

INFERNO!



TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



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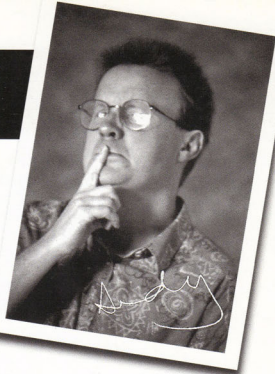
UNLESS I HAVE my dates horribly wrong (not for the first time, I might add), this issue must mark two years of *Inferno!* How time flies! *Inferno!* has been a great springboard for new artists and writers to show us their take on Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. Apart from the impressive array of fiction from the likes of William King, Gav Thorpe, Alex Hammond, Jonathan Green, Dan Abnett, and many others besides, and the cool illustrations to go with them, there has been all sorts of other cool stuff – cutaway tank diagrams from Logan Lubera (where are you, Logan, by the way?), feature after brilliant feature from Ralph Horsley and the breakneck 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh. The comic strips impressed us so much that we spun off our own award-winning comic, *Warhammer*

Montbly! Not that this has stopped us running comic strips here in *Inferno!* too, oh no!

So what's next, I hear you ask, suspecting (quite rightly) that there is a cunning point to my rambling. Well, much as we have enjoyed all the one-off stories, some characters have forged themselves a place in the Warhammer mythos to the extent that we have gone back for more... and more. Of course, there is the indomitable duo of Gotrek and Felix, who have re-emerged with a vengeance in the pages of *Inferno!*, but there are others too. Dieter, the priest of Morr with a distinctly shady past; Kage, the reluctant hero of Schaeffer's Last Chancers; the Elf Gillead, doomed to wander the known world in search of an empty destiny; my very own Grunson's Marauders (must get round to finishing off another story!); Zavant Konniger, the mysterious sleuth of Altdorf (back next issue!); the hammer-wielding, beer-swilling Company of Wolves; Torben Badenov and his hardbitten mercenaries; and of course the mighty commissar Gaunt and his warriors of Tanith. Quite a list when you start to think about it, and I'm bound to have missed loads.

Here's a question for you: Do you like to read short snappy one-offs, or do you prefer to see the same characters coming back from time to time in new stories? Or a combination of both? Write in and let us know, and feel free to tell us anything else you like or dislike about *Inferno!*

HERE'S ANOTHER question: what would you think about a Gaunt's Ghosts novel, all new adventures from start to finish? Or a trilogy



of Gotrek and Felix novels?

As you no doubt suspect (and no doubt *know*, if you've already had a look at the inside back cover!), this is a little more rhetorical than the previous question. Because the first two titles in a brand new range of novels set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 hit the streets in August. We're kicking off with *Trollslayer*, a collection of Gotrek and Felix stories from William King, plus *First and Only*, an all-new Gaunt's Ghosts novel from Dan Abnett.

And this is not an isolated glitch – from now on as well as your regular dose of short stories with *Inferno!*, the Black Library will be publishing an ever-growing range of action and adventure novels. Interested? If you want to find out more about our first four releases, look at our new website; the URL is at the top of the page. You can even download the first chapter of each of the first two novels for a taster right now!

Oh no! Horror of horrors, I've just been forced to use my precious editorial space for an unashamed advert. Well, it just goes to show how full of mayhem and carnage this issue of *Inferno!* must be...

Andy Jones
Editor

ENTER THE





INSIDE...

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Illustration by *Percy Melbye*.

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THE BATTLE WAS at an end. There was nothing more to be known except the dirge of the wind, sighing through the blackened elms that marked this deep tract of the Drakwald forest.

Fithvael began to rouse. It was cold and lightless as he lay on the dank earth of the battlefield. Yet it was neither the chill nor damp that had woken him. His unconsciousness had been broken by the singular strangeness of a warm, pulsing body lying against his. It was a sensation he did not particularly relish.

Fithvael drew his body carefully away from the warmth. He could sense his own fragility, though he could locate no definite pain. He could feel with every fibre of his warrior instinct the devastation that surrounded him. But he had no memory of where or how or why.

He cleared his nose of ash and blood and the first invasion of scents brought back stark reminders of the ten-year quest he had undertaken with Gilead, and their continued fight against the darknesses of the world. It was the stench of unnatural flesh. Dead, unnatural flesh. It was the putrefying, astringent odour of Chaos, an odour that could be mistaken for nothing else.

Slowly, the old warrior Elf allowed his other senses to return. Now he could feel the pitted earth beneath his body and the places where puddles of gore and stale water had formed, soaking into his outer garments and making his joints feel rigid and useless. He wanted nothing more than to move, to release his stiff, locked body and relax the muscles that were tightening with revulsion against his surroundings. But first he would listen, tune his hearing to this place and discover if his life was at any immediate risk.

The silence was nearly entire save for the pulse and breath of the body that remained utterly still beside him. There was a reassuring taste in his mouth. The sweet-sour taste of sleep and his last long-forgotten meal. The feared metallic tang of his own blood and bile was entirely, comfortingly absent. At least he had suffered no grievous injury.

Gilead's Test

by Dan
Abnett



Regaining his confidence, Fithvael gradually opened his eyes. He had hoped against reason that the body beside his own would be Gilead's, broken perhaps, but alive and stable, ready and eager for the old Elf's ministrations. It was not to be, and the veteran warrior smothered his disappointment.

Fithvael and Gilead, so much the younger, could never be as close as the twin siblings, Gilead and Galeth, had been. But the aged warrior had devoted his life to Gilead, and to the quest when Galeth had died, and their relationship had become intensely close. On the battlefield, they fought as one and could communicate any amount of information with a glance or the nod of a head. They had one goal, represented one force. Their relationship had long since ceased to be that of master and servant, man and boy, or even companions. They were as much at one as two such singular, disparate individuals could ever be.

Fithvael's Elven eyes adjusted instantaneously to the last of the night's darkness. He smiled to himself slightly and moved freely for the first time in hours. His mare turned her head to him, snickered quietly and then stood up from her resting-place beside her master. Her vigil was over.



AS HE FELT the hilt of his sword come into contact with his assailant's sternum, Gilead turned and swiftly scanned the area again. Time was short on any battlefield, even for a warrior of his consummate skill and shadowfast abilities. Yes, Fithvael was still with him, a hundred yards to his right, fighting strong.

The foe were all around them. Tall, darkly noble, yet twisted and corrupt. Elves, kin and yet not kin. Blasphemous parodies of their race, death pale, dressed in reeking black armour, eyes rotting in skulls, breaths foul from black-lipped mouths. Their rusting armour was decorated in flaking gilt, fading silks, worm-eaten brocades.

The Elf warrior and his man-at-arms had penetrated the dark spinneys of the Drakwald in search of the Tower of Talthos Elios, a bastion of Gilead's kind established generations ago to watch over a foul barrow, an ancient crypt that, legend said, descended into hell itself. Wars had been fought there, skirmishes of light against dark, until the line of Elios had sundered the spawn of darkness and driven it far underground. From that day, their tower had stood, guarding the breach against further incursions.

So the myths said, and the land was full of them. But as their course passed through the Drakwald, Gilead and his old companion had decided to detour, to search for any descendants of Elios who might yet live. Rumours came to them thick and fast as they trekked into the great forest. Rumours of darkness reawakened, and of a custodianship long fallen away.

And then, all at once, the enemy had been on them. Not beastmen, not bulky warrior clans of Chaos. Elves. Ruined Elves. Broken, twisted, decayed echoes of noble warriors.

Gilead wrenched his blade from a weeping chest. He swung the sword again, in a singing arc, drawing the weight of his body around with it and sinking it so deep into the neck of the assailant behind him that it was left just standing, expressionless and quite literally dead on its feet.

The stench of the bubbling, tarry fluids that gouted from the fatal, gaping wound would have been more than enough to fell a weaker constitution. It gave Gilead the merest moment to breath and regroup. The body shielded Gilead from the onslaught of another, which had to tear its own comrade down to lunge at Gilead head-on. Its jagged rows of black teeth were bared and its lean arms, each ending in a mass of bloodied spikes, flailed wildly at the warrior Elf.

Gilead took advantage of the fact that he was holding his sword low, two-handed, in front of him. He raised the blade as his latest horror surged forward. It was an easy kill. The tip of the long sword entered the enemy's gut low, the hilt crashing home against a grotesquely misshapen

iron codpiece. Gilead began to pull the blade free, but his adversary grabbed at it with its spike-armoured fists. The warrior sliced upwards, slicing apart both bestial hands, and his sword finally came to rest against the neck seal of the dying enemy's body armour.

Gilead's eyes swept in another arcing scan, once, twice. Fithvael was gone. But the fighting was not over yet.

Gilead had quested for ten long years to avenge his brother's death. The ghost of Galeth had remained with him throughout, but the living twin seemed neither of this world nor the next. Ten years of his life had been spent fighting the forces of evil to bring down one pathetic man. He questioned, often, the value of his task. There was no satisfaction.

Yet his struggle had continued and chiefly because of Fithvael. At first, Gilead had been compromised into fighting on the side of right. Now it had become his life, he would use whatever force was at his disposal to war against the darkness until the day of his death came and released him from this violent existence.

He had no brother now, and precious few kin in this fading age of the world. But he would fight. Fight on, against the darkness.

And so he fought now, plunging hard steel into misshapen bodies, severing limbs, scything through torsos and necks, disgorging the foul-smelling ichor and mortal fluids of the things. Gilead abhorred the enemies, bodies corrupted and twisted, infested with evil. From their stench and their symbols he knew them; bestial, decorated devotees of Chaos.

Gilead fought on as the earth beneath his feet turned to gore-soaked clay. Dark water gathered in the prints left by the heavy footfalls of the enemy. Bodies fell in all directions as the screams and battlecries of the foe became fewer. With every fresh onslaught, with every breath taken after the kill, Gilead's eyes swept the field. Fithvael was still nowhere to be seen.

