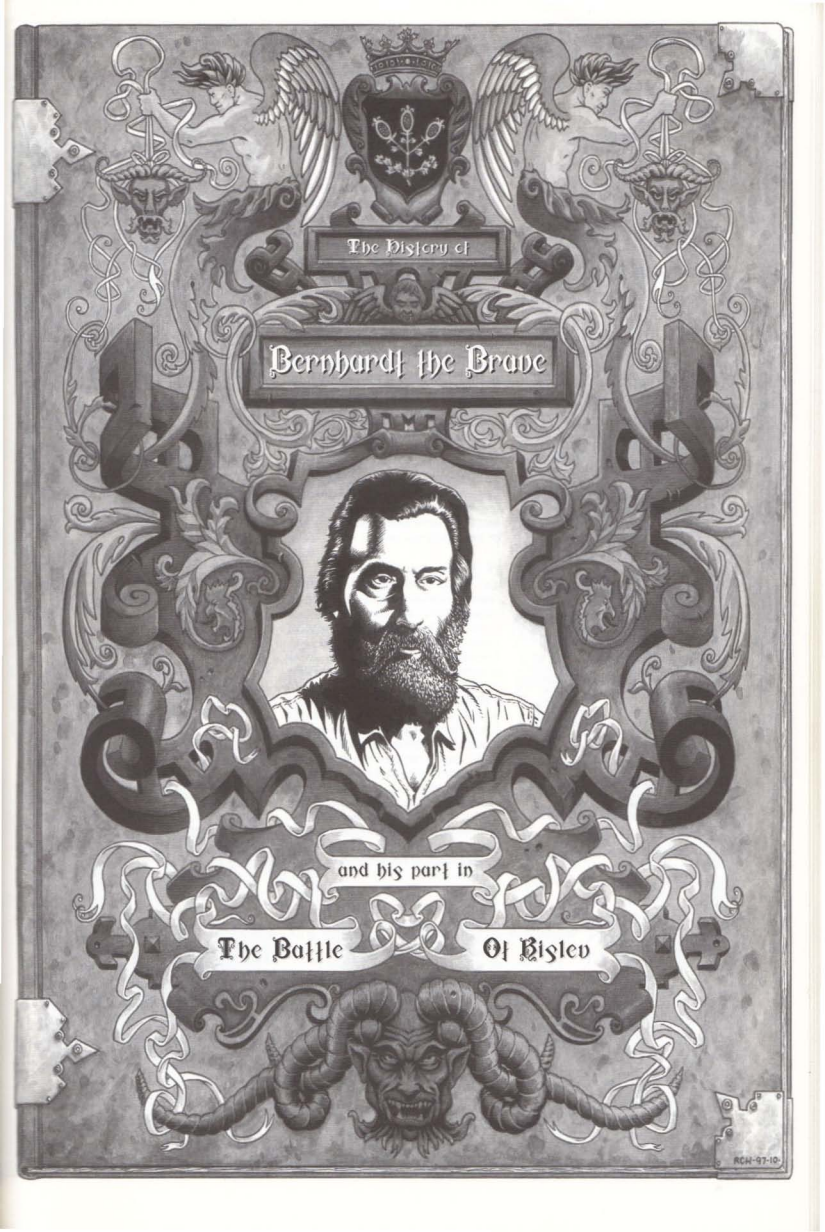
Aldus spent a lot of time staring. He let his mind wander on these occasions to stop boredom from seeping in and addling his brain. He spent a lot of time waiting. But that was part of the job description. He needed the time to mull over and orchestrate his deals. It was during all the time that he spent thinking that he first realised that the highest price was not always the fastest way to the Upper Spire. Protection, security, special handshakes and powerful patrons were far more useful in the long term.

In the sky above him, Aldus saw one of the stars move. He brushed his lank, greying hair out of his eyes. Minutes passed. The star grew larger until Aldus could make out the Ran Lo symbol on the shuttle's nose. The lights marking the runway lit up. Aldus began his long walk back to the safety barrier at the runway's end, casting tall shadows along the walls as he passed over each guide light.

Harkon sat and watched, reassured to see the shuttle land at a reasonable speed. He began his approach as it settled on its landing gear and jets of steam poured from conduits. The stairs lowered and a lone figure stepped out of the hatch. Aldus recognised the hunter from earlier. Monomolecular sword sheathed at her side, swagger in her step, braided black hair. Moving slowly; she had been wounded. And her companions? Dead? Aldus stalked forward, rubbing his fingers.

'Welcome home.' He bowed severely before the woman, came up grinning. 'I hope the hunt was as successful as I promised.'

'The hunt, Aldus Harkon,' Knife Edge Liz replied, 'has only begun.' ●



The History of

Bernhard the Brave

and his part in

The Battle

Of Bistev



The Drakwald family crest dates back many centuries and its origins are lost in the mists of time

The Drakwald Blade is one of twelve such Runefang swords forged by Alaric the Mad, as thanks to Sigmar and his allies

The Stern Bises

The cruellest winds known for many a century howled through the Drakwald Forest in that fateful spring of 2302, bringing with them increasingly heavy swathes of snow. Boughs cracked and fell from pines as their strength gave out under the burden of snow. The beasts of the forest lay huddled in dens, loathe to set forth, despite the gnawing aches of hunger in their shrivelling stomachs. Huts, o'er banked with snow, signalled life within only by a desultory plume of smoke from ice-rimed chimney stacks. None dare face the elements so harshly disposed against them.

None, that is, except Count Bernhardt the Brave. Resolutely he travelled the distant reaches of his land, delivering bounties from his own store to loyal subjects. Their gaunt faces turned upwards gratefully as his unexpected knock at their door brought deliverance from death. The brave Count's noble features, bleached by the cold and framed with a beard of icicles, will long linger in the memory of many a poor mother whose children were thus saved by his courageous acts.

A Rallying Cry

Such a man needed no prompting when news reached him of the onrushing forces of Chaos that threatened to overcome the State of Kislev. The soil upon which he might fall may be foreign, but the enemy was one common to all humanity. Seizing the Runefang sword, granted to his forefathers for their heroism, he bellowed a rallying cry across his land. Barely had the exhausted courier's feet touched the icebound ground before Count Bernhardt's were in the stirrup.

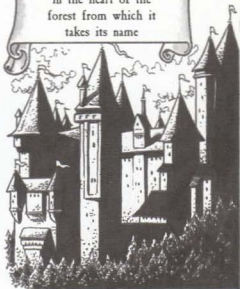
The famous Warhorn rang out, calling the militia to arms, as the fearless Count rode out at the head of the Knights of the Drakwald Forest. Banners streamed resplendent, dim spring sunshine glanced off lance tips, and hooves struck sparks, as the womenfolk waved the fearless warriors off to war.

The Best Gathers

The retinue of knights galloped down the old forest road, encouraging all who passed to join their swelling ranks. At the court of Middenheim, Count Bernhardt embraced his comrades in the Order of the White Wolf. Immense goblets of wine were passed amongst the ranks. As each man took a sip, he pledged his loyalty and life to this mightiest of crusades. The yellow tunics of Drakwald and the blue of Middenland blended into a common brotherhood of arms.

The weary feet and hooves of the hurriedly assembled army only paused

Drakwald Castle stands in the heart of the forest from which it takes its name



The Drakwald Warhorn is only ever blown in times of crisis. It is carved from an immense Dragon's horn

for rest a further three hundred miles along their route at Talabheim, on the banks of the vast and still ice-bound River Talabec. In this frost-bitten city, terrible news was filtering in of the final destruction of the Tzar's army. His troops, previously bolstered by the Count of Ostland's own, had been beaten back to the frozen River Lynsk. The spring thaw was long overdue, and the daemonic forces of Chaos had swept across the ice to annihilate the stalwart remnants.

A melancholy gloom settled upon the gathered host much like the snow still descending to smother the city streets. Yet as the sun will unexpectedly break through the darkest of storm clouds, so their despair was forced to retreat once more to the deepest recess of their souls, for Magnus the Pious had arrived.

Magnus had already achieved incredible feats. Raising his banner in Nuln he had drawn a prodigious legion to his side. Marching north through Aldorf, to face the tide of Chaos, the numbers had swollen immeasurably, so that as his army flowed into Talabheim it looked likely to burst the city's very walls.

Praga in Peril

A great council was called. Leaders of forces from the Marches of the Rivers Reik, Stir, Aver and Talabec listened expectantly to Magnus's wise words, words whose impact was mirrored by the cracking splintering of ice along the Talabec that signalled the great melt. He spoke of the peril that threatened all humanity, especially Praga, which even now lay grasped within the daemonic hold of Chaos, and whose defenders' lifeblood was relentlessly being squeezed out. Then he laid out their strategy: a strong, clear plan, whose watchword was speed.

Count Bernhardt the Brave was chosen to lead the magnificent cavalry vanguard forth into the northern lands of Kislev.

Bernhardt's great helm was worn by his forefathers before him, and bears the marks of many mighty battles



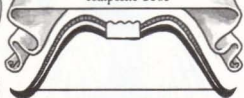
A typical uniform of a Drakwald soldier

Their favourite weapons are variants on the woodsman's axe



When the R.Lynsk thawed, so many bodies were washed downstream that rotting corpses were still being found months later

Bakshi Bazouk's horse archers were armed with curved composite bows



The bow has sinew on the outside, wood in the centre, and horn on the outside

When unstrung the sinew contracts, horn expands, and the bow turns 'inside-out'



Nurgle's Rot is a horrible wasting disease

Symptoms show first on a victim's hands

Banners of all the noblest Imperial Regiments fluttered in those ranks, the mightiest warriors in the land, and Praag's only possible salvation. For if they could reach Praag before it fell then the reinforced defenders should hold long enough for the main army to fall upon the rear of the besieging Chaos host.

Despite the punishing pace set, summer was nearly over when tired fetlocks arrived at the gates of Kislev, five hundred miles of country behind them. Crops lay rotting in the fields for lack of men to harvest them. The Tzar's subjects had all exchanged swords for ploughshares, and it was a motley, ill-equipped militia that gratefully cheered their arriving allies.

All had pressed in to Kislev in a last attempt to halt the destructive tide that swept the land. Count Bernhardt's clear eye caught sight of Nurgle's touch upon the city folk, and his nostrils were assaulted by the stench of overpowering decay. Tzar Vassily Zykov's pox-marked features and emaciated frame were mirrored in all of his subjects. The only relief from this oppressive sight was Aylmar Benjakson's band of Dwarfish Longbeards, from Karaz-A-Karak, who tirelessly strove to shore up Kislev's defences. Fresh earthworks seemed to spring up from the barren ground with each Dwarfish spade stroke.

Count Bernhardt required no imprecation from the grateful Tzar Vassily. Heedless of forthcoming danger the brave band set forth once more, guided now by local scouts. Departing through the city gates the column of knights was quickly encircled by the wildest swarm of horsemen they had ever seen – lithe figures, encased in all manner of furs and leather armour,

cavorted around them performing daring tricks of horsemanship. At some hidden signal the escapades ceased abruptly and instantly regiments formed into battle order. Mounted to their fore was a strong-chested figure, who grinned broadly from beneath an immense moustache. Greeting Bernhardt warmly he revealed that he was Bakshi Bazouk, war leader of many men, and they would fight with their southern allies to save the state of Kislev from destruction. Curious but grateful, the Empire Knights watched the famed northern cavalry join their ranks, each new comer armed with a lethal curved bow.

A Chill Wind Blows

Fallen leaves whirled in the maelstrom created by thousands of hooves thundering up the Praag road. As the remaining miles to Praag diminished rapidly in number an icy blast struck the riders. The freezing Northern gales were as early this year as the thaw had been

Kislev is built on the Hill of Heroes, and at its heart stands the famous Golden Dome



Kislev's defences were further strengthened by the addition of earthworks by Aylmar Benjakson's Longbeards

Murder hole

Arrow slit

Roat

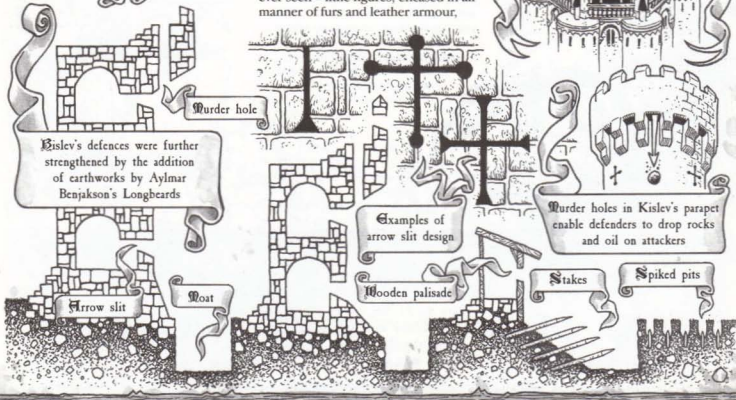
Examples of arrow slit design

Wooden palisade

Murder holes in Kislev's parapet enable defenders to drop rocks and oil on attackers

Stakes

Spiked pits



late. Chilled fingers gripped icy reins, as cloaks were pulled tighter around frozen flanks. The first few flakes of winter began to flurry groundwards.

If this wind chilled the flesh of men, what followed would chill their very hearts. A low moaning rumble began to rise from the direction of Praag, now but a day's ride away, building as it neared to a discordant cacophony of tortured souls. The swelling sound roared across the land like a wave towards a beach, then crashed upon the warriors. Pennants tore jaggedly from lances. Cloaks ripped in shredded strips from broad backs. Teeth chattered loose from bleeding gums. The Chaos Wind raked the land with its cankerous claws. Praag had fallen.

Bakshi's returning scouts reported that the enemy was close by. All manner of beasts, unimaginable to the minds of man, ran, galloped, slithered, crawled and flew southwards from Praag across the blasted land in a relentless broiling flood of Chaos.

The Chaos Gods are identified by their misguided followers with specific runes

Fzeentch:
the Great Sorcerer

Slaanesh:
Prince of Chaos

Nurgle:
Lord of Decay

Khorne:
the Lord of Skulls

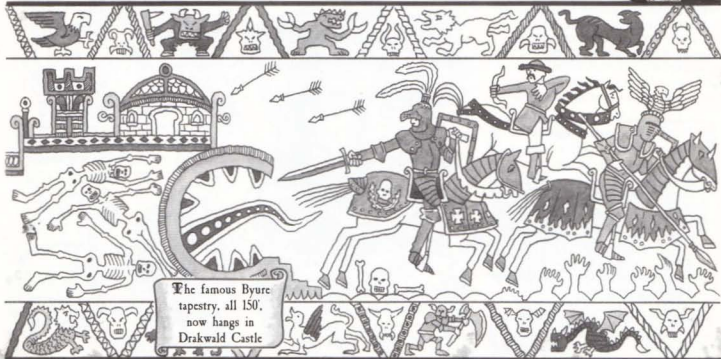
Count Bernhardt cursed that destiny which had thwarted their heroic exertions. At least by now Magnus should be helping defend Kislev's walls. There was little Bernhardt's horsemen could do to stop the foul horde before them. The ground was poor for battle, and the odds far too long. The sacrifice would be futile. Instead he employed the cunning for which he is well-renowned.

Chaotic Crypt

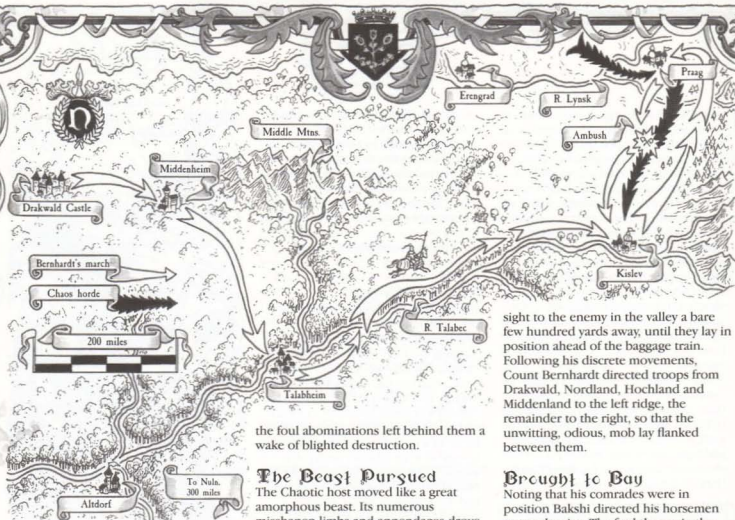
Guided by his fur-wrapped allies he skirted around the flank of his foe, circling behind the enemy horde. Topping the crest of a rise, the fearless vanguard beheld Praag's fate. Where once a fine city had stood, full of tall towers, fine houses and glassy domes, now all was unrecognisable. As Chaos had swept through the city it wreaked havoc in a myriad of inconceivable ways. It were as if the city had been but a waxen creation, now blasted by the very fires of hell. The forces of destruction had wrought their worst, and like a spoiled brat as quickly abandoned this now broken toy. Ever hungry for fresh blood, the Chaos host, still unsated, had moved on.

Buildings which had once stood proud now oozed and dribbled through the streets. Stone, wood and glass bubbled and coalesced into a mockery of their previous form. Fearless warriors exchanged troubled glances as they rode silently into the destruction. Naught was fully identifiable as what it had been. Horses whinnied pitifully as they pulled their hooves free from the cooling putrescence shaking off globules, iridescent with innumerable crazy colourings, as they did so.

Praag's deformed city walls were initially mistaken for grotesque carvings



The famous Byure tapestry, all 150, now hangs in Drakwald Castle



Yet this was the least of the horror, for it was not only the materials of buildings that had been caught in this molten brew of damnation. Deformed limbs stretched forth to grasp the unwary, distorted twisted faces cried out unspeakable oaths. The stalwart defenders of Praag had been subsumed and warped by Chaos into another adjunct of its multi-faceted terror. A terrible fate was sealed and there was no aiding them in their torment.

Grim pledges were made between warriors whose homes lay over a thousand miles apart, but who were now bound into an unlikely alliance. An alliance whose resolve had been strengthened, and turned to thoughts of vengeance by the horrors all now witnessed. Praying for the souls of the doomed defenders of Praag, the vanguard turned its back on this strangely-wrought tomb. It was an easy task to follow the horde of Chaos, for

the foul abominations left behind them a wake of blighted destruction.

The Beast Pursued

The Chaotic host moved like a great amorphous beast. Its numerous misshapen limbs and appendages drove it remorselessly onwards, all senses focused on its next prey: the city of Kislev. The bloated carcass tapered for many miles into a narrow tail, a rearguard that contained the lumbering, but necessary, baggage of war.

The courageous Count Bernhardt seized his chance. Such a leaderless mob would be slow to react, especially now that its powerful pincers were reaching out to squeeze Kislev until it screamed in agony. The slow moving tail snaked its way through the narrow, steep sided Vashienka Valley. This terrain presented the Count with a perfect opportunity.

Bakshi Bazouk led his troops along the lee of the ridge line, remaining out of

sight to the enemy in the valley a bare few hundred yards away, until they lay in position ahead of the baggage train. Following his discrete movements, Count Bernhardt directed troops from Drakwald, Nordland, Hochland and Middenland to the left ridge, the remainder to the right, so that the unwitting, odious, mob lay flanked between them.

Brought to Bay

Noting that his comrades were in position Bakshi directed his horsemen to top the rise. The foul throng in the vale below reacted instantly, the baggage guards swarming towards the cavalry silhouetted against the horizon. Howling taunts down the slope, the northern clansmen cantered forward to within easy bow range, then wheeling in the face of their foe withdrew as they released a hail of arrows. Enraged, the loathsome pack pursued them up the

Bakshi's men wrapped their horses hooves in special boots to protect them from the cold



Sholokov's famous sculpture of Tzar Vassily Zykov



Empire knights used plate armour to defend their warhorses



Bazouk's horsemen
lure the guards away

Vashienka Valley
proved an ideal
location for an
ambush

steep slope, triggering the trap with their enthusiastic ignorance.