Then it came. His concentration must have waned momentarily, his thoughts with Fithvael or perhaps with Galeth instead of with the foe. He was felled, by the last surviving enemy on the field. A

foe, fatally wounded, but not yet dead. Gilead's body reeled, parodying his own gymnastic battle-swings, and his startled face watched as his assailant collapsed to his knees. The foe's cadaverous, decaying visage slapped into the cloying, blood-swathed mud just before Gilead's head came to rest upon its dead back.



AS THE SUN began to rise, Fithvael led his horse out of the carnage to a green place with fresh water. He tethered her there and she contentedly began a hearty breakfast. She had earned it. But Fithvael needed more. He needed to find Gilead.

Fithvael did not remember the battle, nor did he recall the last time that he had seen his partner. His intention was to follow the course of the battle, mapping its action as he went. He picked his way across the field, no more than a hundred paces wide and about the same long. He counted some three dozen bodies – but Gilead's, thankfully, was not among them. The pair of Elf warriors had taken on and utterly destroyed an entire band of the foul wights. There were no mounts, so where Gilead had gone, his horse had gone with him. A second good omen.

Fithvael began to distinguish his own kills from Gilead's. It wasn't difficult. His own were neat and accurate enough, but Gilead's were a sight to behold. With each group of bodies, Fithvael was able to track every move the Elf warrior had made. His mind's eye noted every pirouette, every firm stance. Each lunge, parry and faint came clearly to him. He felt nothing but immense respect for Gilead's fighting skills. Every kill was clean, there were no false starts, no unnecessary swings, no butchery. One stroke, one swing, one plunging blade had destroyed each vile thing in its turn.

Fithvael took in the wide variety of strokes which Gilead had brought to bear in the battle. He could almost hear the whistle of the blade through the air – and was certain he knew where and when the Elf had changed hands. His three-finger

grip was as effective as the conventional four-finger grip of Gilead's whole hand. Gilead had lost his finger, but Galeth had been there to save him on that occasion, so long ago.

The exercise of dissecting the battlefield began to clear and concentrate Fithvael's mind. He remembered events from the day before, and of the week, month and year before, but nothing seemed important since Gilead was missing. The veteran warrior spent the rest of that day crossing and re-crossing the battlefield, breaking it down into a grid and searching each sector for clues of his friend. There were no footprints to be found, the earth was a mess of gore and tarry puddles and the enemies' decaying bodies covered most of it in any case. So Fithvael began to look a little deeper.

He found his eyes continually drawn to the corpses of the foe. So like his own kind, so unlike. Elven forms corrupted from within, their ancient armour and weapons tarnished and overlaid with the dank remnants of satin swathes and gold-leaf. What had befallen these... these things? What misery had overtaken their lives, overcome them with rancorous passions and destroyed them?

He set it from his mind. He could find no shreds or fragments torn from Gilead's garments, no shards of armour, no hair. The Elf had left nothing of himself behind in the carnage. Fithvael counted this the third good omen. Even his scent was absent. It would have been hard to detect over the heavy backdrop of malodorous Chaos, but if Gilead's blood had been spilled, his old friend would have found the traces.

With the fall of his second night on the battlefield, Fithvael retired to the green haven where he had left his mare, somewhat content in the knowledge that Gilead was alive somewhere. All day he had used physical evidence to work out what had happened. All night he exercised his mind with suppositions and possibilities. He could only conjecture, but the one thing he could be sure of was that something had caused Gilead either to leave his old friend or to forget him. If Gilead had searched the battlefield, as

Fithvael had done, he would have quickly found the veteran, in spite of the dark, cold and carnage. He would not have believed his companion dead. He would have rescued Fithvael and ministered to his needs. Of course, the aged Elf had suffered some amnesia, but his mind had never lost sight of Gilead. Evil was as thick in the atmosphere as the smell of the Chaos spawn, but surely the Elf warrior's mind was too strong to succumb to the dark influences?

So, Gilead was alive and seemingly unscathed, physically at least. But Fithvael knew that he must find his old friend, for something was sorely amiss.



GILEAD'S HEAD nodded in the light slumber of semi-consciousness. He knew that he was mounted and could sense the reins in his hands, but he was unaware that a rope attached to the bridle was leading his horse. If he had realised, he would simply have assumed that he was being led by Fithvael, for it could be no one else. He could not awake, he could not summon the energy to rouse himself. Yet neither could he quite comprehend his own complacency.

He slumbered on, unaware of time and space and unconscious of any needs, desires or appetites. He questioned nothing.



DAWN ONCE MORE. Fithvael had slept little. His mind would not still. He rose to his elbows on the cold ground and resolved he would begin a new quest. A quest for Gilead, and if it took ten years, as the quest to the memory of Galeth had taken then so be it. Pray that Gilead was lost to some other fate than death.



THE ROOM WAS softly lit with candle lamps, whose steady flames illuminated wall hangings, depicting epic battles between mounted White Lions and Chaos Beastmen. The rugs which covered the stone flags of the floor were deep and warm-looking, in the muted colours of autumn, and the heavy, rough-hewn items of furniture were rendered majestic by the gold and silver shawls and cloths which covered them and made them inviting. On a small table close by stood a pitcher of water and a bowl of sweet-smelling petals. Soft clothes for bathing his wounds half-obscured an ornate little hand mirror in its gilt frame. The soft light of the candles flickered and reflected in the bright surface of the mirror, casting light on Gilead's face.

Gilead rolled lightly over in the warmth of a clean, sweet-smelling bed, and awoke. He suddenly knew the kind of comfort that he had long denied himself. Fully alert for only a moment, he sighed and spread his limbs in the luxurious space.

'Awake, warrior. Your slumber was both long and deep.' He heard the low, soft cadences of his own people, spoken in the lilting, breathy tones of a young woman. 'Awake now and take a little sustenance, sir.' Her voice was so beautiful he dared not open his eyes lest he be dreaming.

'Let him sleep a little, daughter. There is time enough.' The same voice, but lower still, with the slight creak of age, but familiar, Elven, and wonderful to Gilead's ear.

He opened his eyes, not knowing how long he had slept, nor how he had come to this place. Comfort dulled his instinct to enquire. He felt clean and could sense the ointment on his bruises. He smelled, not of the battlefield, but of fragrant soaps and unguents and of sweet sleep. Someone had tended him gently and well.

'Father, he wakes!' Her voice rose slightly with delight and her smile showed the neatest row of small, white teeth in a frame of perfect peach-plump lips. Gilead smiled back and adjusted the sheet around his torso.

'Leave us, child.' Her father dismissed her and she left the room, casting one last gaze down at Gilead, a gaze that showed

him her entire face in all its Elven glory. She had the wide-set eyes and lean, straight nose of his kind; the deep, intelligent brow and narrow jaw. He had not seen an Elf woman for a very long time and to behold so lovely a specimen beguiled the warrior for more than a moment.

Her ageing father smiled down at him. 'Welcome, warrior. Welcome to the Tower of Talthos Elios.'

'Then... I have found it?'

'You were searching for us? We are... perhaps hard to find. We have secreted ourselves in the darkness of the forest for many years. These are lean, dangerous times.'

Gilead look up. 'Who am I to thank for salvation?'

'I am Gadrol Elios. I welcome you here.'

Gilead remained in bed for several days, receiving visits from Lord Gadrol, and meals and other necessities from Elf servants of the Court. On the second day, the woman reappeared and with her came the reassuring scent of the woods and herbs which she had gathered to tend him with. The same plants had administered to his cuts and bruises when he would skirmish with Galeth as a child. The same he had used to restore Fithrael to health after the fool had come to the aid of a human woman, without Gilead's help...

...Fithrael?

Gilead became agitated.

'Your friend fell on the field-'

'I saw him. No, I lost sight of him. I didn't know what had happened.' Gilead interrupted his nurse.

The Elf, whose name was Gudula, soothed the warrior's mind with her gentle words and calm, lullaby tones. 'The rescue party found only you alive on the battlefield amongst so many... things. The carrion beasts had been at work. There was little left of any corpse. It must be your friend met a heroic death. To take on so many and to triumph! You two, alone, fought and killed three dozen of the dark ones.'

'And what are they?'

'The old curse. Half-formed ghouls from the barrow it is our duty to guard. Chaos

once more raises its head in these gloomy forests.'


Gilead fell silent, not really hearing her as she spoke further. Fithvael was dead. Fithvael was dead.

Throughout the third day and the fourth, the Lord of the Court came to listen to Gilead's story. Gadrol spoke too, in turn, of the coming of the wights, rotting things that came stinking their way out of the earth to haunt the living. Dark beings from a vale beyond. Once more, his tower's garrison had armed to guard this corner of the Drakwald. The barrow-kind held a sway of fear across this swathe of the vast forest. Raids, murders and the like were common. One of Gadrol's patrols had found Gilead. The warrior had countered a raiding pack from the barrow single handily.

He... and his fallen friend, of course.

Gilead was sad, but strong and resolute before the old man. When he spoke to Gudula, as she nursed him, his voice often broke and he openly mourned the loyal Fithvael, the last of his questing warriors. On the evening of the fourth day, Gudula took the little mirror from the table beside Gilead's bed. 'Look into the mirror,' said Gudula. 'See who you are and all that means for the future.'

Gilead looked into the mirror, and was surprised at what he saw there. His skin was freshened and bright, and he was clean-shaven. He looked like the carefree young man, who had sparred with his twin and laughed and played and enjoyed life. He thought that time, his quest and the battlefield had aged him and made him cynical, but he did not see life's scars in this face. It brought him calm, gave him hope.




AS DAWN'S LIGHT broke thinly through the greenery far overhead, Fithvael awoke with a start. His dreams had brought him nothing but anguish. He was exhausted, fatigued by tortured sleep and restless nightmares; wracked with the aches and pains of an old body punished on the field of battle;

troubled by the ever-present stench of Chaos in the air and by Gilead's absence. All of his faculties were compromised, but he hadn't enough sense left to realise it. His body and spirit were broken and his tired mind increasingly obsessed.