A single war horn rang out shrilly, and thousands of levelled lances thundered down both steep hillsides. Inhuman cries of surprise and dismay were uttered from beastly throats amongst the baggage train. The creatures of Chaos had been ambushed. Whilst their strongest warriors chased futilely after Bakshi's elusive horse archers, the rest lay surrounded and open to destruction. Shrieking fearfully they huddled together in desperation. There were no champions or sorcerers to protect or discipline these doomed despoilers.

Lances skewered strange bodily organs. Swords slashed tentacles, arms, claws. Hammers split brain boxes asunder. The slaughter was swift. Many hues of blood stained the trampled snow. Count Bernhardt raised the vengeful Drakwald Blade on high, gore dripped from the keen edge, and all

swore they would not rest until every last one of their foes were vanquished.

The vanguard's spirits were lifted for the first time as they stood amongst the mangled massacred. With such a leader would they not be invincible? The enemy may be at the gates of Kislev, but with Magnus's army inside the forces of Chaos would learn defeat.

The Beast Turns

It is not surprising, then, that Bernhardt shed a tear of frustration when he beheld the reality. The infantrymen of the Empire Army had failed to reach Kislev before the enemy host. The latter seethed around the city walls in frenzied attack. Deep within this boiling mass could be seen the standards of the Reiksguard, White Wolf swordsmen, Drakwald Forest Legion and many other Empire regiments. It appeared that Magnus, upon arriving, had ordered an attack. The indomitable might of his

armies had cut through the enemy, causing destruction and confusion, but had in turn been halted by the rallying forces of Chaos.

The Empire troops stood trapped upon a low hill overlooking the threatened city. The soldiers had formed shield walls, and standing shoulder to shoulder sought to repulse yet another assault. Screaming hordes of hideous mutation swarmed up the corpse littered slopes all around them. Mobs of Beastmen, packs of Flesh Hounds, a mass of Spawn – even Haszteech, Chaos champion, charged in at the head of his dark knights. The deafening clash of arms rang out over the embattled countryside. Count Bernhardt could see amongst the defending ranks the yellow tunics of the Drakwald militia, who resolutely defended their ground. Rivulets of blood flowed down the hillside, turning to rivers as the carnage ensued.

A Dragon's skull found after the battle was three times as long as a human is tall



Empire regimental
banners

Dwarf weaponry, such as that wielded by the Longbeards, is justly famous for its intricate adornment



Count Bernhardt led the
Empire cavalry charge



Suddenly the gates of Kislev were flung open. Crying out a bloodcurdling battle cry, Aylmar Benjakson led his Longbeards into the fray. Desperately they attempted to carve an avenue through the enemy, such that Magnus might reach the city himself, but it proved a forlorn hope. Dragons that circled lazily in the sky swooped down upon the irrepressible axe-wielding warriors. Mighty talons snatched bearded heroes from the field, only to toss them back like scattered pebbles. Bloodied but unbowed, the decimated Dwarfs were forced back behind the ramparts.

The Count knew that he must act decisively. The Empire Army was contained, and could offer no assistance to those within Kislev. The outer earthworks had long since been overrun, and it was clear that the last sweeping assault against Kislev was beginning. The piles of dead against the walls were such that no ladders would be needed to clamber over their heights.

Runejang Speaks

Count Bernhardt the Brave held the Runefang sword up for all his comrades to see, then pointed to the heart of the army before them. All could clearly see Nurgle's Daemon slaves as they cajoled and guided the servants of Chaos. Destroy them and their forces would crumble. Mailed hands lowered visors.

Never had the World witnessed a charge such as on that day. The finest flowering of manhood swept in serried ranks upon their foe. The Chaos multitude, caught upon their rear, splintered. Like a sharp axe cleaving the mightiest oak, thus the cavalry wedge split their foe asunder. Runefang whistled in blurred arcs, a whirling scythe of death. Wherever Bernhardt led, the knights followed, carving a swathe of destruction.

Bloodshot, yellowed, demonic eyes swivelled feverishly to the source of their doom. A horned, bulbous head leapt from bulky shoulders in a spray of blood as the Drakwald Blade sliced through a

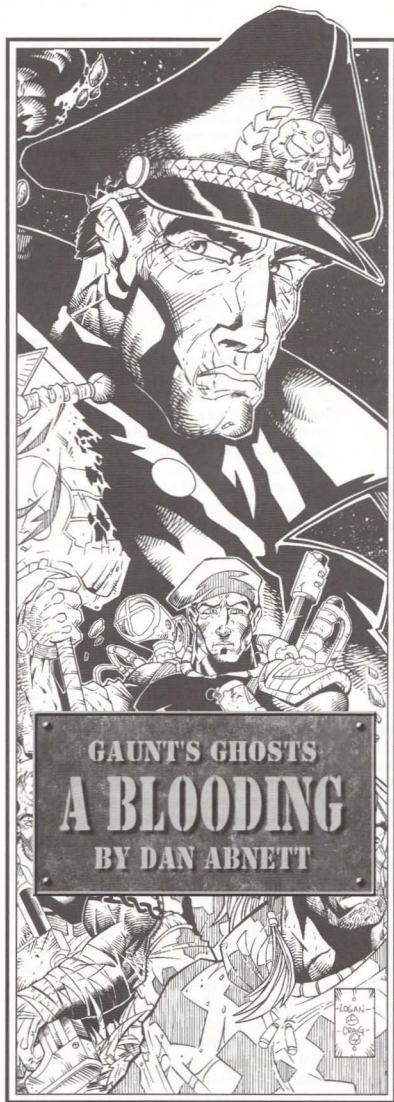
tendonous tree trunk of a neck. Lords of Chaos were forced to cower before Bernhardt's might. Howls of despair echoed across the field, as the Chaos masters fell to the blows of the Imperial cavalry. Disarray spread like Nurgle's rot over the battlefield. Emboldened militiamen swarmed from the City. Magnus signalled a counter-charge. The foe were routed; Kislev was saved.

Counting the slain fiends was impossible the numbers were so great. Over a hundred bonfires were built to burn their putrescent corpses, each standing taller than the highest tower of Kislev. The fires burned for a full cycle of the moon before the last bone was reduced to ash.

The tide of Chaos had swept south, only to break against the indomitable barrier of Imperial arms. Let us all praise men such as Magnus, and Count Bernhardt the Brave, for as sure as the Chaos Moon wanes it will wax again, then our mettle may also be tested. ✽



The stalwart Drakwald
Militia lost over half their
number in the great battle



GAUNT'S GHOSTS
A BLOODING
BY DAN ABNETT

IN THE ELEVENTH year of the Sabbat Worlds Campaign, an Imperial Crusade to liberate eighty human planets along the Segmentum Pacificus from the choking hold of a vast Chaos armada, the Imperial Force under High Commander Macaroth squandered an earlier advantage, and locked instead into a bestial war of attrition on several fronts as the enemy rallied and dug in.

One vital world was Voltemand, the seat of a proud and ancient culture that had fallen to an invading army of Chaos Cultists. Macaroth sent in his favoured regiment, the so-called Bluebloods, to take the planet, but after a month they had not succeeded. A new element had to be introduced to break the deadlock...'

— from *A History of the Later Imperial Crusades*

DAY SIXTY,
VOLTEMAND MIREWOODS

THEY WERE A good two hours into the dark, black-trunked woods, tracks churning the filthy ooze and the roar of their engines resonating from the sickly canopy of leaves above, when Colonel Ortiz saw death.

It wore red, and stood in the trees to the right of the track, in plain sight, unmoving, watching his column of Basilisks as they passed along the trackway. It was the lack of movement that chilled Ortiz. He did a double-take, first seeing the figure as they passed it before realising what it was.

Almost twice a man's height, frighteningly broad, armour the colour of rusty blood and crested by curving brass antlers. The face was a graven death's head. Daemon... Chaos Warrior... World eater!

Ortiz snapped his gaze back to it and felt his blood drain away. He fumbled for his radio link.

'Alarm! Alarm! Ambush to the right!' he yelled into the set. Gears slammed and whined, and hundreds of tonnes of mechanised steel shuddered, foundered and

slithered on the muddy track, panned, trapped, too cumbersome to react quickly.

By then the Chaos Space Marine had begun to move. So had its six comrades, each emerging from the woods around them.

Panic seized Ortiz's convoy cluster, the ten-vehicle forward portion of a heavy column of eighty flame- and feather-painted Basilisk tanks of 'The Serpents', the Ketzok 17th Armoured Regiment, sent in to support the Blueblood push. They had the firepower to flatten a city, but caught on a strangled trackway, in thick woodland, with no room to turn or traverse, and with monstrous enemies at close quarters, far too close to bring the main guns to bear, they were all but helpless.

Panic alarms spread backwards down the straggled column, from one cluster of vehicles to the next, in a discordant howl of protesting gears and roaring, smoking engines. Ortiz heard tree trunks shatter as some commanders tried to haul their machines off the track.

The Worldeaters started baying as they advanced, wrenching out of their augmented throats deep, inhuman calls that whooped across the trackway and shivered the metal of the tank armour. They howled the name of the bloody abomination they worshipped.

'Small arms!' ordered Ortiz. 'Use the pintle mounts!' As he spoke, he cranked round the autocannon mounted on his vehicle's rear and angled it at the nearest monster.

The killing started. The rasping belch of flamers reached his ears and he heard the screams of men cooking inside their superheated tank hulls. The Chaos Marine he had first spotted reached the Basilisk ahead of his and began to chop its shell like firewood with a chain axe. Sparks blew up from punctured metal. Sparks, flames, metal shards, meat.

Screaming, Ortiz trained his mounted gun on the Worldeater and fired. He shot long at first, but corrected before the monster could turn. The creature didn't seem to feel the first hits. Ortiz clenched the trigger and streamed the heavy tracer fire at the red spectre. At last the figure shuddered, convulsed and then blew apart.

Ortiz cursed. The Worldeaters soaked up the sort of punishment that would wreck a Leman Russ. He realised his ammo drum was almost empty. He was snapping it free and shouting to his bombardier for a fresh one when the shadow fell on him.

Ortiz turned.

Another Chaos Marine stood on the rear of the Basilisk behind him, a giant blocking out the pale sunlight. It stooped and howled its victory shout into his face, assaulting him with concussive sonic force and wretched odour.

Ortiz recoiled as if he had been hit by a macro shell. He could not move. The Worldeater chuckled, a deep, macabre growl from behind the visor, a seismic rumble. The chainsword in its fist whined and swung up.

The blow didn't fall. The monster rocked, two or three times, swayed for a moment. And exploded.

Smearred with grease and ichor, Ortiz scrambled up out of his hatch. He was suddenly aware of a whole new layer of gunfire – sustained lasgun blasts, the chatter of support weapons, the crump of grenades. Another force was moving out of the woods, crushing the Chaos Marine ambush hard against the steel flanks of his artillery machines.

As Ortiz watched, the remaining Worldeaters died. One was punctured dozens of times by lasgun fire and fell face down into the mire. Another was flamed repeatedly as he ripped apart the wreck of a Basilisk with his steel hands. The flames touched off the tank's magazine and the Chaos Space Marine was incinerated with his victims. His hideous roar lingered long after the white-hot flames had consumed him.

The column's saviours emerged from the forest around them. Imperial Guards: tall, dark-haired, pale-skinned men in black fatigues, a scruffy, straggle-haired mob almost invisible in their patterned camo-cloaks. Ortiz heard strange, disturbing pipe music strike up a banshee wail in the close forest, and a victory yelp erupted from the men. It was met by cheers and whoops from his own crews.

Ortiz leapt down into the mud and approached the Imperial Guardsmen through the drifting smoke.

'I'm Colonel Ortiz. You boys have my earnest thanks,' he said. 'Who are you?'

The nearest man, a giant with unruly black hair, a tangled, braided beard and thick, bare arms decorated with blue spiral tattoos, smiled jauntily and saluted, bringing up his lasgun. 'Colonel Corbec, Tanith First and Only. Our pleasure, I'm sure.'

Ortiz nodded back. He found he was still shaking. He could barely bring himself to look down at the dead Chaos Marine,

sprawled in the mud nearby. 'Takes discipline to ambush an ambush. Your men certainly know stealth. Why is it—'

He got no further. The bearded giant, Corbec, suddenly froze, a look of dismay on his face. Then he was leaping forward with a cry, tackling Ortiz down into the blue-black mud.

The Worldeater lifted his horned skull out of the muck and half-raised his bolter. But that was all. Then a shrieking chain sword decapitated him.

The heavy, dead parts flopped back into the mud. One of them rolled.

Ibram Gaunt held his keening chain sword in front of his face like a duellist making a salute, then thumbed it to 'idle'. He turned to Corbec and Ortiz as they picked themselves up, caked in black filth. Ortiz stared at the tall, powerful man in the long dark coat and cap of an Imperial Commissar. His face was blade thin, his eyes as dark as space. He looked like he could rip a world asunder with his hands.

'Meet the boss,' chuckled Corbec at Ortiz's side. 'Commissar Gaunt.'

Ortiz nodded, wiping his face. 'So you're Gaunt's Ghosts.'



DAY SIXTY, IMPERIAL PLANETARY HEADQUARTERS, VOLTEMAND

MAJOR GILBEAR poured himself a brandy from the decanter on the teak stand. 'Just who the hell are these awful scum?' he asked, sipping from the huge crystal balloon.

At his desk, General Sturm put down his pen and sat back. 'Do help yourself to my brandy, Gilbear,' he muttered, though the sarcasm was lost on his massive aide. Gilbear reclined on a chaise beside the flickering amber read-out displays of the message-caster, and gazed at his commander. 'Ghosts? That's what they call them, isn't it?'

Sturm nodded, observing his senior adjutant. Gilbear – Gizhaum Danver De Banzi Haight Gilbear, to give him his full name – was the second son of the Haight Gilbears of Solenhofen, the royal house of Volpone. He was nearly two and half metres tall and arrogantly powerful, with the big, blunt, bland features and languid, hooded eyes of the aristocracy. Gilbear wore the grey and gold uniform of the Royal Volpone 50th, the so-called Bluebloods, who believed they

were the noblest regiment in the Imperial Guard.

Sturm sat back in his chair. 'They are indeed called Ghosts. Gaunt's Ghosts. And they're here because I requested them.'

Gilbear cocked a disdainful eyebrow. 'You requested them?'

'We've had nigh on six weeks and we can't shake the enemy from Voltis City. They command everything west of the Bokore Valley. Macaroth is not pleased. All the while they hold Voltemand, they have a road into the heart of the Sabbat Worlds. So you see I need a lever. I need to introduce a new element to break our deadlock.'

'That rabble?' sneered Gilbear. 'I watched them as they shambled off their stinking dropships. Hairy, illiterate primitives, with tattoos and nose rings.'

Sturm lifted a data-slate from his desktop and shook it at Gilbear. 'Have you read the reports General Hadrak filed after the Sloka took Blackshard? He credits Gaunt's mob with the decisive incursion. It seems they excel at stealth raids.'

Sturm got to his feet and adjusted the sit of his resplendent Blueblood staff uniform. The study was bathed in yellow sunlight that streamed in through the conservatory doors at the end, softened by net drapes. He rested his hand on the antique globe of Voltemand in its mahogany stand by the desk and span it idly, gazing out across the grounds of Vortimor House. This place had been the country seat of one of Voltemand's most honoured noble families, a vast, grey mansion, fringed with mauve climbing plants, situated in ornamental parkland thirty kilometres south of Voltis City. It had been an ideal location to establish his Supreme Headquarters.

Outside, on the lawn, a squad of Blueblood elite in full, resplendent battle dress were executing a precision synchronised drill with chainswords. Metal flashed and whirled, perfect and poised. Beyond them, a garden of trellises and arbours led down to a boating lake, calm in the afternoon light. Navigation lights flashed slowly on the barbed masts of the communications array in the herbarium. Somewhere in the stable block, strutting gaudcocks whooped and cried.

You wouldn't think there was a war on, mused Sturm.

He wondered where the previous owners of the mansion were now? Did they make it off-world before the first assault? Are they

huddled and starving in the belly hold of a refugee ship, reduced overnight to a level with their former vassals? Or are they bone ash in the ruins of Kosdorf, or on the burning Metis Road? Or did they die screaming and melting at the orbital port when the legions of Chaos first fell on their world, vaporised with the very ships in which they struggled to escape?

Who cares? thought Sturm. The war is all that matters. The glory, the crusade, the Emperor. He would only care for the fallen when the bloody head of Chanthar, demagogue of the Chaos army that held Voltis Citadel, was served up to him on a carving dish. And even then, he wouldn't care much.

Gilbear was on his feet, refilling his glass. 'This Gaunt, he's quite a fellow, isn't he? Wasn't he with the Hyrkan 8th?'

Sturm cleared his throat. 'Lead them to victory at Balhaut. One of Old Slaydo's chosen favourites. It was decided he had the prestige to hammer a new regiment or two into shape, so they sent him to the planet Tanith to supervise the Founding there. A Chaos Space Fleet hit the world that very night, and he got out with just a few thousand men.'

Gilbear nodded. 'That's what I heard. Skin of his teeth. But that's his career in tatters, stuck with a understrength rabble like that. Macaroth won't transfer him, will he?'

Sturm managed a small smile. 'Our beloved overlord does not look kindly on the favourites of his predecessor. Especially as Slaydo granted Gaunt and a handful of others the settlement rights of the first world each conquered. He and his Tanith rabble are an embarrassment to the new regime. But that serves us well. They will fight hard because they have everything to prove, and everything to win.'

'I say,' Gilbear said suddenly, lowering his glass. 'What if they do win? I mean, if they're as useful as you say...'

'They will facilitate our victory,' Sturm said, pouring himself a drink. 'They will not achieve anything else. We will serve Lord Macaroth twofold, by taking this world for him, and ridding him of Gaunt and his damn Ghosts.'

VOLTEMAND MIREWOODS

'YOU WERE expecting us?' asked Gaunt, riding on the top of Ortiz's Basilisk as the convoy moved on.

Colonel Ortiz nodded, leaning back against the raised top-hatch cover. 'We were ordered up the line last night to dig in at the north end of the Bokore Valley and pound the enemy fortifications on the western side. En route, I got coded orders, telling us to meet your regiment at Pavis Crossroads and transport you as we advanced.'

Gaunt removed his cap and ran a hand through his short fair hair. 'We were ordered across country to the crossroads, all right,' he responded. 'Told to meet transport there for the next leg. But my scouts picked up the Worldeaters' stench, so we doubled back and met you early.'

Ortiz shuddered. 'Good thing for us.'

Gaunt gazed along the line of the convoy as they moved on, the massive bulk of the Basilisks as they ground up the snaking mud-track through the sickly, dim forest. His men were riding on the flanks of the great war machines, a dozen or more per vehicle, joking with the Serpent crews, exchanging drinks and smokes, some cleaning weapons or even napping as the lurch of the metal beasts allowed.

'So Sturm's sending you in?' Ortiz asked presently.

'Right down the river valley to the gates of Voltis. He thinks we can take the city where his Bluebloods have failed.'

'Can you?'

'We'll see,' said Gaunt, without the flicker of a smile. 'The Ghosts are new, unproven but for a skirmish on Blackshard. But they have certain... strengths.'

He fell silent, and seemed to be admiring the gold and turquoise lines of the feathered serpent design painted on the barrel of the Basilisk's main weapon; its open beak was the muzzle. All the Ketzok machines were rich with similar decorations.

Ortiz whistled low to himself. 'Down the Bokore Valley into the mouth of hell. I don't envy you.'

Now Gaunt smiled. 'Just you keep pounding the western hills and keep them busy. In fact, blow them all away to kingdom come before we get there.'

'Deal,' Ortiz laughed.

'And don't drop your damn aim!' Gaunt added with a threatening chuckle. 'Remember you have friends in the valley!'



TWO VEHICLES BACK, Corbec nodded his thanks as he took the thin, dark cigar his Basilisk commander offered.

'Doranz,' the Serpent said, introducing himself.

'Charmed,' Corbec said. The cigar tasted of liquorice, but he smoked it anyway.

'Lower down the hull of the tank, by Corbec's sprawled feet, the boy Milo was cleaning out the chanters of his Tanith pipe. It wheezed and squealed hoarsely. Doranz blanched. 'I'll tell you this... when I heard that boy's piping today, that hell-note, it almost scared me more than the damn blood cries of the enemy.'

Corbec chuckled. 'The pipe has its uses. It rallies us, it spooks the enemy. Back home, the forests move and change. The pipes were a way to follow and not get lost.'

'Where is home?' asked Doranz.

'Nowhere now,' Corbec said and returned to his smoke.



ON THE BACK armour of another Basilisk, the hulking figure of Bragg, the biggest of the Ghosts, and small, wiry Larkin, were dicing with two of the tank's gun crew.

Larkin had already won a gold signet ring set with a turquoise skull, which he kept glancing at admiringly. Bragg, on the other hand, had lost all his smokes, and two bottles of sacra. Every now and then, the lurch of the tank beneath them would flip the dice, or slide them under an exhaust baffle, prompting groans and accusations of fixing and cheating.

Up by the top hatch with the vehicle's commander, Major Rawne watched the game without amusement. Velaz, the Basilisk commander, felt uneasy about his passenger. Rawne was slender, dark and somehow dangerous. A starburst tattoo covered one eye. He was not... likeable or open like the other Ghosts seemed to be.

'So, Major... what's your Commissar like?' the commander began by way of easing the silence.

'Gaunt?' asked Rawne, turning slowly to face the Serpent. 'He's a despicable bastard who left my world to die and one day I will slay him with my own hands.'

'Oh,' the commander said, and went to find something important to do down below.

ORTIZ PASSED Gaunt his flask. The afternoon was going and they were losing the light. Ortiz consulted a map-slate, angling it to show Gaunt. 'Navigation puts us about two kilometres or so short of Pavis Crossroads. We've made good time. We'll be on it before dark. I'm glad, I didn't want to have to turn on the floods and running lights to continue.'

'What do we know about Pavis?' asked Gaunt.

'Last reports were it was held by a battalion of Bluebloods. That was at oh-five-hundred this morning.'

'Wouldn't hurt to check,' Gaunt mused. 'There are worse things than rolling into an ambush position at twilight, but not many. Cluggan!'

He called down the hull to a big, grey-haired Ghost sat with others playing cards.

'Sir!' said Cluggan, scrambling back up the rocking Basilisk.

'Sergeant, take six men, jump down and scout ahead of the column. We're a couple of kilometres short of this crossroads,' Gaunt showed Cluggan the map. 'Should be clear, but after our tangle with the damn Worldeaters we'd best be sure.'

Cluggan saluted and slid back to his men. In a few moments they had gathered up their kits and weapons and swung down off the skirt armour onto the track. A moment more and they had vanished like smoke into the woods.

'That is impressive,' Ortiz said.



DAY SIXTY, PAVIS CROSSROADS

THE SERPENTS SPOKE. Stretching their great painted beaks towards the night sky, they began their vast barrage.

Brin Milo cowered in the shadow of a medical Chimera, pressing his hands to his ears. The youth – slim, lean, sharp-witted, with a distinctive blue fish tattoo above his right eye – was not Guard. Only Gaunt's mercy had rescued him from the dying world of Tanith. Now he served as aide, as piper, almost as mascot to the Ghosts. He'd seen two battles up close; the fall of Tanith Magna and the storming of the citadel on Blackshard, but this was the first time he had ever encountered the sheer numbing wrath of armoured artillery.

The Ketzok Basilisks were dug in along the ridge in a straggled line about two kilometres long. They were hull-down into the grey earth, main weapons swung high, hurling death at the western hills across the valley twelve kilometres away. They were firing at will, a sustained barrage that could, Corbec had assured him, go on all night. Every second at least one gun was sounding, lighting the darkness with its fierce muzzle flash, shaking the ground with its firing and recoil.

Pavis Crossroads was a stone obelisk marking the junction of the Metis Road that ran up the valley from Voltis City, and the MireWood track that carried on towards the east. The Serpents armour had rolled in at nightfall, ousting the encamped Bluebloods who held the junction, and deploying around the ridge line looking west. As the first stars began to shine, Ortiz's men began their onslaught.

Milo kept his eyes sharp for the Commissar, and when he saw Gaunt striding towards a tented dug-out beside the orbital communication stack, accompanied by his senior officers. Milo ran to join them.

'My scope!' requested Gaunt over the barrage. Milo pulled the Commissar's brass-capped nightscope from his pack and Gaunt stepped up onto the parapet, scanning out of the dug-out.

Corbec leaned up close by him, a thin black tube protruding from his beard.

Gaunt glanced round. 'What is that thing?' he asked.

Corbec took it out and displayed it proudly. 'Cigar. Liquorice, no less. Won a box off my gun-crate's commander and I think I'm getting a taste for them... See much?'

'I can see the lights of Voltis. Watchfires and shrine-lights mostly. Not so inviting.'

Gaunt flipped his scope shut and jumped down from the parapet, handing the device back to Milo. The boy had already set up the field-map, a glass plate in a metal frame mounted like an easel on a brass tripod. Gaunt cranked the knurled lever on the side and the glass slowly lit with bluish light. He dropped in a ceramic slide engraved with the local geography and then angled the screen to show the assembled men: Corbec, Rawne, Cluggan, Orcha and the other officers.

'Bokore Valley,' Gaunt said, tapping the glass viewer with the tip of his long, silver Tanith war-knife. As if for emphasis, the nearest Basilisk outside fired and the dug-out

shook. The field map wobbled and soil trickled in from the roof.

'Four kilometres wide, twelve long, flanked to the west by steep hills where the enemy is well established. At the far end, Voltis City, the old Capital of Voltemand. Thirty metre curtain walls of basalt. Built as a fortress three hundred years ago, when they knew the art. The invading Chaos Host from off-planet seized it at day one as their main stronghold. The Volpone 50th have spent six weeks trying to crack it, but the filth we met today shows the kind of force they've been up against. We'll have a go tonight.' He looked up, oblivious to the constant thunder outside. 'Major Rawne?'

Rawne stepped forward, almost reluctant to be anywhere near Gaunt. No one knew what had passed between them when they had been alone together on Blackshard, but everyone had seen Gaunt carry Rawne to safety on his shoulder, despite his own injuries. Surely that sort of action bonded men, not deepened their enmity?

Rawne adjusted a dial on the field-map's edge so that the plate displayed a different section of the chart-slide. 'The approach is straightforward. The Bokore River runs along the wide valley floor. It is broad and slow-moving, especially at this time of year. Most of the way is choked with bulrushes and waterweed. We can move down the river channel undetected.'

'You've scouted this?' Gaunt asked.

'My squad returned not half an hour ago,' Rawne said smoothly. 'The Bluebloods had tried it a number of times, but they are semi-armoured and the mud was too great an impediment. We are lighter - and we're good.'

Gaunt nodded. 'Corbec?'

The big man sucked on his cigar. His genial eyes twinkled and it made Milo smile. 'We move by dark, of course. In the next half hour. Staggered squads of thirty men to spread out our traces.' He tapped the map-screen at another place. 'Primary point of entry is the old city Watergate. Heavily defended of course. Secondary squads under Sergeant Cluggan will attempt to storm the wall at the western sanitation outfalls. I won't pretend either way will be a picnic.'

'Objective,' Gaunt said, 'get inside and open the city. We'll move in squads. One man in every ten will be carrying as much high explosive as he can. Squad leaders should select any man with demolition experience. We provide cover for these men

to allow them to set charges to take out sections of wall or gates. Anything that splits the city open. I've spoken to the Blueblood Colonel. He has seven thousand men in motorised units ready to advance and take advantage of any opening we can make. They will be monitoring on channel eighty. The signal will be "Thunderhead".

There was silence, silence except for the relentless hammering of the Basilisk guns.

'Form up and move out,' Gaunt said.

Outside, Ortiz stood talking to several of his senior officers, one of them Doranz. They saw the Ghost officers emerge from the dug-out and orders being given.

Across the emplacement, Ortiz caught Gaunt's eye. It was too loud for words, so he clenched his fist and rapped it twice against his heart, an old gesture for luck.

Gaunt nodded.

'Scary men,' Doranz said. 'I almost feel sorry for the Chaos Cultists.'

Ortiz glanced round at him.

'I'm joking, of course,' added Doranz, but Ortiz wasn't sure he was.



DAY SIXTY-ONE, VOLTIS CITY WATERGATE

MIDNIGHT HAD SEEN them waist-deep in the stinking black water of the Bokore River reed beds, assailed by clouds of biting flies. Three hours' hard trudge through the oily shallows of the old river, and now the sheer walls of Voltis rose before them, lit by cressets and braziers high up. Behind them, like a distant argument, the Basilisks spat death up into the sky, a distant, rolling roar and a series of orange flashes on the skyline.

Gaunt adjusted his nightscope and panned it round, seeing features in the darkness as a green negative. The Watergate was thirty paces across and forty tall, the mouth of a great chute and adjoining system that returned water to the Bokore once it had driven the mills inside the City. Gaunt knew that somewhere sluices must have been lowered and the flow stanchied, closing off the chute's operation. Sandbagged emplacements could be made out up in the shadows behind the Gate's breastwork.

He adjusted his micro-head link. 'Corbec?'

Colm Corbec heard his commander in the darkness and acknowledged. He waded

forward through the reeds to Bragg, who had hunkered down behind a rotting jetty.

'When you're ready...' Corbec invited.

Bragg grinned, teeth bright in the starlight. He dragged the canvas cover off one of the two huge weapons he had lugged on his shoulders from Pavis Crossroads. The polished metal of the missile launcher had been dulled down with smears of MireWood mud.

Bragg – called 'Try Again' Bragg by his comrades – was a spectacularly lousy shot. But the Watergate was a big target, and the rack held four melta-missiles. The night exploded. Three missiles went straight up the throat of the chute. The force of the heat-blast sent stone debris, metal shards, water vapour and body parts out in a radius of fifty metres. The fourth vaporised a chunk of wall, and brought down a small avalanche of basalt chunks. For a while, the heat was so intense that Gaunt's nightscope read nothing but emerald glare. Then it showed him the chiselled mouth of the Watergate had become a bubbling, blazing wound in the huge wall, a ragged, slumping incision in the sheer basalt. He could hear agonised screaming from within the chute. Beyond the city wall, alarm bells and sirens rose in pandemonium.

The Ghosts charged the Watergate. Orcha lead the first squad up the sloping tunnel under the molten arch of ruptured stone. He and three of his men swung flamers in wide arcs, scorching and scouring up into the darkness of the echoing chute. Behind them, Corbec brought in fire teams with lasguns who darted down into the side passages and cisterns of the Watergate, butchering the Cultist soldiers who had limped or crawled into cover after the first attack.

The third wave went in, under Major Rawne. In the front rank was Bragg, his empty launcher discarded in favour of the heavy bolter that he had liberated from its mounting back on Blackshard and now lugged around like a smaller man might heft a heavy rifle.

Gaunt leapt forward too, bolt pistol in one hand, chainsword in the other. He bellowed after his attacking men, all of them racing silhouettes backlit against the glittering water by fire. Milo sprang up, fumbling with the Tanith pipes under his arm.

'Now would be a good time, Brin...' Gaunt prompted.

Milo found the mouthpiece, inflated the bag and began to keen out the old battle

lament of Tanith, 'The Dark Path of the Forest'.

Up in the chute, Orcha and his squad heard the shrill wail of the pipes outside. Damp darkness was before them.

'Close up,' Orcha snapped into his microphone.

'Aye.'

'To your left,' Brith yelled suddenly.

An assault cannon raged out of the darkness of a side chute. Brith, Orcha and two others disintegrated instantly into red mist and flesh pulp.

Troopers Gades and Caffran ducked back behind the buttress work of the huge vault.

'Enemy fire!' Caffran yelled into his bead. 'They have the chute covered in a killing sweep.'

Corbec had expected this.

'Stay down!' he ordered the young Ghost over the microphone as he beckoned his first two squads up the lower chute, black water swilling around their knees.

'Hell of a foul place for a firefight,' mourned Mad Larkin, scoping with his lasgun.

'Stow it, Larks,' Corbec growled. Ahead they heard the nightmare chatter of the cannon, and the added rhythm of drums and guttural chants. Corbec knew Larkin was right. A tight, confined, unyielding stone tunnel was no place for a serious fight. This was a two-way massacre in the making.

'They're just trying to psyche us out,' he told his Ghosts smoothly as they edged forward.

'What d'you know, it's working,' Varl said.

The drums and chanting got louder, but suddenly the cannon shut off.

'It's stopped,' Caffran reported over the link.

Corbec looked round into Larkin's mad eyes. 'What do you think? A trick to lure us out?'

Larkin sniffed the thick air. 'Smell that? Burning ceramite. I'd wager they've got an overhear jam.'

Corbec didn't answer. He cinched his bayonet onto his lasgun and charged up the slope of the chute, screaming louder and shriller than Milo's pipes. In uproar, the Ghost squads followed him. Caffran and Gades joined the charge, bellowing, weapons held low as they splashed out from behind the buttress into the main vault. Corbec leapt clear of a sandbag line damming one gully and disembowelled the

two Chaos Cultists who were struggling to unjam the assault cannon. Larkin dropped down on one knee in the brackish soup and popped the cover on his lasgun's darkscope. Carefully selecting his expert longshots, he blasted four Chaos Cultists further down the chute.

Las and bolt fire slammed back at the Ghosts, dropping several of them. The charging Guardsmen met the enemy force head on in a tight, tall sub-chute, no wider than two men abreast. Bodies exploded, blasted at close range. Bayonets and blades sliced and jabbed. Corbec was in the thick of it. Already a chainsword had mashed his left hand and cost him a finger, and blood blurred from a slash to his shoulder. He speared a man, but lost his gun when the corpse's weight on the bayonet tore it out of his hands. He ripped out his fallback weapons, a laspistol and his Tanith knife of sheer silver. Around him in the frenzy, men killed or died in a confined press that was packed in close like a busy work transit, crowded at rush hour. Already the water level was rising because of the depth of bodies and body parts in the gully.

Corbec shot a cultist through the head as he was charged, and then lashed sideways with the silver blade, opening a throat.

'For Tanith! First and Last and Only!' he screamed.



A DVANCING UP the chute fifty paces back, Gaunt could hear the sheer tumult of the nightmarish close quarters fight in the chute. He looked down and saw that the trickle of Bokore water that ran down over his boots was thick and red.

Ten paces further, he found Trooper Gades, part of Orcha's original squad. The boy had lost his legs to a chainsword and the water had carried his twitching form back down the smooth slope of the channel.

'Medic! Gaunt bellow, cradling the coughing, gagging Gades in his arms.

Gades looked up at his Commissar. 'A real close fight, it is,' he said with remarkable clarity, 'packed in like fish in a can. The Ghosts will make ghosts tonight.'

Then he coughed again. Bloody matter vomited from his mouth and he was gone.

Gaunt stood.

Milo had faltered, looking down at Gades's stricken, miserable death.

'Play up!' Gaunt urged, and turned to shout down the chute to the Ghost main force in the bulrushes.

'Advance! Narrow file! For the Emperor and the glory of Tanith!'

With a deafening bellow, Gaunt's Ghosts charged forward en masse, breaking down into files of three, surging into the throttling entrance to hell.

Up ahead, in the dark, close, smoky killing zone, Rawne slumped against a buttress, splashed in gore, and panted. By his side, Larkin squatted and fired shot after shot into the darkness.

Corbec suddenly loomed out of the smoke, a terrible apparition drenched in blood.

'Back!' he hissed. 'Back down the chute! Sound the retreat!'

'What is it?' asked Rawne.

'What's that rumbling?' Larkin asked, distracted, pressing his ear to the stone work. 'The whole tunnel is vibrating.'

'Water,' Corbec said quietly. 'They've opened the sluices. They're going to wash us out!'



VOLTIS CITY WESTERN OUTFALLS

THE CULTISTS WERE everywhere. Sergeant Cluggan's secondary expedition force poured in through the stinking crypts of the sanitation outfalls, and enemy rose to meet them all around. It was hand to hand, each step of the way won by strength and keen blades. The dark, tight confines of the drainage tunnels were lit by the flashes of lasfire, and shots ricocheted from the roof and walls.

'What the hell is that smell?' Forbin wailed, blasting away down an airless cavity with his lasgun.

'What do you think? This is the main sewage drain,' snapped Brodd, a one-eyed man in his fifties. 'Notice how the others get the nice clean Watergate.'

'Keep it together!' Cluggan snarled, firing in a wide sweep and cutting down a trio of attacking cultists. 'Forget the smell. It's always been a dirty job.'

More, heavy fire came their way. Forbin lost his left arm and then the side of his head. Cluggan, Brodd and the others returned fire in the close channel. Cluggan eyed the Cultist troops they cut through: bloated, twisted men in robes that had been white

silk before they had been dyed in vats of blood. They had come from off-world, part of the vast host of Chaos Cultists that had descended like locusts onto Voltemand and destroyed its people. The sigils and runes of the blasphemy Khorne were cut into the flesh of their brows and cheeks. They were well-equipped, with bolters and lasguns, and armoured. Cluggan hoped to the sweet, dead gods of Tanith that his Commissar was faring better.



VOLTIS CITY WATERGATE

THE GHOSTS staggered and stumbled back through the reed beds towards the comparative cover of the riverbank. Enemy fire from the walls high above killed dozens, their bodies joining the hundreds swept out, swirling and turning, by the torrent of brown water roaring from the Watergate.

Micro-bead traffic was frantic with cross-chatter and desperately confused calls. Despite their discipline, the madness of the flight from the water had broken Gaunt's main force into a ragged jumble, scrambling for their lives.

Soaked through, furious, Gaunt found himself sheltering by some willows in a scummy river bend eighty metres from the Watergate. With him were Caffran, Varl, a corporal called Meryn and two others whose names he had forgotten.

Gaunt cursed. Cultists he could fight... Worldeaters, Daemons... anything. He'd set square with any beast in the cosmos. But a million gallons of water pressured down through a stone conduit?

'May have lost as many as forty to the flood,' Varl said. He'd dragged Caffran by the tunic from the water and the young man could only retch and cough.

'Get a confirmed figure from the squad leaders! I don't want rumours!' Gaunt snarled, then keyed his own radio link and spoke into his bead. 'Squad leaders! Discipline the radio traffic. I want regroup status! Corbec! Rawne!'

The channels crackled and a more ordered litany of units and casualties reeled in.

'Corbec?' Gaunt asked.

'I'm west of you, sir. On the banks. Got about ninety men with me,' Corbec's voice hissed back.

'Assessment?'

'Tactical? You can forget the Watergate, sir. Once they realised they couldn't hold us out in a straight fight, they blew the sluices. It could run at flood for hours. By then they'll have the chute exits on the city side sewn up with emplacements, maybe even mines.'

Gaunt cursed again. He wiped a wet hand across his face. They'd been so close and now it was all lost. Voltis would not be his.

'Sir?' Meryn called to him. The corporal was listening to other frequencies on his bead. 'Channel eighty. The word has just been given.'