Fithvael contented himself with a handful of clean water for his breakfast, scooped from a dark stream that whispered between the towering trees. He didn't remember when he had last eaten a meal. He untethered the mare from a low bough on the edge of the clearing, and began to lead her in a wide sweep around the battlefield. She whinnied and snorted and kept her muzzle upwind of the foul arena.

Only hours later did Fithvael find what he was looking for. He had been circling, resolutely, since dawn, and must have passed the hoof prints several times already. It was a wonder he had not covered them with his own circling steps. He and Gilead had ridden into battle and Gilead had ridden out, but these were the only tracks the veteran had found and he would follow them, blind now to reason and probability. He stepped purposely into the cool shade beneath the trees.

Fithvael led his horse hour upon hour, following whatever hoof-print trail he happened upon, regardless of direction or number. He did not feel useless. He was on a quest.



GILEAD'S GRIEF WAS sharp and weighed heavy upon him. Heavier because he was surrounded by his own kind. He would see Fithvael's wisdom in the old Lord's face, or recognise the old warrior's tone in the words of a servant at the Court. His pain dulled only with the kindnesses of Gudula. Her soft words were as effective a sedative as her sweet-tasting tonics.

A week passed, a month. He roused himself, first from his bed and then from his chamber, and soon he began to take his meals with the family and their court. They made him welcome, celebrated his recovery and talked about the constant

threat of the Barrow. He recounted for them stories of his quest and of his warriors' unerring bravery. He told how one by one he had lost them all and he recounted, for them, the heroic death of each of his questing comrades.

For Gudula, Gilead saved the stories of his home, the tower he had destroyed before taking up his life-quest. He told her of his dead twin, Galeth, and of how he believed he had taken on his sibling's life force to conquer evil. He talked of Fithrael, of the dead Elf's loyalty to the old traditions and ideals of Gilead's ancient family. A family that would become extinct with his own death.

Gudula sat for many hours, head bowed over some piece of woman's work, while she listened intently to Gilead's epic tales. At these times, Gilead's feelings would sometimes catch him unawares and he would find himself searching her face for signs of her response to him.

When he was alone Gilead would lift the mirror to his face and see there something new and positive for the future and he began to forget Fithrael and Galeth and the hard fight and pain of his past.



THE AIR WAS COLD and moist amidst the trees in the dirty-brown dusk. Fithrael could not distinguish the dense, grey cloud of mist from the murky, tumultuous sky. Night was falling sluggish, heavy and moonless. There were no stars to navigate by, even if the veteran Elf had known where he was or which way he needed to go. Fithrael was so tired that he had long since dropped the mare's reins and was allowing her to meander through the dense black trees. Everything fell into a flat, sepia-grey landscape of trunks and branches, and he could no longer see colour or judge distance.

Days without food and with little water had taken its toll on Fithrael and his mount, and eventually the mare slowed to an exhausted stop, bent her head and slowly grazed a forest clearing. Fithrael slumped across her warm neck, then

slowly rolled off her back, landing heavily on his empty, aching side. Sleep, he must sleep. Pulling his cloak around his head, Fithrael gave in to his fatigue, trusting that his horse would stand guard for him once more.

Who knows how long he slept? Dull, dark days wove seamlessly into cold, dark nights. There was no sun to wake him. The mare lay beside her master as the ancient Elf sweated and twitched and cried out. Delirious dreams tortured his sleep. Awake, his mind had been full of Gilead, of tracking him, finding him, fighting for him. He'd thought of nothing else since waking on the battlefield, but nothing of his rational mind was left in his slumber, and the nightmares raged.

Gilead was dead. Gilead was dying. Gilead was being torn apart by a horde of foul, mutated beastmen. Gilead was walking towards him, body slashed open, oozing decaying gore, trying to say something through broken, seeping lips. Gilead was coming back from the dead. Gilead was a monster.

Even Fithrael's dreams didn't wake him. He fought his way through them, killing Chaos beasts, reaching Gilead too late. Over and over again the dream circled round in his head and each time the veteran warrior fought harder and dirtier. He needed to get to Gilead faster. Each time he was too late.

Yet again the stench of Chaos was in the air – and abruptly he was awake. Fithrael sprang to his feet, knees bent, arms wide. His staring eyes flicked around the clearing, penetrating the foliage, searching out the enemy. A shadow moved and the warrior plunged towards it, a weapon in each thrashing hand, arms flailing, a howl screaming from his dry throat. He threw himself on the adversary's back, plunging twin blades into its collarbone, shoulders, arms, indiscriminately stabbing and scratching at the thing that had taken Gilead. At last the enemy, a corrupted echo of an Elf warrior, sloughed off the berserk Fithrael, dropping him unceremoniously on his back and staggered away, trying to staunch a bursting gash in its neck.

Fithrael lay on his back in the failing brown sunlight, awake, breathing hard.

The enemy had been real, and, fuelled by his dreams, the Elf veteran had injured it and sent it on its way. Tired and starved though he was, Fithvael found new purpose. He felt weak and winded and knew he must eat, but now he also had a beast to track. A direct lead back to Gilead. He had a chance. He had hope.

The mare had a full belly and was well rested. The Elf warrior gathered together some supplies and ate some of the fruits and nuts he had found. He shook out his dirty, crumpled cloak and washed away the ichor which had splashed from the foe's random wounds. He took a little time, knowing that the beast would be moving slowly. He didn't want to catch up with it. He didn't want to have to kill it before he had found his friend. The pleasure of the kill would come later when he was fitter, when he had tracked it to its lair – and to Gilead.



THE TOWER OF Talthos Elios was built inside the four sides of a large, open courtyard. It rose into the grey sky, above the drab walls and black-leaved trees, like a finger of ice. It was a glassy, perfect structure, the work of the gifted and blessed of Tiranoc's dispossessed offspring centuries before. The curtain walls which faced the outside world were thick and solid, without windows. This was a fortress from the outside, but a haven within. The walls which overlooked the courtyard had many windows and doors, and even balconies and internal verandas.

Gilead began regularly to take up a position on one of the tower's first floor balconies and watch the business of the day unfold below him. This was where the court warriors would practice their combat skills, exercising and sparring with blunted weapons. Gilead began to long for their company and to share his skills with them.

Late one afternoon, Lord Gadrol joined Gilead and they began to talk of the world outside the tower, and the endless duty of the Elios line. The cursed barrow lay in the

dark combe beyond the walls and the Warriors of the Tower patrolled the woodlands. They alone guarded the barrow breach, an ancient wound in the order of the world and one now recently reopened. It was a hard, unforgiving duty. Gadrol welcomed any help he could get.

Three or four months after being brought to the castle, Gilead was in the courtyard with the other warriors, revelling in the staged battles and the camaraderie. His body had become soft with recovery and with lack of exercise, but his mind was as sharp as ever.

By the half year, he was spending fewer nights carousing with the household and longer days honing his body to its former levels of combat-fitness. He often laughed, in the early days, as he failed to parry a shot from his sparring partner, or lunged too late and fell over his own feet. But as time passed the value of his war-craft came back to him, and with it his old fighting skills. Once more he could wield a sword in either hand; he could move with the kind of dancer's grace that had always characterised his defensive strategy; and, finally, late one afternoon, he became shadowfast.

He had spent all day sparring in the courtyard with the Elios warriors who had become his friends and allies. Suddenly Gilead sensed an attack from behind, then another to his left. It was a regular habit of the warriors to ambush each other in this manner, for battle awareness or, at the end of a long day, for fun.

Gilead's adrenaline began to pump hard. He disarmed the Elf before him, spinning his opponent's wooden stick high into the air before catching it deftly and boxing the Elf around the ears in a resounding double blow. While the practice pole was still in mid-air, he had spun round, dropping the warrior behind him with a swing to the legs. A second blow to the back of the knees sent Gilead's unsuspecting assailant sprawling across the cobbled courtyard, landing him face down with a severe crack to the head. The third Elf had no time to fight off the advance of two twirling, spinning staffs. He did not see them coming. One cracked his sword arm at the shoulder and the

second beat hard into his sternum, point first, winding him. Then the first staff came back, wrapping itself around his neck. Gilead had almost strangled the bewildered, broken wretch before he relaxed and let the Elf drop, gratefully, to the cobbles.

One moment Gilead had been struggling furiously against one sparring partner. The next he was in three places at once; defending himself simultaneously on three fronts; disarming and felling three fine warriors in no time, with no apparent linear progress. Shadowfast, as of old. On the ground lay three spent warriors, breathing hard and reaching for the wooden weapons that had been broken or confiscated in Gilead's onslaught. He looked at them for a moment, aghast, then began to laugh, throwing his head back in a hearty roar.

He was close to his old pitch of ability. He longed now for more than practice. To face the ever-present incursions of corruption from the barrow, with these brave warriors at his side. Elf warriors; how long it had been since he had fought alongside so many of his own kind. In the meantime, somewhat sheepishly, Gilead helped two of his combatants to their feet; the third was carried away, unconscious. They all took several days to recover sufficiently to rejoin Gilead and the others in the exercise yard.



THE SKIES NEVER cleared and the foliage pressed ever more densely around Fithvael, but the trail was hot with gore and ichor, and the tracking was easy. The wounded foe had but one purpose, to return whence it had come. It made no attempts to cover its tracks or move with any stealth. Camouflage was unnecessary for both the pursued and its pursuer, since nothing was visible in the depths of the densely wooded landscape. Fithvael was careful, though, not to be heard and at regular intervals he ate and rested, building his strength.

Fithvael came upon the broken body of the foe less than an hour's gentle ride from

his last halt. Cautiously, he dismounted and stood beside the body. He could feel its warmth and sensed that it was still pulsing. If it was not dead, then it could still lead Fithvael to his quarry. It must!

The veteran Elf remounted and the mare took a step or two backwards, then Fithvael reared her, letting out a fierce war cry of his own as the mare whinnied and snorted in surprise and stamped her front feet hard. The noise seemed massive in the still and quiet of the forest, but the wight still did not wake. Fithvael reared the mare again, dancing her in a circle around the fallen thing, desperately crashing amongst the undergrowth and clanging his long sword and dagger together over his head. The single-minded Elf did not perceive the risk of raising hell in an area rife with Chaos. His only thought was to drag this sorry half-corpse back to consciousness, to rouse the thing and drive it onwards.

The dark one whimpered, then screamed, convulsing in the filth of torn undergrowth and damp, peaty earth around him. Fithvael dismounted, still crashing his weapons together and letting out his ancient war cry. It could feel neither fear nor motivation. It couldn't, wouldn't stand. Then it ceased to writhe. It glared up at Fithvael, ichor still finding an oozing path through the thick, crusting scabs around its dozen or more wounds. He saw it wanting nothing, except to kill him. It couldn't even do that.

Fithvael turned his back on the beast, bitter and angry that his plan had failed. Then rage crept into his eyes and overtook him. His long sword entered the fallen thing's chest a split second before the dagger reopened the fatal wound in its neck. Its death was instant, but Fithvael took no pleasure in it.

The Elf warrior had no choice but to continue his quest in any way possible. He assessed, as best he could, the direction which the beast had been taking and decided to follow its course. He moved faster now, more urgently. His dream kept flashing in his mind, images of the Chaos things woven with the knowledge that, in his nightmares he had been too late. Too late to save his friend. Too late to rescue Gilead and renew their partnership.

Fithrael fought his feverish mind, and lost. He began to crash through the forest, heedless of the noise he made and the trail he left. Forgetting that woodland was his natural home, his natural ally, the Elf tore a path through the forest, destroying as he went. The ground was churned up beneath the frantic hooves of his frightened mare, and the clutching foliage was hacked aside, swept out of his furious path.

His mind would not see an end to the struggle, so when the Elf suddenly found himself upon the brow of a steep, sheer pass of black conifers it was a moment before his sword arm rested and he reined in and calmed his mount. His paranoia turned to glee. In the distance before him, Fithrael could see the tall, glinting sides of a structure. Taking refuge in the lea of the trees, he stopped and looked again. A fortress, a tower, a dank place of evil – this was the monstrous place where he would find his friend. This was where the foe had been making for.



THE TOWER OF Talthos Elios glowed with magnificence. Pennants and banners were raised in the great hall. Gold and silver cloth adorned the benches and the grander courtly chairs around the long table, which groaned under the weight of the food which covered it. Meat, fowl and game of all kinds were arranged amongst wide dishes, standing on tall feet, which contained mountains of spices, fruit and bread.

There was to be a grand feast day on the morrow and the Lord Gadrol and his fair daughter Gudula were arranging everything. It was a special occasion and Gilead was to be the guest of honour. He had resided at the castle for a year, so tomorrow was to be his anniversary and his formal inauguration into the court. He was to become one of them, and to have so illustrious a warrior join their cause delighted all at the castle. They had every reason to celebrate.

Gilead, too, was ready to celebrate and eager to become a full member of this

society. They had so much to offer, companionship, a good cause... and then there was Gudula. The beautiful woman had restored Gilead's health, ministered to his needs when he was mourning Fithrael, been constant companion and confidante. She had even made a radiant new suit of gold and blue for Gilead to wear on his feast day.



AS FITHVRAEL MOVED up the pass, closer to the tower, every last remnant of caution left the veteran Elf. The tower was derelict, dilapidated, and its walls stood tall and square to the outside world, but as he cast his eyes towards the top of the walls, the stone seemed insubstantial. He couldn't focus on individual stones; they seemed to move around each other and he could see the sky through them. The lower walls of the edifice were covered in a brackish black slime of moss and lichens. Fithrael placed his hands on the stone, but felt only the softness of the moss. There was nothing solid there. Working his way around the outside walls, Fithrael found the space where a doorway had once been. One huge, black-studded rotten door still hung from one hinge. The other had fallen inward towards what must once had been a courtyard, but was now a wilderness of rock and dead and dying plant-life.

The warrior was confused and disappointed. He had been convinced that this was the place, that this was where Gilead was being held. Yet there was no sign of him or anyone – until a swift, unseen blow felled him from behind.



GILEAD WAS SPARRING in the courtyard, as usual, when the body was carried in. Patrol parties left from the castle at regular intervals, but since Gilead had arrived there had been no new arrivals. He was excited to see that the Elf guards' latest expedition had been more successful.

Dropping his wooden weapons and nodding briefly to his sparring partner, Gilead bounded towards the two Elf warriors who carried the limp body between them. Fithvael was unconscious, one arm around each of the warriors' shoulders, feet dragging across the courtyard and his head down. Gilead did not recognise his old friend; he simply wanted to help. He threw the body over his shoulder and took him up to his own room, the room where Gudula had nursed him back to health. Only when Gilead had gently laid his burden on the clean bed did the Elf realise that it was his dearest friend who had been rescued.

'Fithvael... Fithvael, my old friend... I thought you were dead...'

Gilead called Gudula and Gadrol, and the three kept a bedside vigil for the aged Elf, while he slowly regained consciousness. Gilead could think of nothing more perfect than to have Fithvael join him on his feast day in his new home. As Fithvael's eyes began to open, Gilead leaned over his old friend.

Fithvael sat bolt upright, staring past Gilead's gently smiling face at the room in which he found himself. The walls crawled with putrid vegetation and monstrous lice. The furniture was black with decay and the food by his bed was rotten and riddled with squirming parasites. The stench of Chaos was all around him – yet this was Gilead before him.

'Fithvael. It's me, Gilead. You're alive. You're safe. I want you to meet my great friends and rescuers, Lord Gadrol and his daughter, the Lady Gudula.'

Two hideous Elf-things stepped out of the gloom behind Gilead, leering at Fithvael and baring their blackened teeth. Fithvael blinked terrified eyes and saw, in that blink, a majestically magnificent room, decorated in fine Elvish style. He saw a beautiful young Elf woman and her doting father. He saw fresh fruit and herbs and smelt sweet medicinal potions.

But it was a mere blink and when he opened his eyes again the room had resumed its rotten, filthy demeanour. Brain reeling, Fithvael embraced Gilead, closing his eyes for a moment, concentrating only on his friend.

Eyes tightly shut, Fithvael felt the syrupy ooze of magic around him. He had seen, for an instant, what Gilead believed to be the truth. But Fithvael would not succumb. He saw Chaos and realised that they meant not to kill Gilead, but to seduce him, to recruit him. To turn to evil one such as Gilead would delight their perverse minds. The wights wanted to harness Gilead's skill, his knowledge, his tenacity, his bravery. They were, somehow, unthinkable, Elves corrupted by Chaos. To recruit one of their own kind, the best of their kind, was a goal worth pursuing.

Fithvael lay back on the rancid pallet, concentrating hard on his quest. He had sworn that he would save his friend, but now he was no longer sure he could. Gilead didn't see what was truly around him and Fithvael could not defeat so many of the dark things without his old friend's help.

He took a deep breath. If he couldn't fight his way out of this situation, he would have to think his way out. He would have to show Gilead the truth.

Fithvael lay in bed, refusing potions and food and talking little. He let Gilead talk. And Gilead could speak of nothing but his feast day on the morrow. His inauguration into the community of Talthos Elios. His new life.

'How long have you been here, my old friend?' Fithvael asked tremulously.

'A year tomorrow, Fithvael. I am happy that you will sit by my side at the feast. I have been content here, these are good people...'

Gilead talked on as Fithvael lay, deep in thought. Even time was false here. Fithvael had left the battlefield, where he had last seen Gilead, only a single lunar month ago. And now the old Elf had only one short day before Gilead would be lost to him forever, bound to Chaos by whatever corrosive ceremony they had prepared for him.



COME THE DAWN, the tower was truly glorious in the sunlight. Banners streamed in the blue, windy air. Horns sounded clarion notes

from the battlements. Gilead woke at their sound and smiled.

The day was full of tournaments, displays of skill, friendly contests. Then, as dusk settled, thousands of lamps and candles were lit in the great hall. Gilead dressed in the beautifully crafted suit that Gudula had made for him, but Fithvael saw only the old, worn and dirtied battle garments that were his friend's usual attire. He saw only the filth on his friend's hands and face, smelt only rancid decay that was threatening to claim him for eternity.

The population of the tower gathered in the great hall, to the strains of musicians in the gallery, and took their places at the long tables. The feast began.

Fithvael felt a mounting sense of doom, of dark magics gathering to seal Gilead's fate. The veteran Elf had tidied himself, and sat at Gilead's right hand at the head table. He kept his face against his sleeve; the piles of rotten, squirming food were enough to make him nauseous, but the stench of the gathered host was worse. Fithvael used every ounce of self-control when looking around. He was appalled by the sheer weight of numbers of the dark things; sixty or more, in all their grotesque, reeking forms. He wondered that they could believe they had duped him.

Fithvael watched as Gilead and his party took their hearty appetites to the rotten food. Fithvael smiled at his friend, but all of the food on his plate found its way under the table and onto the floor. He couldn't even bear to sully his clothes by secreting it in his pockets.

Then the speeches began. Gilead stood to toast his friends and his new home. Fithvael looked up into his friend's eyes, and by the light of a thousand candles he saw what Gilead saw. He saw the beauty of the sumptuously decorated room and the glory of the feast before them. As Gilead's eyes moved across the room Fithvael saw, reflected there, a large party of Elf warriors – and then the serenity of a lovely Elf woman, as his friend's eyes came to rest on Gudula.

Fithvael had his plan. He only prayed that it was not too late. As Gilead resumed

his seat, his old friend leaned towards him.

'Gilead, it is time now for my toast. Promise me only this. Look into my eyes and see what I see. Be by my side now.'

Gilead looked at him curiously.

'Promise me!'

With that, Fithvael got to his feet and cast his eyes slowly around the room. He spoke slowly of his love for his friend, of years of dedicated service and of the hope of many more to come. But he concentrated his eyes, first on the decorations, then on the food, then on the Chaos band, and finally upon the monster that was Gudula.

Gilead looked into his friend's eyes.

Looked...

...looked...



AS FITHVAEL CAME to the end of his speech, he turned to Gilead. The smile had left the warrior's face.

'Now stand with me, friend,' Fithvael toasted, 'and let us raise our swords and salute each other.'