Gaunt crossed to him, adjusting his own setting. 'What?'

'The word. "Thunderhead."' Meryn said, confused.

'Source that signal!' snapped Gaunt, 'If someone thinks that's a joke, I'll—'

He got no further.

The blast was so loud, it almost went beyond sound. The shockwave mashed into them, chopping the water like a white squall. Half a mile away, a hundred yard section of the curtain wall blew out, ripping a vast wound in the city's flank, burning, raw, exposed.

The channels went mad with frenzied calls and whoops.

Gaunt looked on in disbelief. Corbec's voice cut through, person to person on the link.

'It's Cluggan, sir! The old sod got his demolition boys into the sanitation outfalls and they managed to dump all of their thermite into a treatment cistern under the walls. Blew the crap out of the Cultists.'

'So I saw, Colonel,' Gaunt said wryly.

'I mean it literally, sir,' crackled Corbec innocuously. 'It was Cluggan sent the signal. We may have lost the fight to take the Watergate, but Cluggan has won us the battle!'

Gaunt slumped back against a tree bole, up to his waist in the stinking river. Around him the men were laughing and cheering. Exhaustion swept over him. And then he too began to laugh.



DAY SIXTY-ONE, IMPERIAL PLANETARY HQ

GENERAL STURM took breakfast at nine. The stewards served him toasted black bread, sausage and coffee. He read a stack of

data-slates as he ate, and the message-caster on the sideboard behind him chattered and dealt out a stream of orbital deployment updates.

'Good news,' Gilbear said, entering with a coffee and a message slate in hand. 'The best, in fact. Seems your gamble paid off. These Ghost fellows have taken Voltis. Broken it wide out. Our attack units followed them in en masse. Colonel Maglin says the city will be cleansed by nightfall.'

Sturm dabbed his mouth with a serviette. 'Send transmissions of congratulation and encouragement to Maglin and to Gaunt's mob. Where are they now?'

Gilbear eyed his slate and helped himself to a sausage from the dish. 'Seems they've pulled out, moving back to Pavis Crossroads along the eastern side of the Bokore Valley.'

Sturm set down his silver cutlery and started to type into his memo-slate. 'The greater half of our work here is accomplished, thanks to Gaunt,' he told the intrigued Gilbear. 'Now we thank him. Send these orders under extreme encryption to the commander of the Ketzok Basilisks at Pavis. Without delay, Gilbear.'

Gilbear took the slate. 'I say...' he began.

Sturm fixed him with a stare. 'There are dangerous Chaos units fleeing along the eastern side of the Valley, aren't there, Gilbear? Why, you've just read me the Intelligence reports that confirm it.'

Gilbear began to grin. 'So I did, sir.'



DAY SIXTY-ONE, PAVIS CROSSROADS

COLONEL ORTIZ snatched the radio from his com-officer. 'This is Ortiz! Yes! I know, but I expressly query the last orders we received. I realise that, sir, but—I don't care! No, I— Listen to me, you— Oh, General! No— Yes, I—I see. No, sir. Not for a moment. Of course for the glory of the Emperor. Sir. Ortiz out.'

The colonel sank back against the metal flank of his Basilisk and breathed deeply, his face pale.

'Make the guns ready,' he told his officers slowly. 'In the name of the Emperor, make them ready.'



DAY SIXTY-TWO, PAVIS CROSSROADS

THE GUNS HAD been silent for ten hours. Ortiz hoped he would never hear them blaze again. Dawn frosted the horizon with light. Down in the valley, and in the Blueblood emplacements, the victory celebrations continued with abandon.

Amoctez ran over to Ortiz and shook him. 'Look, sir!' he babbled. 'Look!'

Men were coming up the Metis Road out of the Valley towards them, tired men, weary men, filthy men, walking slowly, carrying their dead and wounded. They were a straggled column that disappeared back into the morning mist.

'In the name of mercy...' stammered Ortiz. All around, shocked, silent Basilisk crew were leaping down from their machines and going to meet the battered men, supporting them, helping them, or simply staring in appalled disbelief.

Ortiz walked over to meet the arrival. He saw the tall figure in the long coat, now ragged, striding wearily out of the mist. Ibram Gaunt was half-carrying a young Ghost whose head was a bloody mess of bandages.

He stopped in front of Ortiz and let medics take the wounded Ghost from him.

'I want t-' Ortiz began.

Gaunt's fist silenced him.



DAY SIXTY-FOUR, IMPERIAL PLANETARY HQ

HE'S HERE,' said Gilbear, with an insouciant smirk. Sturm got to his feet and straightened his jacket.

'Bring him in,' he said.

Commissar Ibram Gaunt marched into the study. He stood, glowering at Sturm and his adjutant.

'Gaunt,' said Sturm. 'You opened the way for the Royal Volpone. Good show! I hear Chanthar turned a melta on himself.' He paused and absently tapped at a data-slate on his desk. 'But then this business with what's his name...'

'Ortega, sir,' Gilbear said helpfully.

'Ortiz,' Gaunt corrected.

'The Ketzok fellow. Striking a fellow officer. That's a shooting offence, and you know it, Gaunt. Won't have it, not in this army. No, sir.'

Gaunt breathed deeply. 'Despite knowing our position, and line of retreat, the artillery

unit pounded the eastern flank of the Bokore Valley for six hours straight. They call the phenomenon "friendly fire", but I can tell you when you're in the target zone, with nothing but twigs and dust for cover, it's nothing like friendly. I lost four hundred men, another thousand injured. Amongst the dead was Sergeant Cluggan, who had led the second prong of my assault and whose actions had actually won us the city.'

'Bad show indeed,' Sturm admitted. 'but you must learn to expect this kind of loss, Gaunt. This is war.' He tossed the data-slate aside. 'Now this hitting business. Chain of command and all that. My hands are tied. It's to be a court martial.'

Gaunt was level and unblinking. 'If you're going to shoot me for it, get on with it. I struck Ortiz in the heat of the moment. In hindsight, I realise he was probably following orders. Some damn fool orders from HQ.'

'Now look, you jumped up-' Gilbear began, stepping forward.

'Would you like me to demonstrate what I did to Ortiz?' Gaunt asked the bigger man acidly.

'Silence, both of you!' snarled Sturm. 'Commissar Gaunt, I take my duty seriously, and that duty is to enforce the discipline and rule of Fleet Commander Macaroth, and through him the beloved Emperor himself, strictly and absolutely. The Imperial Guard is based upon the towering principles of respect, authority, unswerving loyalty and total obedience. Any aberration, even from an officer of your stature, is to- *what the hell is that noise?*'

He crossed to the window. What he saw made him gawp, speechless. The Basilisk tank thundering up the drive was dragging part of the main gate after it and scattering gaudcocks and drilling Bluebloods indiscriminately in its path. It slewed to a halt on the front lawn, demolishing an ornamental fountain in a spray of water and stone. A powerful man in the uniform of a Serpent Colonel leapt down and strode for the main entrance to the house. His face was set and mean, swollen with bruises down the left side. A door slammed. There was some shouting, some running footsteps. Another slamming door.

Some moments later, an aide edged into the study, holding out a data-slate for Sturm. 'Colonel Ortiz has just filed an incident report. He suggested you saw it at once, sir.'

Gilbear snatched it and read it hastily. 'It seems that Major Ortiz wishes to make it

clear he was injured by his own weapon's recoil during the recent bombardment.' Gilbear looked up at Sturm with a nervous laugh. 'That means—'

'I know what it means!' Sturm snapped. The General glared at Gaunt and Gaunt glared right back, unblinking.

'I think you should know,' Gaunt said, low and deadly, 'it seems that callous murder can be committed out here in the lawless warzones, and the fact of it can be hidden by the confusion of war. You should bear that in mind, General, sir.'

Sturm was lost for words for a moment. By the time he had remembered to dismiss Gaunt, the Commissar had already gone.



DAY SIXTY-SIX, TANITH REGIMENT TROOP TRANSIT, WARP SPACE

OH, FOR FETH'S sake, play something more cheerful,' said Corbec from his bunk, flexing his bandaged hand. He was haunted by the ghost of his missing finger. Appropriate, he thought.

In the bunk below him, Milo squeezed the bladder of his pipes and made them let out a moan, a shrill, sad sigh. It echoed around the vast troop bay of the huge, ancient starship, where a thousand Tanith Ghosts were billeted in bunks. The dull rhythm of the warp engines seemed to beat in time to the wailing pipes.

'How about... the Euan Fairlow March?' Milo asked.

Above him, Corbec smiled, remembering the old jig, and the nights he heard it played in the taverns of Tanith Magna. 'That would be very fine,' he said.

The energetic skip of the jig began and quickly snaked out across the iron mesh of the deck, between the aisles of bunks, around stacks of kits and camo-cloaks, through the smoky groups where men played cards or drank, over bunks where others slept or secretly gazed at portraits of women and children who were forever lost, and tried to hide their tears.

Enjoying the tune, Corbec looked up from his bunk when he heard footsteps approach down the deckplates. He jumped up when he saw it was Gaunt. The Commissar was dressed as he had first met him, fifty days before, in high-waisted dress breeches with leather braces, a sleeveless undershirt and jackboots.

'Sir!' said Corbec, surprised. The tune faltered, but Gaunt smiled and waved Milo on. 'Keep playing, lad. It does us good to hear your merrier tunes.'

Gaunt sat on the edge of Milo's bunk and looked up at Corbec.

'Voltemand is credited as a victory for the Volpone Bluebloods,' he told his number two frankly. 'Because they seized the city. Sturm mentions our participation with commendations in his report. But this one won't win us our world.'

'Feth take 'em!' spat Corbec.

'There will be other battles. Count on it,' Gaunt said.

'I'm afraid I do, sir,' Corbec smiled.

Turning away, Gaunt bent down and opened the kitbag he was carrying. From its depths he produced half a dozen bottles of sacra.

'In the name of Tanith!' Corbec said, jumping down from his bunk. 'Where—'

'I'm an Imperial Commissar,' Gaunt said. 'I have pull. Do you have glasses?' Chuckling, Corbec pulled a stack of old shot glasses from his kit. 'Call Bragg over, I know he likes this stuff,' Gaunt said. 'And Varl and Meryn. Mad Larkin. Suth. Young Caffran... Hell's teeth, why not Major Rawne too? And one for the boy. There's enough to share. Enough for everyone.'

He nodded down the companionway to the three bewildered naval officers who were approaching with a trolley laden with wooden crates.

'What do we drink to?' Corbec asked.

'To Sergeant Cluggan and his boys. To victory. And to the victories we are yet to have.'

'Drink to revenge, too,' Milo said quietly, from his bunk, setting down his pipes.

Gaunt nodded. 'Yes, that too.'

'You know, I've got just the treat to go with this fine brew,' Corbec announced, searching his pockets. 'Cigars, liquorice flavour...'

He broke off. What he had pulled from his coat pocket had ceased to be cigars a good while before. They were a matted, frayed, waterlogged mess.

Corbec shrugged and grinned, his eyes twinkling as Gaunt and the others laughed. 'Ah, well,' he sighed, 'Some you win...' ●





WHAT ABOMINATION IS THIS?

ASSAILED BY FOUL DEATH GUARD IN THE CATACOMBS BENEATH THE CITY, THE BLOOD ANGELS WITNESS A STARTLING TRANSFORMATION ...



THE DAEMON'S AURA CLOAKED MY PRESENCE.

... A WOMAN?



ASSASSIN, CALLIPUS TEMPLE!

WELL DONE LIBRARIAN TROILUS.

I'LL BE BRIEF. WE HAVE LITTLE TIME ...



YOU KNOW ME?

INDEED, AND VALIANT SERGEANT ANTEFOR.

WHAT GOES ON HERE, ASSASSIN? YOU HAVE BEEN PLAYING SOME GAME WITH US?

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Six

SCRIPT & ART DAVID PUSH

"DARKNESS LIFTED"



THIS PLANET, **OBZIDIION**, IS RICH IN PETROCHEMICAL PRODUCTION, SO RICH AND SO WELL LOCATED WITHIN IMPERIAL SPACE, THAT IT BELIEVES IT CAN STAND ALONE!

A GROUP OF THE PLANET'S MOST INFLUENTIAL LEADERS HAD BANDED TOGETHER TO FORM THE **COUNCIL OF NINE**, TO SET THE INDEPENDENCE PLAN INTO MOTION. THEY WERE ...

GENERAL ZHATOR



ADMIRAL CHARDUZ



VIZIER BALAL



SISTER MOTHER MARACHEL

PREFECTS UPHRON AND GAANST



INDUSTRIALIST PHAN-TOR



PRELATE ABRALAN



ARCH BISHOP MAHAAK



NURGLE, LORD OF DECAY, AID US IN OUR STRUGGLE, HELP US BREAK THE CRUEL SHACKLES WHICH BIND OUR WORLD.

IN RETURN, WE SHALL CONSECRATE ALL OF OBZIDIUM'S TEMPLES TO YOUR WORSHIP.

SURROUND OUR PLANET WITH YOUR POWER, PROTECT US FROM THE GREED OF THE EMPEROR!

WE PLEDGE OUR LOYALTY AND DEVOTION TO YOUR CAUSE, THROUGH ALL THE RINGS OF TIME.

SO SAY WE ALL, SO SHALL IT BE!

'EXPLORING OFFICERS BROUGHT NEWS OF THIS TREASON TO THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS OF THE HIGH LORDS.'

IT IS AGREED THEN, WE CANNOT ALLOW INSURRECTION. THE DIRECTOR PRIME OF THE CALLIDUS TEMPLE WILL SEND IN HIS ASSASSINS TO EXECUTE THE NINE RING LEADERS.

SIMULTANEOUSLY THE BLOOD ANGELS WILL STRIKE HARD AND FAST AT ALL THE MAJOR CITIES, TO QUELL THIS REVOLT. THE DEATH OF THE NINE WILL BE THE SIGNAL FOR THE BOMBARDMENT OF THE CAPITAL. IT WILL BE RAZED TO THE GROUND AS AN EXAMPLE TO ALL WHO WOULD EMBRACE CHAOS.

'I SLIPPED INTO THE CITY UNNOTICED.'

'BUT NOT UNEXPECTED.'

SO, YOU ARE HERE AT LAST. WELCOME TO OUR LITTLE CELEBRATION.

DO YOU PEOPLE DRINK?



'I WAS TO DESTROY THE MOST POWERFUL FIRST, A SISTER ASSASSIN ASSIGNED TO EACH OF THE OTHERS...'

'NOW IT SEEMED, I SHOULD HAVE TO EXECUTE ALL NINE, OUR PLANS HAD BEEN BETRAYED.'

COME SIT DOWN... YOU CAME TO KILL US, BUT YOUR MISSION IS IN VAIN. WE CANNOT DIE!

INCORRECT!

IN CORRUPTION LIES HIS ETERNAL BEAUTY...



LORD, I JOIN YOU...

KISS ME WITH YOUR UNDYING LIPS...

YOUR DISEASE IS BEYOND CURE...

NURGLE... WE ARE ONE WITH YOU!



'IT WAS EASILY DONE.'

'TOO EASY PERHAPS.'



'THE DIRECTOR PRIME'S ASTROPATH SENSED THE DEATH SPASM OF THE NINE...'

IT IS DONE...

ALL COMMANDERS ON OBZIDION ALERT... THE SIGNAL HAS BEEN GIVEN, WITHDRAW ALL GROUND FORCES.

THE BOMBARDMENT OF THE CAPITAL TO COMMENCE IN FOUR HOURS.



'AS WE SPEAK, BATTLE CRUISERS ARE POSITIONING FOR AN OPTIMUM STRIKE ON THE CAPITAL. THE CITY WILL BE WIPED OFF THE FACE OF THE PLANET.'



PLANETARY BOMBARDMENT! WE WERE NOT TOLD! IS THERE TIME TO EVACUATE?

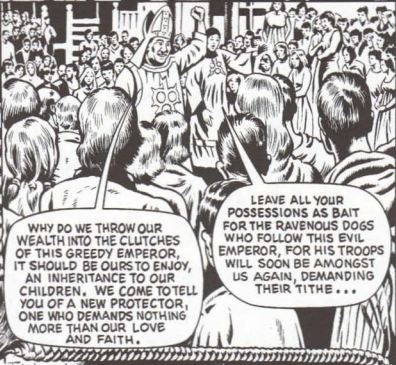
FOR ONE, WHY WERE SO MANY OF THE OUTER CITIES ABANDONED? WHY SUCH LITTLE RESISTANCE UNTIL WE REACHED THE CAPITAL?

WAIT, THERE IS MORE YET...

GOOD, TROILUS! VERY PERCEPTIVE! NOW LISTEN...

'THE SECRET JOURNAL OF GENERAL ZHATOR, A QUICK SEARCH REVEALED ITS EXISTENCE, AND ITS IMPORTANCE.'

'THE SPIRITUAL LEADERS OF THE NINE HAD CARRIED AN EVANGELICAL CRUSADE THROUGH ALL THE MAJOR CITIES OF OZBIDION. PEOPLE FROM THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE GATHERED IN THE CITY SQUARES AND MARKET PLACES, TO HEAR THE HOLY WORD.'



WHY DO WE THROW OUR WEALTH INTO THE CLUTCHES OF THIS GREEDY EMPEROR, IT SHOULD BE OURS TO ENJOY, AN INHERITANCE TO OUR CHILDREN. WE COME TO TELL YOU OF A NEW PROTECTOR, ONE WHO DEMANDS NOTHING MORE THAN OUR LOVE AND FAITH.

LEAVE ALL YOUR POSSESSIONS AS BAIT FOR THE RAVENOUS DOGS WHO FOLLOW THIS EVIL EMPEROR, FOR HIS TROOPS WILL SOON BE AMONGST US AGAIN, DEMANDING THEIR TITHE...

'AND AS THEY PILLAGE OUR HOMES, OUR REDEEMER WILL STRIKE THEM DEAD WITH HIS HOLY PLAGUE. WE SHALL BE SAFE IN THE GREAT CATACOMBS OF OUR LONG FATHERS, BENEATH THE CAPITAL, NOW CONSECRATED TO HIM, THE GREAT GOD NURGLE.'

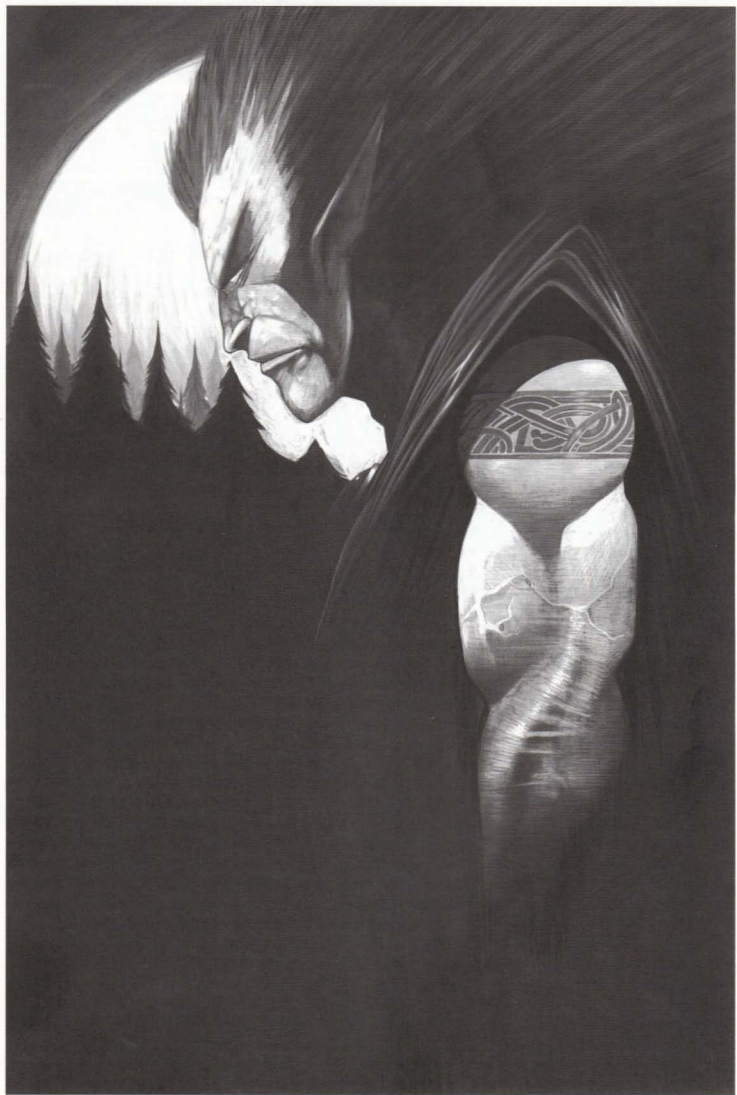


'AFTER FORTY DAYS, WE SHALL EMERGE INTO A WORLD CLEANSED OF THE IMPERIUM DISEASE. NEVER AGAIN WILL THEY DARE SET THEIR IRON SHOD FEET ON OUR FAIR PLANET.'