Gilead rose, drew a deep breath and raised his sword to his old friend. Emotions were swirling behind his fixed, pale visage. Rage, disappointment, guilt, horror. But rage was the greatest.

The creatures around them, the decaying remnants of the noble line of Elios, perverted and corrupted by the baleful influence of the very barrow which they had chosen to guard, raised their goblets in mock salute. And the two Elves began their attack.

Fithvael ran through three of his nearest neighbours before any of them had even armed themselves. Gilead, already shadowfast and in several places at once, had reduced a dozen dark things to a heap of spurting, disgorging corpses.

Then the battle began in earnest as the ancient, corrupted court of Talthos Elios fought back.

Fithvael used their weight of numbers against them. Battling on two fronts, he managed to slip out of the fight and turn

on a third assailant, leaving the first two to kill each other in their frenzy.

Gilead threw a table over, tipping its contents into the laps of the beasts. They struggled to rise, but Gilead was too fast, attacking them as they lay on their backs in the debris, or were trapped by the heavy dishes which rained down on them. The Elf things were not prepared for attack; those who wore no weapons fought with their hands, losing their limbs to Gilead's long sword. Gilead was standing atop the great tables, swinging his great blade and thrusting his dagger into any and all Chaos flesh he could find. He fought his way nearer the doorway, taking down half a dozen barrow-spawn with his flailing weapons. They in turn tore at each other in their rage to reach him.

Fithrael ploughed on, slower, but just as efficient. Following the swing of his long sword with a lunge from his dagger, he tore the throat out of one barrow-thing, the eyes out of the next. Here he severed a leg, bursting a great artery and filling his nostrils with the stink of the oozing ichor. He had both strength and purpose and he used them to good effect.

He could not see Gilead, but he could see his work as more foul things fell near to him, their mortal wounds releasing more of the putrid reek of Chaos.

With each blow, each death, the room grew darker, filthier, older and more decayed. The piles of rotten food quickly became puddles of black liquid and then disappeared. The bodies of the foe wept their gory contents, decayed quickly to ugly skeletal forms and then to grey dust. It was as if the room was suddenly filled with dark, shadowy spirits, as black souls were sent screaming out of this world.

The two Elves fought on as the forces of Chaos weakened. Finally they stood alone, Gilead and Fithrael together, at one end of what had been the great Elf hall, then a terrifying Chaos gathering. Now it was a ruin.

'Our work is done,' Fithrael said, sheathing his dagger.

Gilead bowed his head for a long moment. The two looked at each other, then the hall, before turning to leave.

As they turned, Gilead saw movement.

His sword and dagger were drawn and he spun back into the room, swinging his sword in a wide arc as he spun high off his feet. As he landed he plunged his dagger into the monster which had risen up in front of him. Fithrael turned as he heard Gadrol's head hitting the floor. The Lord of Elios's body followed its decapitated head, taking down with it the body of the wraith that had been Gudula. The hilt of Gilead's dagger could be seen sticking straight out from the second barrow-thing's ichor-pulsing throat.

Fithrael stared down at the last two bodies. Gadrol and Gudula twitched in their final death throes. Then they, too, began to decay before the Elves' eyes.

'I'm sorry, Gilead,' Fithrael said. He could think of nothing else to say.

Gilead looked across at his companion, then down at himself. He was suddenly tired. He had not been washed, nor his bruises tended. He was shabby and dishevelled and the bruises he had received on the battlefield had not yet faded. He raised his hand to his face and felt the filth and gore smeared there. 'Time was corrupted too, I'm still bruised and dirty from the battle. I dreamed it all, didn't I? How did they do this to me? My - our - kinfolk... Yet more of Tiranoc now lost to the world.' There was an odd mix of bitterness and sharp sadness in his eyes. 'I'm in your debt for waking me.'



OUTSIDE, THE EVENING was slate grey along the pass. Jet crows rasped from the steep scarps. Two comrades moved out from nightmare into encroaching night.

Their torches lit the walls of the tower with flickering shapes. Fire began to twist and flurry around the desecrated tower. The Tower of Talthos Elios burned, its nobility and its curse sooting away into the night.

'Now the barrow,' Gilead said, ferocity burning in his tired eyes.

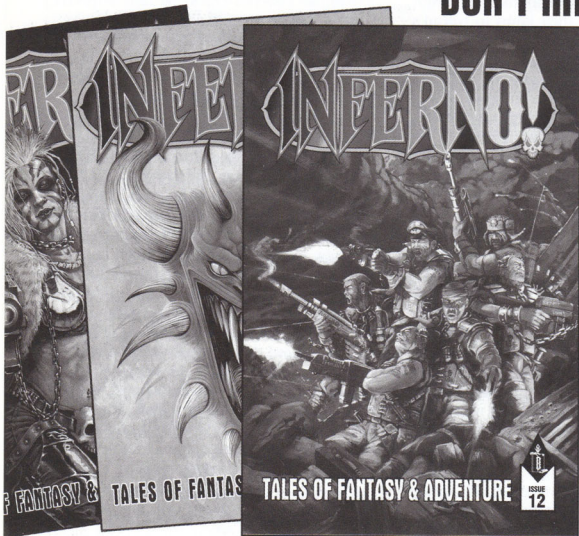
Fithrael followed him. There was work to be done. ●



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HOW IRONIC, IF ONLY COLONEL KANDINSKI COULD SEE ME NOW.

ANSWER, DAMN YOU, OR I'M FINISHED!

KANDINSKI ALWAYS SAID I WAS MARKED FOR DEATH.

THEY'VE GONE FOR NOW, BUT THEY'LL BE BACK, DAMMIT, SO SOMEONE PICK UP THIS SIGNAL!!

URNS OUT I'M THE LAST ONE ALIVE.

HALVUS CALLING BY THE EMPEROR, SOMEONE RESPOND!

NOTHING, JUST STATIC.

LOOKS LIKE KANDINSKI WAS RIGHT AFTER ALL.

GRSSHHHH!!

ZZZT... KANDIN... ASSISTA... SHORTLY... SZZT... HOLD YOUR GROUND!

GRAARSHHH!

ZZZZT... TAND AND FIGH... SZZT... REINFORCE... FIFTEEN MINUTES... SZZT... MPEROR!

THANKS FOR THE OFFER... DON'T THINK I'VE GOT...

ZZZAKOOOM!

FIFTEEN SECONDS!

ZZZZZSSSS

WHAT THE-!?



GET OFF YOUR KNEES, BOY!

ARE YOU THE REINFORCEMENTS? COME TO SAVE US?

• THE DEAD STILL SERVE •

SCRIPT: ANDY JONES • ART: JEFF REBNER • LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON





YOU DEPRAVED
SCUM COULD
NEVER RESIST
SUCH TEMPTING
BAIT!!

ZZAKOM!!

SPACE
MARINES!!

AIEEEE!

URRGH!



BRAKKATA-
BRAKKATA-
BRAKKATA!!!!

AAAAARGH!



IT MUST ONLY HAVE
LASTED A FEW SECONDS

AAARGH!

KILL-
MAIM-
SLAY!

AIEEEE!

BRAKKATA-
BRAKKATA-
BRAKKATA-
ZZAKKOOM!!



BUT THEY WERE BLOODIER THAN
ALL THE MONTHS OF CAMPAIGNING
ON GOLDERON V SO FAR.

BRAKKATA-
BRAKKATA-
BRAKKATA-

URRGH!

AIEEEE!

ZAAKOOM!!



JUST A FEW
BLOODY SECONDS
WAS ALL IT TOOK.

NO LIFE SIGNS,
COOLANT LEVEL
STABLE, MAINTAIN
OVERWATCH.

AFFIRMATIVE,
BROTHER-CAPTAIN.



I HAD HEARD THE STORIES OF SPACE MARINES, BUT I'D NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE.



BROTHER-CAPTAIN INVICTUS, DO YOU CONFIRM ENEMY READINGS ON BEARING SEVEN-FIVE-NINE?

INDEED I DO, BROTHER, INDEED I DO.

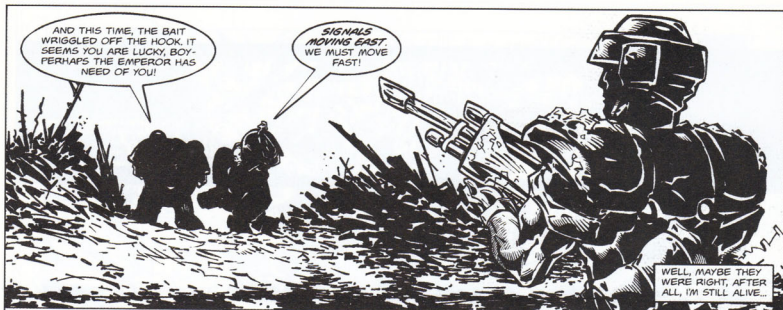
YOU USED ME AS BAIT!



YOU'D GIVEN UP, BOY. YOU WERE ALREADY DEAD, BUT EVEN THE DEAD CAN SERVE!



AS BAIT!?



AND THIS TIME, THE BAIT WRIGGLED OFF THE HOOK. IT SEEMS YOU ARE LUCKY, BOY—PERHAPS THE EMPEROR HAS NEED OF YOU!

SIGNALS MOVING EAST. WE MUST MOVE FAST!

WELL, MAYBE THEY WERE RIGHT. AFTER ALL, I'M STILL ALIVE.



SO LET'S SEE IF I CAN STAND MY GROUND, FIGHT AND DIE ALONE IF NEED BE!



SEEMED LIKE THE EMPEROR HAD OTHER PLANS.

TROOPER HALVUS! AS I LIVE AND BREATHE!

JUST IN TIME, COLONEL I, ER, COULDN'T HOLD MUCH LONGER!



INDEED, SOLDIER, IT SEEMS YOU HAVE DONE WELL TODAY!



I HAD YOU MARKED AS A LIE-DOWN-AND-DIE BOY!



WELL, SIR, I'LL FIGHT, ALRIGHT, FIGHT AND DIE IF I MUST. BUT I WON'T DIE ON MY KNEES LIKE A DDS. I'VE A FEELING THE EMPEROR NEEDS ME A WHILE LONGER YET!

THE END.

NIGHTMARE

by Gav Thorpe

JOSHUA WAS DREAMING. He knew he was dreaming, because he could distinctly remember laying down to sleep, wrapped in a thin, ragged blanket, out in the desert that he now called home. Inside his dream he found himself standing in a dank grotto of trees, the light dim and the air tinged with the thick, musty smell of rotting vegetation. The trees' leaves hung limp and almost lifeless, pale and sickly on thin, twisted branches. Overhead the watery light of an unfamiliar moon broke through fitfully as a desultory breeze sighed through the foliage around him.

Looking around, Joshua could see that the grotto was surrounded by steep-side cliffs, broken only by a single cave entrance. It was carved in the shape of a giant mouth, jagged stalactites hanging down just inside the opening like a row of fangs. The dark pits of a pair of hollows just like skull eyes glared at the young man from above the cave entrance.

Greetings, young friend.

The Voice was inside Joshua's head, felt rather than heard. He knew the Voice well, for it had spoken to him many times over the last few years. At first the young man had been afraid of the Voice, but over time he had felt less and less threatened, despite the strange things it sometimes said. This was the first time that the Voice had been in one of his dreams, though, and it was stronger, somehow louder than normal.

'What is happening?' Joshua asked, his words also thought rather than spoken aloud.

You are dreaming, that is all. There is nothing here that can hurt you. There is no need to be afraid, the Voice replied.

'How are you here too? You have never spoken to me while I slept before. Why have you never spoken to me in my dreams until now?' Joshua was not afraid. The Voice was soothing, calming him.

You would not let me into your dreams before. You did not trust me until tonight. Now you know that I am your friend, I can speak to you anywhere. It was you who let me into your dream, Joshua.

'Where is this place? Is it real, or is it a dream-land?' Joshua asked, though he was unsure why, for he knew that he was dreaming. There was no place on the whole of arid Sha'ul where plants could grow in such abundance, except perhaps the gardens of Imperial Commander Ree.

It is not a real place, I helped you create it. We are going to have an adventure together. Do you remember when you were just a child, you used to have adventures in your mind. You would slay the Emperor's foes, those daemons and monsters, with a bright sword.

'I remember my daydreams, yes. But that was when I was little. I am fifteen now, too old to have childish adventures,' Joshua argued.

You are never too old to have adventures, Joshua. In this land you are a hero. People will welcome you, adore you even. Not like in the world of the waking, where you are shunned, where

you were driven from your village by your own friends and family. Here, no one will hate and despise you for what you are.

The Voice was very persuasive. It knew everything about Joshua; his childhood, his thoughts, his emotions. In the lonely times since Joshua had fled from the mob who had once been his friends and relations, it had been his companion, soothing his troubled thoughts with its presence. The Voice always knew the exact right things to say to make him forget the loneliness. It had taught him so many things about the gifts he had been given, the gifts the ignorant peasants of his village had called witchery.

The Voice had explained everything. It had taught Joshua how others were jealous of his talents and how, out of jealousy, they became angry. It had shown him the way to practice his skills, so that he could control them, rather than letting them take him over. Sometimes it had asked him to do things, unpleasant things, but Joshua had always refused, and the Voice had never been angry, never shouted or complained. It had been like a father to Joshua, ever since his real father had reported him to the Preacher and Joshua had been forced to flee or be burnt at the stake.

Come, Joshua, in this world where you are a hero. Your adventure awaits you.



AS JOSHUA STEPPED towards the sinister cave mouth, two strange figures appeared, as if out of nowhere, and barred his path. The creatures were hunched and deformed. Pale, lidless eyes glowered at him from sunken sockets. One opened its mouth to speak, revealing a circle of razor-sharp teeth lining its mouth, but all that issued forth was an incomprehensible burbling and hissing.

'They will not let me pass,' Joshua told the Voice without speaking.

Then you will have to make them, Joshua.

'How can I fight them? I have no weapons, no armour,' Joshua replied. His heart felt heavy with a sense of inevitability, as if he knew what the Voice would say next.

Here in the dream you can create weapons. Your mind is your weapon, use it!

Joshua stared at his hands, picturing them holding a long-bladed sword. As if at his command, a hefty metal falchion appeared in his grasp, its semi-transparent blade shimmering with an unearthly blue light.

See! the Voice crowed. Here in this world you have real power, Joshua. Here you are the master. Now – strike them down!

Joshua hesitated for a moment. The demons were backing off from the holy fire of his sword, panicked gurgling sounds spewing from their lips.

They are foul, Joshua thought to himself. I am the master here. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward decisively. One of the demons lunged for him and he reacted without thought. The blade screamed as it swung through the air. Without pausing in its sweep, the sword sliced through the outstretched arm of the attacking daemon, which howled in pain. Another stroke cleaved the daemon from shoulder to groin. The other creature turned to run, hobbling away on its twisted legs, but Joshua was faster, striding effortlessly after the fleeing beast. A single backhanded stroke separated the daemon's neck from its head, and Joshua watched with distaste as its dark blood spread across the ground, soaking into the dead leaves, making them hiss with wisps of acrid vapour.

Good, good, the Voice congratulated Joshua. You have vanquished your foes. Now, enter the cave, pursue your quest.

Casting once last look back at the fetid woodland, Joshua stepped beneath the tooth-like stalactites and plunged into the darkness of the cave.



INSIDE, THE CAVE had turned into a twisting, downward-sloping tunnel, with smaller paths branching off in all different directions. As he progressed through this maze, the Voice was unerringly guiding Joshua as he sped through the depths. Joshua didn't feel like he was walking, the sensation was more like floating, moving speedily through the network of passages. As he reached another fork in the tunnels, more daemons ran into view, each as twisted and ghastly as the first he had encountered. They held wands and staffs that began firing bolts of white lightning at Joshua. As they exploded against the walls all around him, the young man ducked back into a side passage. Joshua used his mind to weave a shield around himself. Glorious power flowed through his limbs, creating a shifting miasma of miniature stars which whirled around his body. Stepping out into the main tunnel once more, Joshua advanced towards the daemons. Their energy bolts flared harmlessly off Joshua's mental shield, but more and more were arriving.

Eradicate them. They must not stop you!

Joshua held up his hands and concentrated. Each fist burst into eye-searing purple flames and he hurled the balls of magical fire at his foes. The sorcerous flames exploded around the tunnel, engulfing a handful of daemons, burning them in an instant and scattering their ashes through the air. Joshua hurled more fireballs, incinerating the daemons as they charged towards him, the storm of their lightning blasts dissipating harmlessly around him. Joshua was filled with elation – he was unstoppable. More and more daemons fell to his attack. Soon the daemons were dead and none rushed forward to replace them. The air was heavy with the stench of charred flesh. Seeing the scattered lumps of burnt carcass, Joshua was suddenly struck by a deep sorrow. He stopped dead.

'They stood no chance, did they?' he asked the Voice.

Of course not. Spare them no pity! Inferior creatures exist only to serve. If they fight against that purpose, they are

utterly worthless. Destroying them was a mercy, for they had wandered from the path of service. They are nothing.

Joshua found the Voice's words disturbing. It had not been the first time the Voice had spoken of destroying inferior beings. Often it was callous and heartless, it seemed to him.

The Voice seemed to have sensed his thoughts.

Did not your own people try to destroy you? Did they pause to listen to your pleas for mercy? Did they try to understand you, to comprehend your innocence? No they did not. They wanted to kill you for what you represent to them, driven by their misguided fear and loathing. It was they who forced you into the wilderness, condemned you to a life of loneliness and misery. Were it not for me, you would have died out there, young, weak and vulnerable as you were. But I protected you, nurtured you. They are below your consideration, they deserved to die!

'But these were daemons, not people, weren't they?' Joshua demanded, worried by the Voice's tirade.

Of course, of course. This is all a dream, Joshua. None of this is real.

Joshua paused for a moment, considering the Voice's words. It had spoken hurriedly, as if trying to cover up a mistake, angry with itself for letting something slip. There was a glimmer of a thought forming at the back of the young man's mind. But before Joshua could work things out, the Voice was telling him to move on, insistent and urgent. Joshua gave up trying to figure out the Voice's purpose and let himself be guided further into the winding labyrinth of caves.



IT WAS NOT long before Joshua was forced to stop once more. Ahead of him, the narrow, sloping passage was barred by a great iron portcullis. He sidled up to it and looked miserably at its bars, each as thick as his arm.

'You've led me the wrong way!' Joshua complained unhappily to the Voice.

I have not! You must trust me. This is no real obstacle. Merely break the bars and continue.

'But how can I bend these?' Joshua demanded. 'Even the strongest man could not move this portcullis, and I am weak and feeble.'

You hear me, but you do not listen, Joshua! Others have said you are weak, but you know that you are strong. You are stronger than any full grown man. Listen to me, not the doubts placed in your head by fools who do not understand you. Who would you believe? Peasants who grub in the dust and dirt all day, or me, who has already shown you so much, brought you so much?

'I guess you're right,' Joshua thought, though he was still unsure. He grabbed two of the bars in his hands and strained with all of his meagre muscles. They did not move an inch. Panting, with sweat dripping down his cheeks, Joshua stood back.

'I told you! I'm not strong enough,' he complained.

Stop whining, Joshua, you sound like one of those pathetic preachers who sermonise about the follies of the universe without ever having left their shrines! Bend the bars with your mind, not your body. There you are strong, there you have power.

Joshua took several deep breaths and stepped up to the portcullis once more. Closing his eyes, he grasped the bars again. The metal felt hard and cold in his hands, but he began to pull at them, this time imagining them to be as flimsy as reeds. When he opened his eyes the bars of the portcullis were rent from the frame, leaving a twisted gap wide enough for him to slip through.

As he stepped through the hole, Joshua felt the tunnel constricting around him, suddenly becoming very narrow.

'It is too small,' he told the Voice.

Why is everything an obstacle to you, Joshua? You complain endlessly.