'THE FIERCE RESISTANCE YOU MET AT THE CAPITAL, WAS A MASSIVE REAR GUARD ACTION. IT BOUGHT ENOUGH TIME FOR THE POPULOUS TO ASSEMBLE BELOW.'







MORMACAR'S LAMENT

— By Chris Pramas —



MORMACAR WAS DROWNING in a sea of agony. Although he longed to surrender to the undertow and let the pain consume him, he continued to struggle towards consciousness. Far off he could hear voices but he couldn't understand what they were saying. He strove to listen, to somehow bring the voices nearer. After a torturous struggle, the sea calmed, the voices became clear and Mormacar opened his eyes.

'He's awake,' a gruff voice said, 'bring him some water.'

Suddenly a cup was at his lips and water coursed down his throat. Although it was warm and stale, the water tasted sweet beyond words. He looked up into the scarred face of an old Elf with tangled hair and only one ear, and asked in a cracked voice, 'Where am I?'

The old warrior looked down on him, pity on his face, and whispered, 'I'm sorry, son, but you're in Hag Graef.'

Mormacar groaned and grabbed his throbbing head. He had thought it couldn't get any worse. How wrong he was. Hag Graef was the most notorious of the Dark Elf slave cities, a city of doom and death where untold prisoners were worked to death and from which no one had ever escaped. He began to wish he had simply been slain in battle, along with the rest of his Shadow Warrior band. The Forsworn, however, missed no opportunity for cruelty, especially against their hated foes from Ulthuan.

Sitting up, Mormacar looked about him. He was in a dark cell of crude stone, its floor covered with rank straw. He shared the cramped room with a dozen other prisoners, many Elves like himself, but also some humans and Dwarfs. All of his

fellow prisoners looked dirty and weary and many bore bruises and welts, plainly gifts from their Dark Elf tormentors. A stout door closed them in and one sputtering torch added the smell of smoke to the stink of the windowless cell. 'Rest now,' the old Elf said. 'You won't get another chance.'

'Thank you, brother,' the Shadow Warrior replied. 'May the Everqueen bless you. I am Mormacar of the Night Stalkers. May I ask your name?'

'Galaher,' the man said tersely.

'Galaher?' Mormacar cried. 'Surely not Galaher Swiftblade?'

'Some used to call me that,' the scowling Elf hissed. 'Now I am just Galaher, a slave like you. Leave me be.'

Mormacar was momentarily stunned and could not speak. Galaher Swiftblade alive! The Shadow Warriors had produced few greater heroes and he was long thought dead. Mastering himself, Mormacar reached out and grabbed Galaher's arm. 'Please forgive me if I offended you, Galaher, but everyone on Ulthuan thought you perished on Eltharion's raid on Naggarrond. With you alive, our escape is assured.'

Galaher knocked Mormacar's hand from his arm. 'There is no escape from Hag Graef save death,' the old fighter replied, his voice hollow, 'and only fools seek death.'

Mormacar could hardly believe this was the same Galaher from the stories. His shock must have been plain, for Galaher's face softened a little.

'Be strong. Endure,' the Elf continued. 'And hope that Tyrion brings an army here and razes this place to the ground.'

Galaher looked away, as if he searched his own soul for the dying embers of a long-held dream. 'Any other course is pure foolishness.'

Mormacar stared incredulously at the old Elf. 'I can't believe you, of all people, are telling me to submit to the lackeys of the Witch King. Never! I will try to escape from Hag Graef, with or without your help!'

'Then you'll die,' Galaher said simply. Without a further word, the scarred warrior turned his back on Mormacar and crossed the cell.

The young Shadow Warrior lay back, a storm of emotions coursing through him. It pained him to see one of the great heroes of his people dead of spirit, but he could not take Galaher's advice. It was the duty of every High Elf to escape if captured by their ancient foes. Why couldn't Galaher see that?

Mormacar was so wrapped in thought that he didn't notice another presence until a deep voice jarred him back to his senses. 'The old Elf's fire died out long ago. Don't waste your breath on him, Elfing.'

Mormacar slowly got to his feet, grimacing in pain as he drew himself up to his full height. 'Who dares to insult Lord Galaher Swiftblade?' he said icily.

Facing him was heavily-muscled human, who stood a head above the defiant Elf and whose dirty face was framed by thick braids. 'I am Einar Volundson of Jaederland,' the giant boomed, his Norscan accent thick, 'and I insult every member of your gutless race!'

Before Mormacar could reply, one of the other prisoners near the door hissed, 'Be silent, they are coming!'

Everyone in the cell quieted. The Shadow Warrior and the Norseman stared at each other, their antagonism wordless yet potent. Outside, the thump of heavy boots echoed in the hallway. When the pounding advance stopped, the air was rent with the screech of grinding metal as a distant door opened. Then the screaming started.

The Shadow Warrior looked at his cellmates, seeing the terror etched on

their faces. He would die, he resolved, before he would live in fear of the Dark Elves. The heavy footsteps continued, at last stopping in front of their door of the cell. The prisoners looked at each other as keys clattered outside, but if they sought solace than they found none.

The fear in the cramped room was palpable as the heavy portal swung open slowly to reveal three cruel-eyed Dark Elves. Their leader, a tall woman clad head to toe in black leather, feigned demureness as one of her henchman mopped fresh blood from the front of her leather vest. She could have been beautiful, but her raven hair and striking features were ruined by the twisted sneer on her pale face. Her gloved hands lovingly cradled a long whip, which seemed to writhe with a life of its own under her expert caress.

Her henchmen, two lithe, heavily mailed guardsmen armed with ornate maces and wicked blades, barked in unison, 'On your knees for the Lady Bela, scum!'

The Witch Elf watched with pleasure as the prisoners fell to their knees. Mormacar hesitated for a moment, but complied when he saw even the cursed Norseman obey.

Lady Bela walked slowly around the small cell, her boots clicking on the rough stone. She stopped in front of Mormacar, who met her stare with one of his own. 'What have we here?' she purred as she stroked Mormacar's face with a slender hand. 'This one is still defiant.'

'One of the new batch, mistress,' offered one of the guards. 'We'll break him soon enough.'

Lady Bela stared at Mormacar, drinking up the hatred in his eyes. His skin crawled as her hand continued to caress his cheek. 'Oh yes, I like this one. He's got spirit.' Entwining her whip around his head, she tugged him closer. 'Tell me, slave, what is your name?'

'You'll get nothing from me, you murdering bitch!' Mormacar shouted and spat in her face.

The Dark Elf guards rushed forward, maces raised, but Lady Bela waved them away. Still holding the High Elf with her

whip, she pulled a long pin out of her hair and jabbed Mormacar lightly in the side of his neck. The Shadow Warrior jerked as his body was swept by a burning sensation. Then all feeling went dead and he could not move a muscle. Lady Bela smiled lasciviously and pulled a small blade from her belt. Seeing the blade, Mormacar strove to move, to knock it from her hand, but his body let him down and he remained as still as a statue.

'That's much better, isn't it?' she asked, wiping the saliva off her face. 'I must say I do have a weakness for the lively ones.' Her blade flashed out and slashed Mormacar's chest. 'They provide much better sport than these others, don't you think, Rorga?' Again the blade swept down, this time cutting Mormacar's ear. Her grin widened as she tightened the whip around his neck and pulled him closer still.

'Yes, my lady, great sport indeed,' said one of the Dark Elf guards, staring meaningfully at the other prisoners. 'Will he be the one then?'

'A fair question, Rorga,' Lady Bela replied, pausing as if in contemplation before turning once again to her motionless prey. 'What do you think, slave?' she asked Mormacar, with a cruel smile. The Shadow Warrior tried to speak, tried to scream out his defiance, but the Witch Elf's poison was too potent and he could only gurgle in response. Lady Bela laughed. 'Oh yes, slave, I agree completely.'

The cruel Witch Elf knelt to inspect her handiwork. As the blood welled in the wound on Mormacar's chest, she closed her mouth over it and drank greedily. Then she stood, smacking her lips contentedly. 'It is always refreshing to drink blood that isn't tainted by fear. A rare treat, Rorga, especially here at Hag Graef. I think I'll keep this one awhile.' Lady Bela regarded Mormacar afresh and her eyes lit up with excitement. 'In fact, dear Rorga, I think this noble Elf is perfect for my plans. Victory must be assured, after all, and I fear I can't count on Galaher any more.'

'As you wish, mistress. Who's it to be then?'

Lady Bela turned her attention away from the paralysed Shadow Warrior and looked over the rest of the prisoners, tapping her chin with a finger. She stared long at old Galaher. 'You'd like to die now, wouldn't you, sweet Galaher?' The old Elf stared vacantly, and remained silent. 'But no. While it is a tempting thought, one cannot be too careful where the gods are concerned.' She turned around. Elf, man, and dwarf shrank under her gaze, all trying to avoid catching her attention. Finally, her eyes settled on a swarthy human whose numerous tattoos bespoke years of piracy. 'That one will do. Take him to Khaine's altar.'

The guards moved forward and seized the frightened prisoner. He began to scream and struggle but a few blows from the Dark Elves quietened him and he was dragged unconscious from the cell. Lady Bela once again regarded Mormacar, at last unlashng her whip from his unmoving form. Stroking his face as if he were a beloved pet, she purred, 'I'll be seeing you again.' Then she turned and strode from the cell.

The other prisoners stared at Mormacar as if he were already dead.



MORMACAR WORKED IN the mines, as he had every day for the past two weeks. As a pair of overseers looked on, the wretched slaves toiled in the near-dark, scrabbling out ore in the humid tunnels for the anvils of Hag Graef. Those prisoners who dropped from exhaustion and refused to rise had their throats slit by the Dark Elves. The lesson was not lost on the other prisoners. Nor could they help but notice that the prisoners' ranks grew thinner each day, as more and more of their number were dragged off by the Lady Bela's minions. Death hung like a pall over the squalid prisoners of Hag Graef, and most had become resigned to their fate.

Mormacar refused to give in. His muscles quivered with hatred as he

swung his pick into the hard rock, imagining that the unyielding stone was the soft flesh of the Lady Bela. Every day another prisoner was taken to Khaine's altar. At night he saw their faces and heard their screams, but even in his dreams he was powerless to help them.

But now his grim endurance was to prove its worth. While the Lady Bela had been engaged in her deadly work, Mormacar had slowly cut away at one of the support beams at his end of the long tunnel. This passage had been dug in haste, and the supports groaned under the weight of the rock overhead. Now one good blow would smash the weakened support beam and hopefully cause a cave-in.

Mormacar swung his pick into the rock again, but scarcely paid attention to what he was doing. His attention was fixed on the hated overseers, who even now were striding down the tunnel to inspect the work. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the cursed Norseman working across the way and resolved to watch him closely. Humans were never to be trusted. Galaher, despite what he had said back in the cell, Mormacar knew he could trust. The old Elf would come through in the end. He could feel it.

When the overseers were scant feet away, Mormacar hefted his pick and smashed it into the weakened support beam. The beam shuddered from the blow and dust fell from the ceiling. Mormacar's heart leapt, but his elation was short lived. The beam held.

The overseers whipped their swords free of their scabbards. One of them spat, 'That was your last mistake, slave,' and strode forward, blade at the ready. Mormacar hefted his pick, determined at least to die a warrior's death.

The other overseer followed his compatriot, but hissed, 'Remember the Lady Bela's orders!'

'Damn that witch!' snapped the first Dark Elf, his voice hot with bloodlust, 'this wretch is mine!'

The tunnel was eerily quiet. All of the other prisoners had stopped their work, watching the unfolding drama with dumb fascination. Mormacar looked down the

tunnel, hoping to see Galaher coming to stand at his side. But the old Elf just stood and stared, his pick dangling from his weathered hands. Suddenly the silence was pierced by a echoing crack. Glancing to his right, Mormacar saw that the Norseman had smashed the weakened support beam on the other side of the tunnel. The beam shuddered and fell, loosing a rain of falling rocks.

Mormacar instinctively leapt out of the way, but the Dark Elves, surprised by the falling debris, were knocked to the ground. Before they could rise, the Norseman and the Shadow Warrior were upon them. Mormacar smashed in the head of one of the Dark Elves, while Einar swung at the other, pinning him to the floor. The Norseman hurriedly stripped the dying Elf of his sword and dagger.

Above them the ceiling groaned menacingly. As uncounted tons of rock shifted and slid, dust and debris fell in streams. Mormacar turned to the stunned prisoners, most of whom still stood at their work stations. 'Get out of here!' he yelled furiously.

That was enough for most of them, who dropped their tools and ran up the tunnel. Mormacar and Einar followed them, grabbing torches from their wall brackets along the way. They ran desperately, hearts pounding, until at last they came to an intersection, where the ramshackle band halted to rest. A dull roar echoed up the tunnel, as more of the ceiling caved in behind them.

The two warriors exchanged looks of grim satisfaction, pleased with their handiwork. Looking around at the other fugitives, the Norseman asked, 'What now, Elfing? Is this as far as your plan goes?'

The Shadow Warrior answered without hesitation, 'Now we follow the tunnels down and look for a way out.'

'What do you mean "down"?' Galaher spoke up. 'There's naught down there but Cold Ones and endless tunnels. The best you can hope for is to starve to death. We must go up and try to find an escape route there.'

'I know it sounds crazy,' Mormacar said, looking around at the desperate throng, 'but I've thought this through. You

yourself said there was no way out, Galaher. Now we've all seen Dark Elf war parties in the tunnels, haven't we? Well where do they go? I think the Forsworn have an underground way through the mountains and I mean to find it. 'His compatriots looked dubious, and shifted uncomfortably in the gloom. 'Above are countless soldiers, thick walls and stout gates,' Mormacar continued, speaking quickly, as if he could feel the crowd slipping from him. 'If you go up, you'll surely die. My way we have a chance.'

Chaos erupted as all of the fugitives began to talk at once. Mormacar tried to break in, tried to calm their fears and make them see sense, but had little chance as the panic-stricken fugitives babbled about what to do.

Eventually, the Norseman lost his temper. 'Shut up, all of you!' he bellowed, his angry words bringing immediate silence. 'You're acting like children. There are only two choices, up or down.' Einar pointed to Mormacar. 'The Elf and I go down. Who will join us?'

Mormacar looked at the others, sure that they would see sense. If the oafish Norseman was convinced, surely his Elven brethren would join him. He was shocked when not one voice rose up in support.

'I'm sorry, lad,' said Galaher gravely, 'we know what we must do.' The others nodded in agreement and clustered around the old Elf.

The Shadow Warrior could scarcely believe his ears. It seemed the former slaves were prisoners still, if only in their minds. He started to speak but Einar cut him off.

'Don't waste your breath, Mormacar,' spat the Norseman in disgust. 'Let's go.' Spinning on his heels, the furious giant stomped down the tunnel.

Mormacar hesitated, hoping even now that someone would join them. None stepped forward. With sadness in his heart, he approached Galaher and pressed a sword into his hand. 'You'll need this, brother,' the Shadow Warrior said quietly. Then he turned away and followed Einar down the passage.

MANY HOURS LATER, the two warriors stood in a large cavern that was dimly illuminated by glowing fungi. Peering intently down the three passages that descended further into darkness, Einar, for once sounding hesitant, asked, 'Well, which way now?'

Mormacar considered each of the tunnels carefully before answering. 'I think we must follow the right-hand path.' He indicated barely discernible marks. 'See all the bootprints there? It is clearly frequently used.'

'Which makes it that much more likely we'll run into some of the Dark Elf scum,' Einar said, grinning as he ran his fingers up and down his blade.

'True, but remember that we are trying to escape, not to settle the score,' Mormacar said levelly. 'That can wait for another day. Agreed?'

'Cease your prattle, Elfing,' Einar scoffed. 'The blood of berserkers runs in my veins. I do what I must.'

'Fine,' the Elf said curtly, suppressing an urge to comment on the apparent foolishness of all Norsemen. 'Let's go.'

By Mormacar's estimate, the two warriors were already several leagues underground. After leaving the other prisoners behind, they had hurried down a cavernous tunnel that shot through the bowels of the earth, turning neither right or left. The sounds of the other fugitives had soon been lost as the two warriors continued their descent. Wary of both pursuers and whatever unknown dangers might lie ahead, they had nonetheless set a quick pace. Eventually they had come to this large cavern. Now, as they made their way down the right-hand passage, they were quickly confronted with more choices, as passages split, caverns multiplied, and tracks became ever harder to identify.

Shadow Warrior and Norseman pressed on urgently, stopping only to drink from the few streams and stagnant pools they happened across in their wanderings. Eventually, after what must have been many hours, sheer exhaustion dictated that they stop and rest, and the two collapsed next to a evil smelling pool.

They sat in silence, breathing heavily and occasionally drinking the scum-covered water at their side. The weeks of overwork and under-nourishment at the hands of the Dark Elves were taking their toll. And now that they were deep under the earth, the icy chill made a mockery of their ragged clothing.

'Perhaps the others were right after all,' Mormacar ventured, shivering as he choked back some of the vile water. Suppressing the urge to retch, he sprawled on the ground, his muscles aching with every movement.

The Norseman snorted. 'The others are surely dead already,' he replied. 'At least we are still alive.'

Mormacar accepted this assessment without comment; he knew Einar was right. Sighing, he added, 'I never expected to end my days like this, wandering under the Land of Chill. Curse the day those hellspawn captured me!'

'The day I was caught was a dark one as well,' Einar said softly, his face betraying shame and despair. His voice trailed off. Abruptly, he shook his head as if to clear it, and stared at Mormacar. 'Tell me, how did you come to be in hellish mines of Hag Graef?'

A black look crossed over Mormacar's face as he remembered his last day of true freedom. By his own estimate, it was probably no more than two months since his capture, but it seemed so long ago. 'I was travelling with a band of my brethren, the Night Stalkers of the Shadow Warriors. We've been fighting the thrice-damned Dark Elves for centuries on Ulthuan and it's a war that never ends.' As Mormacar talked, he held his head high and his exhausted slump became a proud pose. 'While other of my kin live in shining cities and try to forget the Witch King's bloody hordes, my folk scour the Shadowlands for invaders and bring red death to the Forsworn defilers.'