'I'm sorry,' Joshua apologised. Almost contritely, he focused his mind, making

his body supple and lithe, almost boneless. With this achieved, he found he could pass through the narrow crevasse with ease.

Well done. You see, nothing is impossible to one such as you.

Joshua grinned to himself, basking in the Voice's delighted praise, and continued to move through the winding fissure.



FOR WHAT STARTED to seem like an eternity, Joshua eased himself through the small tunnel, around turns and corners, always heading gently downwards. Suddenly, though, the tunnel stopped and Joshua felt himself fall for a moment. He landed with a thick splash and, as his eyes grew accustomed to the dull light, he saw he was standing knee-deep in filthy swamp water, at the bottom of a deep pit. The smell was truly nauseating and Joshua felt bile rise in his throat as he gagged at the stench.

Joshua waded a couple of steps through the murk, looking around him. To his right, a massive, formless thing rose from the mud, filthy water cascading off its slimy hide. Tiny eyes peered at him across the shadows, and its true shape was hidden by gigantic folds of blubbery flesh. It reached towards him with a spindly tentacle, uttering a high-pitched mewling noise. Disgusted, Joshua slapped the tentacle away.

'I don't like this adventure any more,' Joshua told the Voice, feeling sickened and tired.

This is the object of your quest, Joshua. Kill it and you can return home.

'Why do you always ask me to destroy something?' Joshua demanded. 'You've always nagged me to go back to the village to kill them, always told me that I have to destroy others if I want to survive. Why?'

It is just the way things should be. For us to rise to the power which is rightfully ours, we must dispose of those who would oppose us. People will always

willingly follow a master, but you must first remove their existing master before they will follow you.

'But I don't want to be anybody's master.' Joshua hung his head sullenly. Beside him, the marsh-thing was huddled against the wall, murmuring with a low, gurgling noise.

Then kill this creature and we will go home. I will never communicate with you again. You can be all alone in the wastelands – friendless, homeless, a vagrant who will never be welcome. Is that what you wish?

'I could get used to the loneliness,' Joshua argued, staring down at the marshy ground as gas escaped in a flurry of bubbles beside him.

You could get used to the loneliness? How often did you weep, that first year in the wilderness? How often did you stand atop the high cliff at Korou and think of leaping off? How often have you longed to return to your family, dreamt that they will welcome you back with smiles on their faces and open arms? This will not happen, Joshua. You will always be alone if you do not let me help you. Never again to know friendship. Never will you meet a pretty girl and wander in the marketplace buying gifts for each other. Never will you meet the woman of your dreams and marry her, to the jubilation of those around you. You are loathed, hated, cast out. You are a vagrant, a menace, a mutant. You are in league with daemons! You have betrayed the Emperor! You will ultimately destroy those who you once loved and who once loved you!

'That's not true! It's not!' Joshua screamed aloud, his voice echoing off the damp pit walls.

It is was they thought of you, loathsome wretch that you are. You were a weakling, a failure. They had no choice but to want to kill you! Now you have no choice but to kill them!

With a howl, Joshua turned on the bloated fiend of the pit, his hands reaching through the folds of flesh to grab its throat.

'They never understood!' he screamed.

'It wasn't my fault! I never did anything wrong! I never chose to be like this! They should have listened to me! I tried to tell them! I tried! Damn them all to hell! I never did anything wrong! I would never hurt anyone!' Joshua's screaming became primal and incoherent, a high-pitched wailing which carried a lifetime of suppressed anger and bitterness. The desperation that only an abandoned child could know reverberated around the chamber in a rending banshee screech that seemed to last forever.

As he howled, Joshua's hands closed tighter and tighter on the monster's throat, slowly choking the life from it. Its feeble limbs thrashed wildly in the mud, throwing up sprays of foul liquid. Joshua felt all of his anger and hate pouring into his arms, imbuing his grip with a vice-like strength. With a final effort he snapped the creature's neck, its tentacles falling limply into the murky water, a foul dribble of slime trickling from its fat lips.

Suddenly Joshua released his grip and he stood back, horrified, watching the foul corpse slip silently back into the filth.

'I'm going now,' he told the Voice with his mind, panting, his whole body trembling with emotion. 'I don't like your adventures. I don't like what you say to me, what you've made me do. I never want to hear you again. I will learn to cope with my life, without your venomous whispers in my ear. I never again want to feel as ashamed as I do know. Return me home and then leave me.'

As you wish, Joshua. You have already done all that I need of you. Simply think of yourself back in the woods and you will leave this place. You will not hear my voice again. But I will be near, of that you can be certain.



JOSHUA WOKE WITH a start, his eyes snapping open. For a moment he did not know where he was. All around him grew lush plants, and he found he was resting against the thick trunk of a

tree, whose branches spread high into the air above him. Looking around, he saw a high wall encircling the area, broken only by an ornate gate, wrought in the shape of a grinning mask.

With a shock, Joshua realised that these must be the gardens of Imperial Commander Ree's palace. To be caught here would mean imprisonment for him, despite his young age. He stood quickly, putting the tree between himself and the gate.

But how had he come to be here? He had been dreaming, but he couldn't remember of what; the dream had slipped away like morning mist. And why had the guards not found him sleeping and oblivious to everything, right here in their midst?

Trying to calm himself, Joshua relaxed his mind, letting it flow from the restricting confines of his body, just as the Voice had taught him to do. He found a group of guards not far away, could feel their agitated thoughts. Gently, he slipped his mind next to theirs, one by one, touching them only briefly so that they would not know he was there.

Lasguns had no effect on them...

Just burnt them, Emperor's mercy. Bodies everywhere...

A rat would've had problems getting down all the way to the Imperial Commander's bedchambers...

Sentries on the gate cut down...

Strangled and his neck broken. What kind of person would do this...

Nobody could have removed that ventilation duct without heavy machinery...

No sign of them since, either of them. Just disappeared without trace...

Somebody had killed the Imperial Commander? Joshua was desperately confused. It would go ill for him if they found him here after the Imperial Commander had been murdered. They might think he had something to do with it.

As he looked around desperately for a way to escape, Joshua had a sudden flash of recollection. The dank woods from his dream were a twisted version of the gardens that now surrounded him. Had it

really been him? Was this where it had started?

He closed his eyes and hung his head in his hands. The Preachers had always warned that the demons of the Warp could possess a person, drive him to do things like this. Joshua's mind reeled.

They had said that... that the ancient, formless denizens of the Empyrean were formed from the sins of the impure and craved after the material universe like a starving man hungers for bread. They could not normally enter the realm of the living, but instead guided unwitting mortals, and sometimes willing servants, to help them break through the boundaries separating the spaces between the stars.

They sought to dominate other creatures, to make them subservient to their immortal and alien whims and needs. It was why they sought out witches and warlocks, because they were the best tools for such monstrosities. It was why the Inquisition and Ecclesiarchy was always hunting down those of magical prowess.

But the Voice had always told Joshua this wasn't true! It was a lie propagated by the Imperial authorities because they feared the power of the blessed ones. Joshua's thoughts were lurching, but through the muddled haze of his mind he caught a strange smell, the metallic reek scent of blood.

Opening his eyes, he looked about him, but could not see anything. Then he looked at his hands for the first time. Both were stained red, smeared with dried blood.



The Voice, his only friend when all else had deserted him so cruelly, had lied to him, had lied from the very first moment. It had used him, manipulated him. And now it had made him do the most terrible thing ever, and then deserted him, just as his own family had deserted him before. Joshua's howl of fear and desperation echoed off the stone walls.

And in the Warp, something laughed. ●

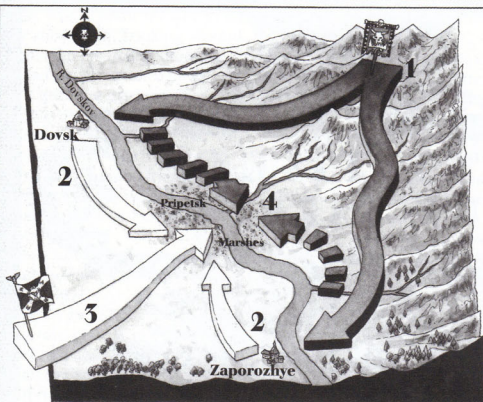




**THE BATTLE OF
• NÎS-PAZAR •**



TACTICA IMPERIUS: THE ROSKAN IMPERIAL GUARD
GLORIOUS VICTORIES (VOL. XVII, CHAPTER 5)



The Deathskull mob of warboss Gorgar Grimrukk split into two pincers after landing (1) and rampaged across the country towards the Roskan heartland. Leaving only a small entrenched garrison in the threatened cities, Lord Kralj withdrew the XXIV regiment stationed there (2) to join reinforcements (3) from the capital. Meanwhile, the Ork forces, beaten back at the cities, sought to reunify for battle (4).

The Battle of Nis-Pazar

was a decisive encounter in which a daring Imperial strategy nearly led to disaster, yet was saved by the blood and bravery of lowly untried troopers.

The Roskan Breadbasket

is a term often used to describe the agriculturally rich planet of Roska. With a culture steeped in military tradition, it was unified under the dynasty of the Kirovs several centuries before it had even assimilated into the Imperium. Graf Hristo Kirov III succeeded diplomatically in securing a hereditary lordship of Roska in exchange for peaceful union with the Imperium.



Lord Kirov ordered the adoption of an army badge, together with the motto:

Aut Vincere aut Mori
To Conquer or Die



Lord Vidar Kirov XVII

The Roskan regiments are famous for their colourful uniforms, which are based on traditional styles.



Grenadier. The 1st company is comprised of these elite troops. Note the traditional helmet and ceramic breastplate.

Basilisk Artillery Sergeant.

Haussa Lieutenant. These elite regiments of cavalry are raised solely from the noble class.

Imperial Guardsman. Many of the volunteers could not be equipped fully and fought in 'civvies'.

So it was that this planet, nestled in the inner arc of the Segmentum Tempestus, furnished vast quantities of valuable food and Imperial Guardsmen, untouched by the ravages of war on its lands. Until 3765265.M41, that was.