Thoughts of what the Dark Elves had done to his homeland filled his mind, and Mormacar strove to push down the hatred that welled-up in his heart. Consumed by his own emotions, he failed to notice the grin of approval break

out on the Norseman's face. 'In any case,' he continued, 'my brethren and I set an ambush for a raiding party. We thought to trap them, but fell into a trap ourselves.' His voice grew quieter 'While we rained death on the Forsworn below, another group of them surprised us from behind. Before I could even unsheathe my sword, one of the cowards struck me from behind.' He spat in disgust. 'The next thing I knew, I awoke in Hag Graef.'

Einar nodded, having heard many similar tales in the slave pits. 'Those evil cum do not fight with honour,' he noted. 'Poison, foul magic and tricks are not the weapons of true warriors.'

Mormacar could not but agree. Strangely curious about this barbaric human, the Shadow Warrior asked, 'What of you? How did you come to be so far from frozen Norsca?'

'That is a tale worthy of the Skalds, Elfling,' the Norseman replied, 'although I doubt any lived to take the story back to Norsca.' He shook his head as he continued, 'Ah, a black day it was indeed. I was sailing with Grimmir Ogre-kin, as fierce a reaver as ever prowled the Sea of Claws.' Einar settled back, as if the two of them were drinking mead in front of the hearth. 'We'd just raided an Imperial merchant fleet and our holds were heavy with booty. Then a great storm blew out of the east, like the breath of the gods themselves.' Mormacar cracked a smile. Storytelling came easily to the Norseman. 'My ship was separated from Grimmir's and we tossed on the seas for three days. When the storm finally blew its last, we were adrift and mastless.' Einar shook his head and dropped his gaze to the ground. 'It was then that the Dark Elves found us. It was a fearsome sight, a castle that floats on the sea, filled with sea serpents and worse. Truly an abomination sent by Mistress of the Damned herself.' The Norseman crossed his arms in front of him, making an ancient ward against evil. 'Seeing its towering walls and countless warriors, I knew that we would soon be dead.'

'It was a Black Ark that you beheld,' Mormacar said. 'None can stand against them.'

Einar nodded but he was talking quickly now, his blood racing as he was caught up in remembrance. 'I swore a vow to the Father of Battle to die before surrendering. Soon the murderers boarded my ship and we fought like berserkers that day.' Suddenly, Einar was on his feet, braids flying wildly as he shook his head back and forth. 'I wish the Skalds could sing of the deeds of Halfdan Wolfclaw, Skragg the Grim and Canute Shield-breaker, for few have equalled their skill at arms. One by one, though, all were slain, pierced by bolts, hacked down by swords or felled by black magic.' He stood there, shaking his fist at unseen foes while Mormacar looked on, wondering if the Norseman had lost his mind. 'My heart cried out for vengeance as more and more of the dragon-cloaked Corsairs boarded my ship. At last, only I was left alive.'

Mormacar could see that guilt stained the Norseman, guilt at not dying with his shipmates like a good captain should.

'I lay about me with my axe, slicing and cleaving, but I could not kill them all. When the bodies were piled up high around me, one of their foul wizards ensorcelled me.' Einar slammed his fist into cavern wall and howled in frustration. 'Instead of letting me die with my crew, the captain of that evil vessel took me to Hag Graef in chains. When we escape, I will hunt him down and feed him his own heart. Only then will my comrades be avenged.' Story finished, Einar slumped to the floor in despair. His hand, now bloody and torn, was still clenched tight as he continued to relive that fateful day.

Mormacar stared at the Norseman, impressed despite himself. 'I think you may have missed your calling, Einar. You should have been a storyteller yourself.'

Einar chuckled a little at this and Mormacar joined him. For a short while, they forgot the mistrust between Elf and man and enjoyed the laughter together. But the moment ended quickly, as the harsh reality of their situation intruded upon them once more. An uncomfortable silence descended on the two fugitives and Mormacar feared that Volundson would sink back into his guilty despair.

But then Einar forced another laugh to break the silence. 'If you liked that tale,' the Norseman said, 'let me tell you of the battle at Brienne. Grinnir's wrath was something to behold that day—'

'Einar, shut up,' whispered Mormacar, squinting in obvious concentration. The Norseman bristled, but Mormacar's insistent gesture silenced him. 'Do you hear that?' asked the Elf.

'Hear what?'

'Listen closely, I heard something.' The Shadow Warrior stood up silently and crept over to one of the passages.

Volundson followed, listening intently.

After a minute, the Norseman said, 'I don't hear anything, Elfling. Have your wits left you?'

'Follow me, you oaf,' Mormacar hissed, yanking his dagger free from his belt. 'And be quiet.'



THE ELF PADDED silently through the dank and gloomy passages, followed clumsily by the big Norseman. At each intersection, the Shadow Warrior would stop, listen, and then pick a new direction. After a few minutes, even Einar could hear the clash of metal and the shouts of combat.

'What now?' asked Einar. 'Who knows what lurks this far under the earth?'

'Whoever it is,' whispered the Elf, 'let's hope they know a way out of here. This way, and try harder to be quiet.'

A gruff belch was all he got by way of a reply. The two fugitives set off again, easily able to follow the echoing cacophony. The minutes passed slowly, as each warrior wondered what lay ahead. They were concentrating so much on the noises that they all but tripped over the body of a Dark Elf lying in the passage. His head had been ripped from his shoulders and was nowhere in sight. Mormacar stuck his dagger in his belt and took the dead Elf's sword. Slowly, silently, the two warriors inched ahead.

Finally, they came to a large cavern, whose circular shape and smooth walls made it seem man-made. Peering inside, they beheld a furious conflict. Battle cries, howls of pain and triumph, and the sound of clashing steel filled the air. Around a dozen Dark Elves were locked in combat with savage lizard creatures. These green and black scaled monsters walked on two legs and wielded crude spears and clubs with considerable skill, although Mormacar and Einar did not fail to notice that they used their razor-sharp teeth at every opportunity. The cavern was already littered with corpses, both Elf and Lizardman, and the fight had clearly become a grim battle of attrition. Most of the smaller lizard creatures were dead already, but their larger cousins were putting up quite a fight.

Two in particular towered above the battle, their huge spears smashing in Elf skulls with unmatched strength. As the fugitives watched, one of these gargantuan Lizardmen was felled by a savage attack from a frenzied Witch Elf. Her twin blades danced over the slow-moving reptile, slicing scales and driving deep into the monster's vitals. With a bellowing death scream, the creature fell backward, crushing a Dark Elf warrior beneath its ponderous bulk. Jumping onto the monster's carcass, the Witch Elf beheaded the monster with one blow and a rapturous howl of 'Blood for Khaine!'

Mormacar, utterly transfixed by this titanic clash, suddenly realised that he looked into the twisted face of Lady Bela. The Shadow Warrior's blood turned cold, and he was so full of loathing at the sight of her that he almost didn't notice that the battle was coming to him. One of the Forsworn had broken and was running right towards the hidden fugitives. A small, crested Lizardman and the other hulking giant chased the fleeing warrior. Einar and Mormacar fell back down the passage and waited in a small alcove. Mormacar could feel the cold, hard, rock against his back but the sword felt good in his hands. Presently the terrified Dark Elf ran around the corner. Before he even realised that he faced a new foe, the Forsworn found Mormacar's cold steel in his belly. Face to

face with his enemy, Mormacar watched the life drain from his victim's eyes. Stepping back, he let the body slide off his sword and fall to the ground.

Overcome by all-consuming hatred, he hadn't even noticed that Einar had split the crested Lizardman nearly in two. There was no time to celebrate, however, as the crash of clawed feet and an ominous bellowing reminded both of them of the other imminent threat.

The huge Lizardman, a mighty spear grasped in its clawed hands, stalked around the corner, roaring fiercely. Einar and Mormacar looked at each other, then jumped forward to attack. Although slow to react, the beast had scales as tough as hardened steel and the two warriors found that their blows were all but ineffectual. The raging beast hissed angrily and smashed Einar to the ground with the butt of his spear. In the same movement, its heavy tail snaked out and slammed down on the Norseman's chest, knocking the wind of him.

While the beast was momentarily fixated on Einar, Mormacar seized his chance. Balancing lightly on the balls of his feet, he took his dagger in his right hand, steadied himself, and then threw the wicked blade at the scaly monstrosity. The beast reared back in agony as Mormacar's dagger flew straight and true into its eye. The Shadow Warrior grasped his sword in both hands and drove it into the creature's exposed throat. Black blood gushed from the wound, showering the Elf and causing him to lose his grip on the blade. The lizard creature, two blades buried in its flesh, stood there stupefied for a few moments, then fell forward with a ground-jarring crash.

Einar sat up, looked at the Shadow Warrior, and marvelled, 'Truly a feat for the sagas. The Father of Battle has blessed you today.'

Mormacar motioned him to be silent. The Elf quietly recovered his weapons and did his best to clean the blood off their hilts. No new foes ventured down their passage and eventually the sounds of battle began to fade. Soon all was quiet.

AS THE TWO WARRIORS crouched in the passage, wondering who had won the brutal battle, animalistic howls of 'Khaine' grimly answered their question. Then they heard the Lady Bela, her usually icy voice hot with the joy of bloodletting. 'We leave in ten minutes,' she said simply. 'Be ready.'

'But Lady,' one of her warriors objected, 'what of the wounded and the missing?'

Even from where they sat, the two fugitives could hear the ferocious slap Lady Bela delivered to her soldier. 'You insubordinate wretch, if you ever question me again I will sacrifice your entire family on the altar of Khaine! Anyone too wounded to travel is to be killed, as are all these Lizardmen who yet offend me with their breathing. Now, move! It's a long way to Arnheim and we wouldn't want to disappoint our High Elf brothers.'

The remaining Dark Elves did their work quickly and soon the whole band marched off in the darkness.

'Faster,' urged the Lady Bela, her voice now distant, 'we've got a prediction of victory to deliver.'

When their footsteps could no longer be heard, Einar boomed, 'That was refreshing. It's been too long since my last battle. I would have preferred Dark Elves to Lizardmen, but a fight's a fight.'

'You are familiar with those things?' Mormacar asked, gazing down at the corpses at his feet.

'Only by reputation,' the Norseman replied. 'I've heard stories of these creatures but I never believed they truly existed.' They walked carefully into the cavern but found nothing but the slain. 'Leaving aside the question of what these Lizardmen were doing under Naggaroth, what are we going to do now?'

The Shadow Warrior considered the question and decided quickly. 'I think we should try to follow the Dark Elves.'

'I see,' the Norseman sneered, 'you miss your girlfriend already.'

Mormacar glared back at him. 'No, you brainless oaf, but if anyone knows the ways out of these caverns, it's the Lady Bela. Did you not hear her say they were heading to Arnheim?'

'Aye, I did,' said Volundson, 'but I've never heard of it.'

'It's a High Elf bastion south of Naggaroth – but it must be a thousand miles away. I don't know what Lady Bela's plans are, but she must be stopped.'

'Speculate later, Elfing. If we're going to follow them, we should do so quickly.' Looking about the cavern, Einar's eyes lit up. 'But not before availing ourselves of the opportunity for booty.'

'How can think of treasure at a time like this,' Mormacar asked incredulously.

Einar, already sifting through the backpack of a dead Elf, pulled out a parcel. 'If you're not interested in treasure, I suppose I'll have to eat all this food by myself.'

Mormacar nodded approvingly. 'Perhaps you are not such a fool after all, Einar Volundson.'

After gathering up all the food, clothing and weapons they could carry, the two warriors set out after Lady Bela. If they looked ridiculous in the ill-fitting clothing of their former tormentors, they did not care. They were warm, they had food in their bellies for the first time in days, and they were still free. And they intended to stay that way.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK was a hellish one for the two fugitives as they trailed their former tormentors through the labyrinth of caves far beneath Hag Graef. They had to stay near enough to Lady Bela's band to follow their tracks but far enough away to avoid detection. They ensured that one of them was always awake, keeping watch and waking the other if their foes moved. They could not even light a fire, lest they draw unwanted attention to themselves, so they continued to navigate by the eerie light of the fungi.

The Lady Bela travelled at a terrific pace and rarely sent out scouts. Indeed all her attention seemed fixated on some distant

goal, although neither of the two fugitives could say what that might be. Despite their fatigue and the darkness, man and Elf would not be left behind. The followed the Forsworn with a manic single-mindedness, so desperate were they to see the light of day again. As the days passed, uncharted by sun or moon, Mormacar and Einar dropped into a monotonous, numbing routine. Conversation had died out after only a few days. It was all they could do to keep going.

When the Dark Elves finally did stop, the two fugitives, tired and dazed, nearly stumbled into the large cavern occupied by their foes. But the Norseman saw the glint of steel in the gloom and pulled his companion back down the tunnel in silence until they found a small cavern full of dripping stalactites. Despite the slimy floor, Mormacar flung himself down and immediately fell asleep.

The Elf awoke to the sound of drums, and at first thought he was back in fair Ulthuan. But a quick look at Einar, who looked nearly dead as he sat on watch, brought his dreaming mind crashing back to reality. 'Einar,' he whispered, 'what's going on?'

The Norseman slid back a few paces, but kept his eye on the passage ahead. 'It sounds like a foul ritual of some sort,' replied Einar, his voice full of loathing. 'You slept through the chanting, but it's been going for at least an hour by my reckoning.'

Mormacar nodded, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Gathering up his few possessions, he asked, 'Shall we pay a visit to the Lady Bela?'

The Norseman grinned. 'I was hoping you'd say that, Elfing. If I sit here any longer, I may well turn to stone.'

The two warriors crept forward. Mormacar still cringed at what the Norseman considered to be 'moving quietly', but the drumming and chanting drowned out even his blundering. After a few minutes they approached an enormous cavern lit up brilliantly with dozens of flaming torches. The bright illumination was almost too much to bear, so used were they to the dim light of the

caves. A few minutes of blinking and quiet cursing and their eyes had adjusted enough to see into the chamber beyond. They crept closer still, and it was then that Mormacar spotted a jagged column of black rock that thrust up from the floor. Signalling Einar with his eyes, Mormacar dashed the few yards to the column, followed quickly, if not gracefully, by Einar. Safely obscured, they crouched behind the rock and peered inside.

At the far end of the cavern was a tall altar of glassy black stone carved with evil runes and darkly stained. A hooded figure lay chained to this hideous slab, his frantic straining useless against the strong steel of the manacles. Surrounding the altar were four mighty stalagmites, and upon each of these was chained another hooded form. Below the altar, Dark Elf warriors beat wildly on a dozen drums while half clad Witch Elves danced around the cavern singing the praises of Khaine, god of murder. Presiding over this scene, her face glowing with ecstasy in the torch light, was the Lady Bela.

'This is truly a place of evil,' whispered Einar, his gaze transfixed on the spectacle before him.

Mormacar nodded in response. This is what Ulthuan would be like without the constant vigilance of the Shadow Warriors, he thought grimly. But even his brethren were but a breaker against the dark tide of Naggaroth.

The wailing of the Witch Elves reached a fevered pitch, and Lady Bela began to dance around the altar, lashing about with her whip in a fit of rapture. As she passed each of the stalagmites, she tore the mask from the face of the bound victim. Mormacar's heart caught in his throat as he recognised all four as prisoners from his cell who had gone upward with Galaher to try to escape. Seeing the terror on their faces, there was no comfort in knowing that he had chosen the right path.

Now all the assembled Dark Elves began to chant, 'Khaine! Khaine! Khaine!'

Lady Bela pulled a jagged blade from her belt, threw her head back, and howled like an animal. 'Lord Khaine,' she

intoned, her voice hot with passion, 'accept this sacrifice!' With that, her blade swept down and plunged into the chest of a screaming victim. Mormacar could watch no more and he turned away, his heart heavy. He could hear the laughter of Lady Bela, and the scuffling of her minions as they fought over the crimson prize he knew she had thrown them.

But realising this was no ordinary ritual, Mormacar steeled himself and turned his head back to watch. And as the last heart was torn from the last victim, a dark mist began to rise around the altar. It seemed that Lord Khaine was listening.

Einar dropped down behind the rock they were hiding behind, and pulled Mormacar down with him. 'Haven't you seen enough?' he said, his voice full of disgust. 'Or are you waiting for Khaine himself to appear?'

Mormacar knocked the Norseman's hand away. 'This ritual is important, Einar, and we must find out why. If it's too much for you cover your eyes!'

The Norseman bristled, and anger flashed in his eyes. Standing slowly, he spat, 'I've seen more blood than any gutless Elf. Pray you never know how much!' Then he turned his gaze away from the Shadow Warrior, and once again looked down on the Lady Bela.

Mormacar, cursing fate for throwing him together with this lot of a Norseman, did the same.

During their heated exchange, the black mist had surrounded the altar and now Lady Bela seemed to be adrift in clouds of inky darkness. She swayed back and forth above the altar, running the flat of her blade over the still-hooded form bound there. 'Lord Khaine,' she shouted, 'I ask for your favour in exchange for one final gift!' She grasped the hood and tore it free. 'See!' she growled. 'Galahaer Swiftblade!'

Mormacar froze in horror as the hood came free. There was poor Galahaer, beneath the knife of the murderous Lady Bela. Instinctively, he pulled his blade free and made to leap over the rock, but strong hands restrained him.

'Don't do it, Elfling!' Einar hissed urgently. 'You'll get us both killed!'

'Let me go, Volundson! It's Galahaer down there!' Mormacar strained against Einar's arms but couldn't break free.

'Remember your own words,' the Norseman whispered in his ear, as he struggled to hold back to writhing Elf. 'We will have our vengeance later. Now, we must escape.'

Mormacar struggled half-heartedly but his body slowly relaxed. As much as he hated it, he knew the Norseman was right. But Galahaer! What of Galahaer?

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Lady Bela's voice echoed through the chamber. 'Lord Khaine, even now our armies are on the march. Accept the blood of this Elf Lord as a sacrifice fitting your dark majesty!'

Once again the chants rose high, and the Lady Bela's knife plunged down. If she had hoped for a howl of fear, she was disappointed. Galahaer had long ago become resigned to his fate, and the sharp blade brought him the eternal rest he craved.

Mormacar wept silently as Lady Bela sacrificed Galahaer Swiftblade to her dark god. Einar held him but there was no need; Mormacar knew what he had to do.

Lady Bela dropped her knife, so she could hold the Elf's heart in both hands. 'Lord Khaine, this heart is yours!' she intoned. 'In return, I ask only one question. Will it burn with the fire of victory, or shrivel with the decay of defeat? Hear your humble servant and know that victory will bring hundreds more to your bloody altars!' Gripping the heart tightly, she tore it free from Galahaer's body. Holding it high, she shouted, 'For you, Lord Khaine, and victory!'

'For Khaine and victory!' howled the assembled Witch Elves. Every eye in the cavern was fixed on the pulsing heart. No one moved, no one breathed – and then the heart exploded in black flame that licked up and down Lady Bela's arms. She embraced the flame like a sister, and shouted one word with indescribable joy: 'Victory!'

The Dark Elves screamed with delight. Lady Bela lowered the heart and looked

with pride on her savage minions. Smiling her cruel smile, she tossed the flaming heart into the boiling mist below the altar. The black flame ignited the unnatural mist, and the heart exploded to form a vortex of swirling energy.

Lady Bela mounted the altar and with a shout of, 'To Arnheim and victory!' dove into the vortex and disappeared. One by one, her minions followed her lead.

Soon, Mormacar and Einar were alone in the great chamber with the bodies of the slain. As the two dumbfounded warriors looked on, the vortex began to shimmer and shrink. Mormacar quickly regained his senses and shouted, 'Quickly, Einar, we must follow them!'

The Norseman, eyes wild, said, 'Are you insane?'

'If you want to live, follow me!' Mormacar yelled. With that, he vaulted the rock and ran towards the shrinking vortex. Einar hesitated for a moment and then barrelled after him. Without a word, Mormacar dove into the endless blackness that hung over the floor.

Einar shouted, 'The gods love a fool!' and flung himself after the Elf as the vortex winked out of existence.



MORMACAR LANDED HARD on cold stone. A few seconds later, Einar appeared from nowhere and nearly fell on top of him. From the expression on the Norseman's face, he seemed entirely surprised to be alive. Warding himself against evil, the superstitious Norseman asked, 'In the name of all the gods, what was that?'

Mormacar stood up and listened intently. Mindful of the chanting and howling of the Dark Elves, which could still be heard from a nearby tunnel, he whispered, 'That was the darkest of magics.' Mormacar could feel the taint on him, and he brushed furiously on his ragged clothing in a vain attempt to wipe himself clean. 'It must have been some kind of gate. We could be anywhere now.'

'Then we have little choice,' Einar replied, at last rising from the cold floor, 'we must follow Lady Bela before her trail is lost.' Mormacar nodded in agreement. Their path was clear.

So the two warriors wearily resumed their previous routine. They followed Lady Bela and her minions, keeping their distance as best they could. Her pace had once again accelerated, and they pushed themselves hard to keep up. Two days later, the tunnels took a definite upward turn. This small victory gave the two fugitives a renewed burst of energy.

The following day Mormacar stopped without warning, and Einar crashed into him, sending them both to the ground. 'Mind yourself, Elfling,' the angry Norseman whispered. 'I've killed men for less.'

'Forget bloodletting for a single moment and smell,' Mormacar said insistently.

'Smell? I think you've eaten too many strange mushrooms these past few days.'

Mormacar grabbed the Norseman and shook him. 'Use your senses! Can't you smell the fresh air?'

Einar drew his hand back to strike the agitated Elf, but paused and then broke into a toothy grin. 'Aye, I can smell it. Fresh air, Elfling! It can't be far now.'

The two pressed on through the day, noting excitedly the widening of the tunnel. Then, without warning, they simply emerged above ground. It was night, so they had not seen light ahead, but there was no mistaking the stars above. The two warriors looked at each other and could not speak. What words could describe their feelings after such an ordeal? They simply clasped hands and laughed. They laughed at their fate, laughed at their luck, and laughed at the stars. And the laughter was real because it was theirs and they were free.

Looking about, they saw that they had emerged in the shadows of a imposing chain of mountains. Jagged spires reached for the heavens, towering above the exhausted fugitives. Below them stretched a valley, perhaps once fertile but now full of withered trees and blasted

earth. Still, Einar and Mormacar could not help but find the sight full of beauty. Compared to the mines of Hag Graef and the terror of the underworld, this place was paradise.

Warily now, lest a wrong step end their journey in tragedy, Elf and man crept down into the valley spread out below them. They searched amongst the withered trees for a sign of their foes, but found none. When they were sure it was safe, the fugitives made camp and then slept.

They awoke the next day refreshed, but their eyes burned in the dawning sunlight. It suddenly seemed so bright, so used had they become to the darkness below. Walking under the barren trees of the forest, Mormacar and Einar slowly regained their eyesight.

That night, Mormacar consulted the stars and tried to figure out where they were. 'I don't know how the Lady Bela did it, Einar, but we are only about 250 miles from Arnheim. We could make it there in nine days if we push ourselves, twelve if we don't.'

The Norseman chuckled, scratching at his ragged beard. 'Something tells me, Elfing, that you want us to push on ahead.'

'You are no fool,' Mormacar said. 'I don't know what Lady Bela has planned, but we must stop her.'

'So be it. We can rest behind the walls of your bastion.'

Without further discussion, the two warriors continued their great trek through the wilderness, leaving the vast Black Spine Mountains behind. Of Lady Bela and her Dark Elves, they saw no sign. It was as if the Witch Elf and her minions had been swallowed alive by the ancient forest.

Einar and Mormacar spent the days travelling and the evenings swapping tales. They were pleased to find that the further east they travelled, the greener the land became. They soon left the blasted forest behind and entered a region of wild grass broken up with copses of trees. The crossbows they had looted from the Dark Elves allowed them to hunt some

game. The Norseman turned out to be a fine trapper, which more than made up for his lack of aim. And thanks to Mormacar's ability to build a nearly smokeless fire, they were able to enjoy their first hot meals in memory. By the week's end they had shaken the worst effects of their imprisonment in Hag Graef.

At the end of the seventh day's march, Mormacar spotted a wispy plume of smoke to the east, where a series of low hills rose above a forest of pine. Cautiously, the two warriors headed towards it, hoping to find a friendly settlement of some kind. Coming to a gentle hill, Einar and Mormacar quickly climbed it. Dropping to the ground, they crawled the last few feet to the top and then peered below. Bile came to Mormacar's throat as he realised what they had stumbled upon.

Beneath them lay an entire Dark Elf army. Mormacar looked in horror at the spectacle before him. The plains below were covered with the tents of the Forsworn, and the once-green grassland had been turned brown and lifeless beneath thousands of boots. It seemed all of Naggaroath was going to war, and the elaborate tents flew the shrieking banners of the dread cities of the Dark Elves.

Hundreds upon hundreds of warriors swarmed across the camp, united in their hatred of their High Elf kin. The Executioners of Har Ganeth, fearsome in the billowing black cloaks, strode amongst the crowd, their brutal axes sharpened and ready. Savage Witch Elves danced lewdly around a great Cauldron of Blood. Black armoured knights whipped their reptilian steeds into readiness for the battle ahead and engineers worked feverishly to build more of their dreaded repeating bolt-throwers. It was as if the Witch King himself had vomited forth a black stain onto the green lands below.

'Einar,' Mormacar whispered, 'they mean to attack Arnheim!' His heart sank when he thought of his kin in the unsuspecting city.

'Aye, Elfing, the words of Lady Bela now ring true.' Einar looked into his

companion's eyes and, seeing the fire that burned there, knew their ordeal wasn't yet finished.

'We must reach Arnheim first and warn my people,' the Shadow Warrior said, his voice strained. 'The Forsworn must be stopped.'

'You know I have no love for your folk, Mormacar,' the Norseman replied, 'but to thwart the Dark Elf scum I will gladly help you and your kin.'

Mormacar gripped Einar's hand. They had fought and bled together, their fates bound inextricably together. The Shadow Warrior stood, then turned to make his way down the hill. His keen eyes quickly picked out the skulking forms of two Dark Elf scouts who were silently making their way up towards them.

'Einar!' he yelled, unloading a bolt at the nearest scout.

The Norseman turned about as a speeding Dark Elf bolt pierced his left leg. Mormacar's missile also found its mark, burying itself in the scout's chest. Norseman and Dark Elf both fell to the ground, as the two remaining combatants closed. Mormacar drew his sword but kept the repeating crossbow hanging loosely in his left hand. The scout smiled wickedly, unsheathed his own blade, and charged up the hill. Mormacar parried a brutal overhead blow, brought up his crossbow, and fired it point blank into his enemy's stomach. The scout fell back with a grunt and rolled down the hill. The Shadow Warrior ran to finish off his foe, but could not plunged his sword home before the wounded scout had screamed long and loudly.

'Einar, let's get out of here!' the Elf shouted, his eyes picking out the shadows of more enemy scouts.

'I'm not going anywhere on this leg,' the Norseman said gravely. 'Leave me and go warn your people.'

Only now did Mormacar see the Norseman's wound. Einar had tugged the bolt free and tied off the bleeding, but he could hardly walk. 'Einar, I can't just leave you here! Not after what we've been through.'

'Yes, you can, because you must.

Together, we'll never make it, but alone you just might.' The Norseman smiled grimly. 'Perhaps now I can make an end for myself worthy of a Saga. I'll hold them here as long as I can. Now, go!'

Mormacar embraced the big Norseman. 'Einar Volundson, I swear this oath before all the gods: the Skalds will sing of your bravery this day.'



WITH A LEADEN HEART, Mormacar turned and ran down the hill. He wanted to turn back, to stay until the bitter end, but he knew that he couldn't desert the people of Arnheim. Even now, he could see Dark Elf soldiers rushing towards Einar. The Shadow Warrior doubled his speed, determined to make his friend's sacrifice meaningful. Einar stood alone on the hill, a sword in either hand and death in his eyes. His life would not be sold cheaply.

The Shadow Warrior made it to the forest, and already he was breathing heavily. Diving behind a fallen tree trunk, he stopped to scan for pursuers. There were none yet. The Dark Elves' attention was fixed on Einar, who lay about him with mighty strokes and sent his foes reeling down the hill. Mormacar tore his eyes from Einar and, moving quickly, plunged into the forest and headed east. He needed to skirt the enemy camp if he was going to make it to the plains beyond. As he ran, he could hear the bloodthirsty howls of the frenzied Norseman. The Father of Battles was surely proud that day.

Mormacar had been reared in the wild expanses of the Shadowlands, and spent his life waging a merciless war on the Forsworn. Now he used every iota of his instinct and his training to slip through the woods unnoticed. He could hear the pounding of hooves and the shouts of the search parties, but he was a ghost in the shadows. Striving to keep his pace steady, Mormacar darted from tree to tree, his passing silent and leaving no sign. It took

him nearly two hours to circle the Dark Elf army and he could now see the plains beyond. He was close, and the hated enemy was almost behind him.

Suddenly, the quiet was shattered by the thunderous approach of a Forsworn war party. Heart pounding, Mormacar threw himself flat and crawled into a tangled bush. The sharp branches cut his face and hands but he uttered no sound. Sitting perfectly still, he waited as the Dark Elves approached. The horses had slowed their pace as they entered the forest, and now Mormacar could only hear the gentle clip-clop of hooves and the jangling of harnesses. The sounds got louder as the Witch King's minions approached, and Mormacar gripped his crossbow tightly with his sweaty palms.

The Dark Elves broke out of cover, and the Shadow Warrior could see the wiry forms of three Dark Riders atop their midnight steeds. They circled the area slowly, scanning the ground for some sign of their quarry. When the Dark Riders found nothing, they regrouped and began to ride deeper into the forest.

But a chance glance from the last of the retreating horsemen aroused his suspicion. This rider broke off from his companions and cantered toward the concealed Elf. Mormacar noticed too late that a piece of his cloak had torn off and was now clearly visible, hanging in the branches of the bush. Cursing himself for his carelessness, Mormacar readied himself as the Dark Elf approached.

The remaining horsemen now turned their steeds and galloped towards the hidden High Elf, skilfully guiding their horses around the intervening trees. The foremost Dark Rider, spear extended, moved ever closer.

Mormacar launched himself out of the bushes with a yell. The evil steed reared in surprise, its rider dropping his spear while seeking desperately to calm his snorting mount. Mormacar stepped to the side of the stomping beast, and levelled his crossbow at the other two Dark Riders. With cold precision, he fired the crossbow twice in quick succession at the approaching horsemen, the infernal

mechanism of the Forsworn weapon now turned against its masters. Both bolts found their mark, and the stunned Dark Elves fell from their saddles, wounded or slain. The last of the Dark Riders had regained enough control of his mount to leap from the saddle and tackle the weary Shadow Warrior. Both Elves fell to the ground and the Forsworn smiled cruelly as he felt Mormacar's bones crunch beneath his weight.

Mormacar felt the breath knocked out of his body, and could only struggle as the Dark Elf rained blows down on him. The Dark Rider pulled a gleaming dagger from his belt, his other hand at Mormacar's throat. The Shadow Warrior thrashed desperately, trying with all his might to wrench the blade free. As the two mortal foes struggled, Mormacar's empty hand closed around a rock. Smiling grimly, the Shadow Warrior shifted his weight, and smashed the jagged rock into the skull of his foe, caving it in with one great blow.

The Dark Elf crumpled to the ground and Mormacar struggled to his feet. He grabbed the reins of the Dark Rider's mount and swung himself into the saddle. Nothing would stop him from reaching Arnheim. Nothing!

Leaving the dead and dying behind, Mormacar raced out onto the plains and kept on riding. He could almost feel the hot breath of Lady Bela on his neck, and whipped the horse furiously to coax every ounce of speed out of the swift beast. Even though he rode at a full gallop, he would turn to look for Dark Riders every few minutes, but the crucial first hours saw no pursuit. All too aware of the power of Dark Magic, however, the Shadow Warrior rode on as if Khaine himself was in pursuit.

For the better part of a day, Mormacar stayed in the saddle and drove the horse on. Finally, the dark steed could take no more: it threw the Shadow Warrior from the saddle and collapsed. The huge steed rolled in the tall grass, whinnying in pain.

Mormacar lay in the grass, agony shooting through his shoulder. For minutes, or maybe it was hours, he

drifted in and out of consciousness. He could tell that his arm was broken and his body seemed to be one big bruise. Gods, but he was wrecked. Perhaps he should surrender to the screaming pleas of his body and rest? But what of Arnheim?

He could still hear the horse screaming in pain. It thrashed in the grass, surely dying. And its howls took him back to the altar of the Khaine. Once again he was in dark temple at Hag Graef, prisoner of the Lady Bela, forced to watch his kinsmen fall under her knife. And he could not decide if the screams of the dying horse reminded him more of the victims of Lady Bela, or of her bestial Witch Elf minions. But he did know that he would gladly give his life to spare his brethren in Arnheim such a fate. There was no more time to waste. He had to push on.

So steeling himself, Mormacar rose, every joint and bone straining with the pressure. But he staggered forward... east, always east towards Arnheim. As he crossed icy streams and tore his way through obstructing brambles, he lost track of time completely. It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other, to ignore the pain in his shoulder and cover those final miles. When his body threatened to fail him, he thought of those who had already fallen in the struggle. The faces of his dead friends seemed to hang before him, urging him on. He saw his Shadow Warrior brethren, slain in foul ambush. He saw the prisoners of Hag Graef and Galaher Swiftblade, ruthlessly sacrificed by the Lady Bela. And he saw Einar Volundson, now surely dead. For all of them, and his kin yet living in Arnheim, he forced himself on.

So Mormacar passed the night, stumbling in the dark in a desperate bid to bring salvation to the last High Elf bastion outside of Ulthuan. As the morning haze evaporated under the burning sun, he saw it. In the distance, rising above the well-ordered fields of the outlying farms, a shining tower of pure white, surrounded by stout battlements and sharp Elven steel. Arnheim! Arnheim at last!

He stopped, overcome with emotion, all his pain forgotten for that one instant. He had done it. He had escaped from

Hag Graef and come in time to warn his kin of the impending attack. He looked forward to watching Lady Bela wither under a crushing defeat, and hoped he could face in her the battle to come. Only when his blade clove her in twain would justice be served.

Eyes closed, Mormacar smiled then, thinking of his sweet revenge, and failed to notice the tell-tale hiss of a speeding missile. His head jerked up as it struck his throat and pain shot through him like fire. He fell to his knees, blood oozing from the terrible wound. He reached out to the horizon, reached for the tower of Arnheim but his hand grasped at nothing. His life ebbing away, Mormacar tried to cry out, to warn his brethren in Arnheim that doom approached. But no sound emerged from his ruined throat, and he fell forward in a heap.

'Forgive me,' Mormacar thought, his head full of visions of Einar, Galaher, and his kin, 'I have failed you all.' Then he surrendered to the pain, and it consumed him utterly.



H'E'S DOWN!' an icy voice shouted. 'Let's take a look.' Three figures rose from the tall grass and walked over to the body of the fallen Elf. They looked him over silently, poking the body to make sure the arrow had done its work. Seeing his haggard form, bloody and dressed in a ragged Dark Elf uniform, their faces filled with disdain.

'Look at this Forsworn scum, he's filthier than a pig,' said a disgusted voice.

'What was a lone Dark Elf doing so close to Arnheim?' said a second.

'You can tell by the state of him,' the icy voice said, 'he's clearly a fugitive. We get these strays now and again. Throw him in that ditch and let's continue our patrol.'

'But sir, shouldn't we alert the garrison, just in case.'

'There's no need to rush, brother. We'll report in at the end of the day, as usual. What could happen by sunset anyway?' ●

"Within the space of a heartbeat it was done, yet Chronos deemed it too few, always too few to satiate his ravenous soul-hunger..."



WATEY



Sgt. Fortius

A good day
to die...



THE DAY OF THIRST

BY TULLY R. SUMMERS



URE YOU'VE GOT a heavy stubber. You just better hope Krug hired you to use it, and not for something else.

Oh, I'd rather not say. If Krug hasn't told you – and he obviously hasn't, because you're here – it's not for me to go spilling the beans. Drink your WildSnake, it'll take your mind off that hand of yours.

Of course it stings. The initiate brand ain't meant to tickle. Supposed to impress upon you the seriousness of joining the Black Hand. Don't pick at it, you'll catch spore rot and the arm'll drop off, then they'll have to burn it someplace else.

What? Well of course it's watered down. The way you Black Hand swill the stuff, I wouldn't have enough WildSnake to souse a sump rat.

Uh huh, that's right. Took you on to replace Dramuck. It's *in what capacity*, you should be worried about.

All right, I'll tell you if you promise to stop calling me 'Weasel' – a most undeserved moniker for such an upstanding gaming den proprietor such as myself, and I don't care what Krug says.

It was a quiet day at the Bonesapper's Lounge–

Yes, that's what they call this old heap of a troop transport.

Why? It's a gambling den, you figure it out.

Nope, hasn't moved for years, ever since whatever it was that blew its left tread off hit it – though some swear it's going somewhere when they get enough WildSnake in them. Look, do you want to hear this or not?

Anyway, it was relatively quiet, with half the Black Hand out working their territory. Krug Face-Mauler sat in a corner with a Guilder from Dead End, hacking out a slag mining contract–

Yes, I'm sure he has a brand somewhere, even if you can't see it behind all that adamantite plate he wears, he *started* the gang, for sump's sake! Shall I continue or do you want go search Krug for distinguishing marks?

Very well. Not far from the hagglers, watching with steely eyes was Horgen, Krug's personal guard.

Yeah, you've seen him before, probably using those two chainswords on some poor gob in the fighting pit at Slimecrawl. Yes, *that* Horgen. Beside Horgen, Flange was primping and combing his long pink mohawk. He's something of a dandy, quite a feat in a crew of Goliaths. The only reason Krug and the others don't kill him is that he's good with those pistols. Soft moans came from the back room where Agar, who usually takes care of Black Hand's 'business' here at the Sapper, lay sweating on my sheets with the shakes. He'd paid some Ratskin to give him a glow mould tattoo the day before, that thing on his face that pulses green with his heartbeat. It's the glow spores under the skin, you see, but it made him sick as a Scavy when he first got it.

On the other side of the room – the others trying to sit out of blast range – was Dramuck, a huge mountain of muscle. That suicidal heavy bolter of his dismantled for cleaning and scattered across my best rat-wheel table. Me holding my breath every time his

tinkering set those unstable bolt shells rolling around.

No, I didn't ask him to move. Sure his bolter was dismantled, but his fists weren't, and I didn't feel like eating my teeth just then.

That's when Mother Dark came in, clanging through the two hinged tread pieces of the door like she owned the place. Everyone froze, like a frag had just landed in their lap, and they were waiting to see if it'd go off. Behind Mother Dark strolled in three of her gang, like some kind of erotic carrion bats in black and red leathers.

Who's Mother Dark? You'll find out soon enough. Mother Dark is the High Priestess of the Blood Coven. A secretive Escher gang to the south, practising an obscure religion of their own. Up until recently the Coven had pretty much kept to themselves. Then, for no apparent reason, they began making bloody raids on surrounding territories. The raids themselves seemed rather pointless, with no obvious goal except carnage. Well, carnage and captives. Gangers and settlers taken by the Coven were never seen again. That's when the rumours started of dark magic and unspeakable rituals.

This, then, was Mother Dark, their leader, standing in my entrance, and staring at Krug Face-Mauler like he was the only one in the room.

'Guilder leave!' she commanded, her voice like a razor through velvet.

The Guilder, sputtering indignation at being given orders, gathered his robes about him and scurried out past the warrior women.

Krug rose slowly, the muscles of his jaw working as he bit back his rage. 'You dare break our pact, witch?'

One of the Eschers behind Mother Dark raised a heavy stubber, levelling at all in the room. Horgen's hands flew to the chainswords sheathed on his back, and Flange's pistols were already out, aiming from his lap beneath the table.

'We have held our part of the bargain, and not entered your territory,' Mother Dark purred icily, ignoring the weapon-

filled tension. 'But you have yet to deliver one for sacrifice.'

Until now Black Hand had not tangled with the Coven, but by the incredulous looks they directed towards their leader, they obviously had not attributed this to some dubious pact. The shock on their faces quickly turned to fury, and for a moment I thought Krug would be gunned down by his own men.

'You'll get your blasted sacrifice when we capture one of those Orlock scum!' Krug growled back, admirably keeping panic out of his voice.

'No, Krug. The time to sacrifice one of a rival gang is passed. *The Day of Thirst approaches!* So say the Books of Letting. Preparations must be made. The Sacrifice must be one of your own, one of Black Hand. You will bring the chosen one to the Drinking Stones in exactly four hours, or prepare for our wrath. The Day of Thirst approaches.'

And they vanished out of the door again before anyone could respond.

Krug turned to his men, who still held their weapons in their hands. All that babble about the Day of Thirst and the prospect of being chosen for sacrifice had done nothing to calm the men's nerves.

'Well, Krug, what's it going to be?' Horgen asked, his finger twitching on the trigger of his chainsword.

'War!' Krug barked. 'No sump-sucking Escher wench is going to give the Black Hand orders! We hit them. Hit 'em hard, and hit 'em now. We'll catch them on the way back to their hideout.'

Krug's plan, though a relieving alternative to sacrifice, had its problems. First of all, only five Black Hand gangers were present, and with Agar sweating out his glow mould, that left only four gangers to 'hit 'em hard'. That's when I was deputised.

No, I can't shoot or fight worth a damn, but Krug wanted numbers. I refused at first, of course, but when Krug offered to wave his 'protection' fee on the Bonesapper's Lounge for a couple of weeks, well, my credit book got the better of my judgement. By all the gods, if I'd

only known... I would've paid Krug twice as much not to go.

The second problem with Krug's plan was time of departure. It took Dramuck an hour to reassemble his heavy bolter, and another hour trudging through chemdust plains, across gantries and down air vents as we made our way into Blood Coven territory. We never caught the Coven on their way home.

We emerged from the air ducts at the Drinking Stones, and a right mess we were too. The chemdust on our clothes had turned to mud in a particularly steamy duct, and our hair was thickly matted with ventmite web, but as we weren't there on a date, it didn't much matter.

The Drinking Stones served as the Blood Coven's headquarters. They lay in an ancient and crumbling dome, filled with debris and rusting catwalks. The Coven had erected the circle of standing stones and a strange altar made out of broken chunks of concrete. Mother Dark and two of the Coven that had been at the Sapper were moving about the stones in bizarre circles. Miraculously, the heavy stubber was not there. We were two hours early, and had apparently caught them in the middle of some ritual.

Dramuck opened fire from the gantry on which he emerged, three storeys up, raining death into the circle of stone with his heavy bolter. I ran to a junction and down the air vent to the next opening about five paces away and began shooting wildly, the borrowed auto pistol bucking awkwardly in my hands. Krug, Horgen and Flange leapt down ladders to the rubble-strewn floor.

Things went well at first. The Coven had scattered and taken cover behind the standing stones, and Dramuck's hail of bolts were keeping them pinned there. I can't say my own shooting did much but add to the noise, but I think that was Krug's idea anyway.

He, Flange and Horgen took the opportunity to rush the Stones on the ground. They were almost there when the back of Flange's thigh burst open in a bloody spray. He went down, clutching the spewing wound.

Krug and Horgen spun to face their new attackers. A hatch had opened in the dome wall behind them. Sister Quench, the witch with the heavy stubber, stood in the opening, sending burning chunks of lead into the three Goliaths. Behind her, also drawn by the sound of gunfire, were two more Eschers, charging to their sisters' rescue.

Krug bent, grabbing Flange by the collar, the ground around him flying into sharp concrete slivers. Meanwhile Horgen, chainswords screaming, charged the three Eschers at the door, who wisely sought to avoid the onslaught of the maniacal pit fighter behind its steel jamb. Krug used the brief respite to drag the wounded Flange to the nearest cover, the steel lattice of a catwalk support pillar. Horgen changed the direction of his charge and followed suit.

High above, sweat poured from Dramuck's body, veins bulging like cords in his neck and arms. The heavy bolter ate belt after belt from its huge ammo pack, spitting those bolts from its glowing red muzzle with a sound like chugging thunder. The Coven's reinforcements had come through the hatch directly beneath the gantry that Dramuck had positioned himself on, so he continued his fire into the standing stones, unable to draw a bead on the new threat.

Me, on the other hand, being twenty feet off to the side, could just barely see the bottom of their entry hatch. With a target finally within range, I redirected my fire.

Mother Dark and her cronies, the stones exploding around them, would periodically duck out to snap off wild shots. The two witches with Sister Quench made a dash through the hatch toward Krug and Horgen, my bullets sparking harmlessly off the nearby wall.

Krug aimed his shotgun through the crossbars of the support strut and blasted one of the charging Eschers. The solid slug hit the Coven juve in the neck, practically severing her head. Her lifeless body hurled back and crumpled on the floor amidst a rain of blood and bits of vertebrae.

Sister Quench's crouching form suddenly filled the part of the hatch I

could see. Heavy stub slugs began pelting the ductwork around me. I pressed myself to the vent wall, only to hear the metallic shriek of the support lattice giving way.

The whole air shaft I was in twisted, buckled, and plummeted to the ground like some huge rusted worm in its death throes.

When the noise and dust settled, I realised I was somehow still alive. I was on my back, buried up to my shoulders in twisted metal. The ventilation tube was still attached to the wall at the other end, slanting down at crumpled angles to the floor where I now lay, trapped and immobile.

As if things weren't bad enough, Dramuck's pumping bolter finally overheated. The huge machine seized, jamming bolt after bolt together like a tube train crash. It exploded in his hands, sending his body soaring over the edge of the gantry. His fall halted with a sickening crunch, impaling him on the jagged end of a support that had held my fallen air shaft. I frantically tried to free myself, and was rewarded with a new avalanche of debris that covered me completely.

That was it. With two men down and his heavy bolter skewered on a girder, Krug was hopelessly outnumbered. His harried voice came 'Out and back! Out and back! Now!'

The Blood Coven jeered and fired off parting shots as Krug, Horgen and Flange fled the dome through a crevice in its shattered wall.

'Come again, Black Hand!' Mother Dark mocked. 'You're welcome any time!'

My stomach turned with sickening realisation that I had been left for dead. The pile of metal covering me had pinned my head to the side... if only it had broken my neck, I would have been spared the horrors I witnessed next. For though trapped and concealed from view, there was a small hole or tunnel through which I could breathe and see out of, directly in front of my face – staring directly at the Drinking Stones.

Some time went by, in which I assume the Coven were tending their wounds,

and scouring the dome for survivors. They did not find me. For that I can give some little thanks. I saw them finally enter the circle of stones carrying two bodies: that of their mangled juve, and Dramuck, who they had somehow managed to drag off the impaling support.

And this is the worst part: Dramuck was still alive.

Any normal man would have died in the blast of his exploding weapon, never mind a careening fall onto sharp metal. It was his massive physique, you see. An iron constitution that refused to let go. The wounds through his shoulder told me that the support hadn't passed through any vital organs. Poor fragging bastard. If only it had hit his heart...

Mother Dark appeared, wearing a robe made of, well, I couldn't swear, but it looked like skin. Yeah, human. No, I don't know for sure. Look, I wasn't that calm at the time... Anyway, she stood before the altar and produced a large bound tome that I chose not to inspect too closely. She began to recite words from the book, strange garbled stuff that I couldn't pronounce, even if I could remember them. A witch with a chainsword began slicing up the dead juve on the floor while four others lifted the groaning Dramuck onto the table-like altar.

I winced and grit my teeth as horrible stone spikes were driven through his wrists and ankles into holes bored deep into the stone surface. This nightmare continued as the rest of the sisters began painting the pock-marked stones with strange symbols and arcs, using the bloody appendages of the dead juve. I could barely watch. This done, the Coven gathered in a circle about the pinioned body of Dramuck.

Mother Dark looked up from her recitation. 'The Day of Thirst is approaching! So say the Books of Letting!' she shouted, lifting the book above her head. 'Preparations must be made!'

With that she opened her robe, revealing a girdle made out of leather. It was covered in dozens of loops and pockets, each holding a gruesome bladed hook, like some horrible surgical

instrument. The Coven members filed past Mother Dark one by one, each taking an instrument, and descended on Dramuck.

I thrashed, contorted and beat myself against the restraining pile of metal around me, in a desperate attempt to free myself. Desperate to be away, desperate not to see the hideous dismantling of Dramuck. Chunks of metal crashed to the floor with my exertions, but their reverberating clangs were drowned out by the inhuman screaming coming from the Drinking Stones.

I finally succeeded in freeing most of my body, but the evil piece of rubble pinning my head would not budge. I could not look away. I caught one nightmare image before I clenched my eyes shut to the abhorrent act before me.

It wakes me at night. Screaming. Dramuck splayed out like an anatomy book, the witches with their little hooks and blades, teasing tendon, vein, and organ from their rightful places, rivers of blood coursing down the sides of the altar... and all the while, Dramuck's screaming...

It seemed to go on for hours, tears streaming down my cheeks, my face aching from pressing my lids together so hard I thought my eyeballs would burst. And then it stopped. I lay there, eyes closed, breathing, for what seemed the first time in weeks.

Sometime later, when all was completely still, and I had heard the Coven depart, I chanced a look into the Drinking Stones. Dramuck's remains had mercifully been removed, though the red stone still glistened wetly. Mother Dark knelt at the base of the altar, praying.

Then, as the quiet of the dome carried her voice to me, I realised what I had taken for prayer was conversation. She was talking. Looking closer, I saw the altar sat upon a large drain, like a sewer grate.

She was cooing as one speaks to a dear, small child. 'Yes. Yes my sweet. Drink. Drink deeply, for your day approaches. The day you will emerge and all the Hive will tremble before your glory.'

My blood ran cold. There was something beneath the altar. Something huge. I could hear it, a sloshing gelatinous mass, flopping and banging around in some vast liquid filled metal vat. She was talking to it. And at the pinnacle of my terror, it spoke back. A sucking, gurgling mockery of human sound echoing from the pit.

'THI-I-I-I-RST'

In an insane surge of panic driven energy, I wrenched my head free of its vice-like imprisonment, leaving a good portion of my scalp hanging on its edge. Bleeding, I ran like a madman up the twisted tunnel of the hanging air shaft and out of that accursed dome, but not before Mother Dark's sickly sweet voice came drifting up the metal tunnel.

'Yes, my sweet. Preparations are being made...'



O SURE, YOU'VE got a heavy stubber, but you see the question you should be asking yourself, don't you? *Have I been hired to replace Dramuck to fight those sump-sucking degenerate witches...*

Or have I been hired to replace Dramuck as sacrifice to that thing, that abominable monstrosity beneath the altar?

You see, I'm not sure wily old Krug and that witch Mother Dark haven't got together and come to an agreement since our last-

No, wait!

Where are you going?

You haven't paid for your WildSnake yet! ●



Dear *Inferno!*

If you can read this writing, I'm trying to say that I thought that the first four issues were stunning. I especially enjoyed 'Paradise Lost' and 'Into the Maelstrom' from issue 4. It gave a good insight into both of these universes. Of the two, I especially enjoyed 'Into the Maelstrom', it had a really good feel, and for once the bad guys win!

I would like to see more stories and artwork. These really add to the feel of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 and also Necromunda. I would like stories about the Dark Age of Technology and possibly pictures of old machines like the Golden Throne.

Cheers,

Luke Nulty, Dundalk, Ireland

Dear *Inferno!*,

Quite a few of the central characters would be good for occasional ongoing series (Nathan Creed or Gaunt's Ghosts, for example). Could the authors of these stories be encouraged to do this?

Best wishes,

Sandra Fotheringham, Roath, Cardiff

Dear *Inferno!*,

As I expected after reading the first issue, *Inferno!* started off brilliantly and has continued to go from strength to strength with each successive issue. The artwork, comic strips, stories and other features of the magazine have all been to the highest standards. The result is a magazine which is riveting to read and very difficult to put down.

Keep up the good work!

James Ridgwell, Yeovil, Somerset

Dear *Inferno!*,

Keep up with the publication, especially tales of Grunsson's Marauders! How about after a dozen issues you print a compilation of the cover artwork with other goodies too?

Good luck!

Ross Sinclair, Kilmarnock

Dear *Inferno!*,

When I first read *Inferno!* I gave thanks to the gods of Chaos for creating this fantastic magazine full of dark stories of violence and carnage. Personally I prefer stories about Chaos, either in Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000. The end of 'Into the Maelstrom' is one of my favourites. From my black tower I summon all the damned powers to keep your magazine going forever.

Esteban Meersmans Morev, Granada, Spain

Dear *Inferno!*,

Inferno! has truly broadened my knowledge of the worlds of Warhammer. I think if you created a special model unit of Gaunt and his Ghosts it would really be popular.

May the Emperor's praise ever shine on you!

Benjamin Zulauf, Narre Warren East,
Victoria, Australia

Dear *Inferno!*,

This is the best ever idea from GW. I can't stop reading the stories even when I've finished them. *Inferno!* is hot - 'scuse the pun!

Andrew McLeish, South Belmont, Ar

Dear *Inferno!*,

The magazine is a very cool idea - kudos to you guys for separating rules from the stories. The chief appeal of Warhammer 40,000 for the people that I play Necromunda with has always been the atmosphere of the universe. Most armies in the future universe have an individual ethos and history that is most interesting (except for House Goliath who are a silly pack of tarty himbo-es!). The Imperium groans under the crushing weight of history with the millenia-past Heresy still reverberating through its worlds. The eerie fallen Eldar civilisation lamenting the birth of Slaanesh. Even the terrifyingly voracious alien Hive Mind which consumes 'civilized' space is intriguing in its horror.

'The Black Pearl' was especially good, not least because the reader is aware that the Fallen Angel has won well before the Chaplain is!

Yours sincerely,

Michael Bradley, Naremburn, NSW, Australia

Dear *Inferno!*,

Inferno! is the best thing from Games Workshop since Slottabases! I love it! It should be twice as thick and monthly. I have one question though: why did you not do this before?!!

Yours,

Jack Roberts, Battle, East Sussex

Dear *Inferno!*,

Waaaagh!! Dakka dakka dakka!!! Ded good!!!

Adrian White, Crawley Down, West Sussex

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



• ROLL OF HONOUR •

JUST A COUPLE OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED
TO THIS ISSUE OF INFERNO!

TULLY R. SUMMERS serves as full-time secretary to his semi-detached Siamese twin, hanging off his left hip, writing down the odd stories it whispers to him at night. Tully is currently recuperating from the twin's attempt to sever their business relationship with a steak knife. He plans to remove all sharp objects from his household and not eat anything that can't be sucked through a straw.

JEFF WAYE is a young artist who works at Frozen Ink Studios in Toronto alongside Logan Lubera. Having spent much of his late teens playing Games Workshop products,

especially WH40K, he has long-been fascinated by the draftsmanship of GW artists (past and present) such as



Kev Walker (*check that cover, Jeff! – Ed*), Gary Harrod, Adrian Smith and Mark Gibbons. These and other, mainly UK-based, artists influenced him in his formative years, but he feels that he's kept enough of himself in his work to be unique.

JOIN THE CREW!

This creative pair sent in their work on spec; we liked it so much we printed it! If you also want to contribute, get in touch. We're looking for short stories, comic art and single-page portraits, all in the familiar action-stuffed Inferno! style. If you're unsure about what we're after, just read this issue! If you feel you have what it takes, write to the address on page 2 and ask for a copy of our Writer's or Artist's Guidelines.

Previously in Inferno!...



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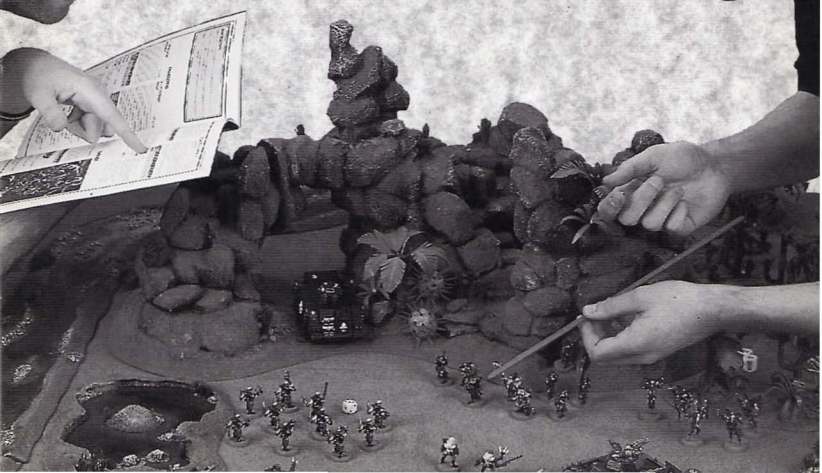
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INFERNO!

A World Above by Alex Hammond

Knife Edge Liz snapped her eyes open and looked about her. From the signs a story unfolded: the blood-sprayed walls, laceration wounds to her dead comrades. A trail of light imprints in the earth led to the body of a stranger, wired into a still-pulsing fighting suit. Bladed gauntlets still moist with blood hung by his side. Liz's gang had come to ambush someone. Something had gone wrong.

The History of Bernhardt the Brave by Ralph Horsley

Count Bernhardt held the Runefang sword aloft and pointed to the heart of the Chaos army before them. Mailed hands lowered visors. Never had the world witnessed a charge such as on that day. The finest flowering of manhood swept in serried ranks upon their foe. The Chaos multitude, caught upon their rear, splintered. Runefang whistled in blurred arcs, a whirling scythe of death. Wherever Bernhardt led, the knights followed, carving a swathe of destruction.

Gaunt's Ghosts: A Bleeding by Dan Abnett

They were two hours into the dark, black-trunked woods when Colonel Ortiz saw death. It wore red, and stood in the trees to the right of the track, unmoving, watching his column of Basilisks as they passed. Almost twice a man's height, frighteningly broad, armour the colour of rusty blood and crested by curving brass antlers. The face was a graven death's head. Daemon... Chaos Warrior... Worldeater!

Mormacar's Lament by Chris Pramas

'He's awake,' a gruff voice said. Suddenly a cup was at Mormacar's lips and water coursed down his throat. It tasted sweet beyond words. He looked up into the scarred face of an old Elf. 'Where am I?' The warrior looked down on him, pity on his face, and whispered, 'I'm sorry, son, but you're in Hag Graef.'

The Day of Thirst by Tully R. Summers

That's when Mother Dark came in, clanging through the door like she owned the place. Everyone froze. Behind Mother Dark strolled three of her gang, like some kind of erotic carrion bats in leathers. She was staring at Krug Face-Mauler like he was the only one in the room. 'We have held our part of the bargain, and not entered your territory,' Mother Dark purred icily. 'But you have yet to deliver a sacrifice.'

Also featuring...

A revelatory episode of 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh; awesome illustrations from Wayne England, Jeff Rebner and Jeff Waye; and much more.

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