Defence Satellites Smashed

from their orbit were the first warning that Roska had of invasion. The Ork battlefleet which had appeared so rapidly from the Warp lost no time in disgorging brutal warriors onto the planet's surface. They quickly established a base site in the Krasnojv Mountains. Roskan Astropaths despatched a psychic distress signal.

Warboss Gorgar Grimrukk sent his Deathskull mobs west and south along sepa-

rate valleys, seeking to cross the physical obstacle of the River Dovskov which kept his warriors from the plunder of the Roska cities beyond.

Lord Vidar Kirov XVII

knew that a battle would have to be fought before any off-world reinforcements could arrive. His only chance lay in seizing the initiative. The Orks' progress would be slow through the difficult terrain of the Krasnojv. While the Dovskov was at its highest due to the spring thaw, the hideous alien invaders would be forced to attempt a crossing via the cities of Dovsk and Zaporozhye.

A Daring Plan

was evolved. Lord Kirov would sacrifice the cities and cross the Dovskov via the Pripetsk Marshes. Knowing



Roska's people were ordered to destroy their crops and villages, in order to deny the Ork army of any supplies during their advance.



Warboss Gorgar Grimrukk



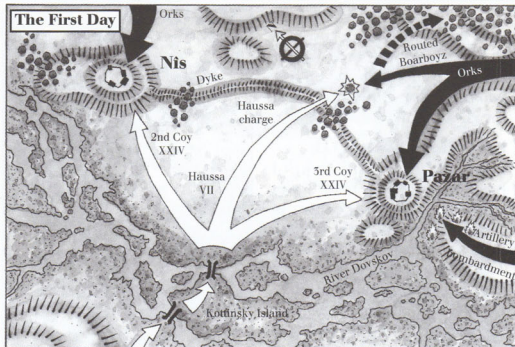
Roskan XXIV regimental banner



Grimrukk's personal war banner



In order to equip all the volunteers, Bacau's arsenals were stripped of even the oldest cannon, firearms and steam-powered vehicles.



that the Orks were split, he believed that his unified force could take on one mob before having to turn to face the other.

The Roska XXIV

were stripped from the recently fortified cities on the Dovskov and marched to join the hastily assembled army heading out from the capital Kralgrad, the latter consisting of the Hausa VII, the Mechanised XIII, and the quickly raised Bacau XXV Regiment, with its twenty-six volunteer companies. The

Roskans numbered just six thousand men, whilst it was estimated that Gorgar commanded nearer ten thousand hulking, merciless Orks.

The Orks Flinched

before the fortified but empty cities on the Dovskov. Rushing across exposed bridges under all types of fire resulted in heavy losses, discontent, and the seeking of an easier way to cross the engorged river. Unfortunately for the Roskan army this meant that, rather than locking the Orks into a

protracted siege, it forced them along the river, and would reunify their forces in front of the homesteads of Nis and Pazar – directly in the path of Lord Kirov's crossing.

Rickety Bridges

linking the marshy islands on the Dovskov rattled under the thunder of the Hausa VII's hoof-beats as they crossed to the eastern side. It was midday as Colonel Stoicho Borzna flung his horsemen into a cordon around the bridge-head. Whilst still forming up, a cacophony greeted them from the grain fields beyond, signalling a horde of boarboyz plunging towards them. Borzna's cool gaze assessed the ground, and ordered an advance at the trot.

As their crazed foe crossed the high flood dyke in their fore, the colonel lowered his chainsword to initiate the charge. The nimble horsemen ploughed into their greenskin foe. The Orks' formation had been disrupted by the dyke, and the



The Hausa charge shattered the Deathskull boarboyz into flight.

Haussa ranks scythed through boar and Ork alike. The rout was complete, and the cavalry pursued their opponents into the wooded slopes beyond to complete the work of destruction.

Too Late to Avert Disaster

The Haussa saw the hordes of fresh Orks in the tree-line. Withering gunfire cut through the horsemen's ranks. The decimated regiment fell back over the fields and dykes in shattered dissarray.



The Roskans constructed look-out posts on the river's islands to observe the Ork activity.

Kirov's Plan was Ruined

by the knowledge that he now faced an enemy force of unknown magnitude. The XXIV were crossing the river even now, but if they failed to hold they would be swept into the water and destroyed.

A Further Disaster

befell the Roskans, as the first of their Chimeras began to cross the last bridge to offer support. Its frail wooden structure collapsed under the weight of the vehicles. All Kirov could do was begin to rebuild the structure, and deploy the company of Basilisks on Kottinsky island to offer long range artillery support.

The First Attack Came

from both flanks. Gorgar had obviously seen the need to capture the farm buildings before the guardsmen could dig in.

The assault against Pazar was ill-coordinated, and the attackers fell back under the Basilisk's sustained bombardment. Lieutenant Utta's 2nd company at Nis suffered far worse. A raucous wave of



The Imperial Cross is Roskan's highest military honour. Lieutenants Brona and Sokal were both awarded this medal.

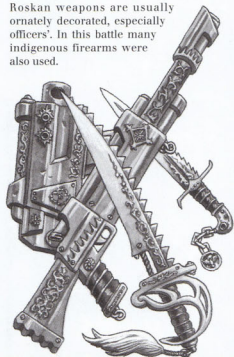


All soldiers received a specially-struck campaign medal.

Orks overwhelmed the guardsmen, who fled the farm leaving half their number lying dead and dying in the burning buildings.

Streaming back to the river, they managed to meet with Lieutenant Giurgenj's Grenaders, who had been held in reserve. The 2nd managed to rally and both companies charged back into the smoking ruins, finally ousting the enemy in a vicious melee. As night came, the foul Orks withdrew battered.

Roskan weapons are usually ornately decorated, especially officers'. In this battle many indigenous firearms were also used.



The 2nd company, XXIV regiment, took up position along the dyke towards dusk.

The Next Day Augured Ill for the Imperial forces. Torrential rains had seen the Dovskov rise nine metres overnight, and the waters had swept away the nearly completed pontoon bridge. This meant that only the three weakened companies of the XXIV held the arc which ran from Nis along the dyke to Pazar, with a small reserve offered by the decimated Haussa VII. The more numerous companies of the XXV were slowly being ferried across the swollen torrid river on makeshift rafts, but no vehicles could assist until the bridge was operational.

Gorgar Grimrukk's Strategy

was as blunt as one would expect from an Ork. He would take that which he had failed to seize the night before, the farmsteads. With the flanks crushed, the guardsmen would be caught in a huge vice.

(1) Nis was Charged

by a wave of over a thousand foul greenskins. Sokal's Grenaders lobbed their grenades into the masses, and slowly the attack faltered, only to begin once more under the lead of a horde of nobz. Lt. Sokal fell to Goffa Tufgutz's axe blow, as his men were ejected from Nis.

The Tide Turned Back

once more as the First Company of the XXV leaped into the fray. During the course of the day Nis would fall to the enemy four times, only to be regained as fresh troops were sucked into the fight that flowed over the devastated farm.

The Battle for the South Flank

began equally viciously, but with the assistance of the Basilisks' accurate fire, the mob of Orks quickly fell back, leaving their dead scattered across the cratered ground.

(2) Sporadic Sorties

were thrown against Pazar, each time the roar of the Basilisks answering in kind – until Lieutenant Zanov was forced to announce to Lord Kirov that their ammunition was so low, only enough remained for one last barrage.





It didn't take long for the attackers to realise that the big guns were no longer firing. A bloodcurdling cry rang out as the jubilant Deathskulls rushed forward, their fearsome weirdboyz pushed ahead of them. The swirling psychic blasts devastating the defenders. Lt. Vasilkov's 3rd company was quickly reduced to the size of a platoon, and he pulled them back to the main farmhouse, their last bastion (5).

Gorgar Sensed Victory

and ordered his centre forward. The enemy ranks covered the fields as they advanced on the remnants of the XXIV's 2nd company, recently bolstered by another from the XXV (4).

Yet the grossly outnumbered defenders lay down such a withering fire that the Orks faltered. The nobz were seen to try to beat their troops forward, yet to no avail. Witnessing the scene, Lieutenant Bozna seized the chance. The remnants of the Haussa charged (5).

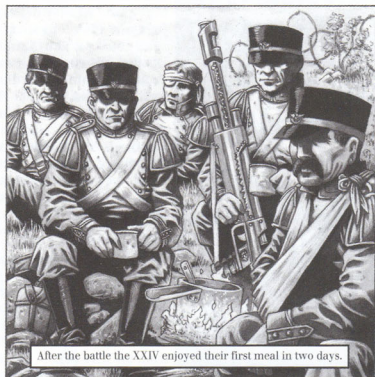
Broken, their opposition fled back into the woods (6). Gorgar's last opportunity to break the centre lay in his runtherdz and their Gretchin-manned cannon. A massed battery was pushed into position, and soon began peppering the dyke with shells (7).

Lieutenant Utta saw his men being blown apart around him. Yelling that they'd taken Nis the night before and would take these guns or die trying, he led the charge over the dyke (8). The cowardly Gretchen broke in panic.

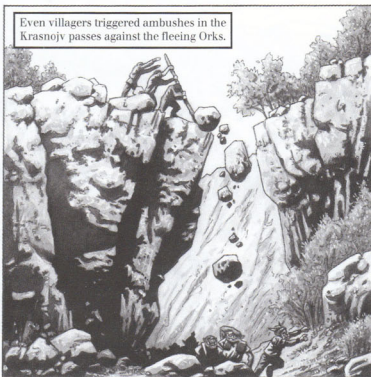
Pazar Still Seemed Doomed

to fall to the determined Ork forces. If this were to happen, the green masses would surely swing behind the rest of the line. Gorgar committed his last reserves, a mob of stormboyz (9) and his dreadnoughts (10). But the 3rd company had held for long enough. The vital bridge had been repaired. Chimera, Leman Russ and guardsmen streamed into the battle (11), whilst the Basilisks' final barrage did deadly work on the rigid ranks of the stormboyz (12).

The Battle Was Won.



After the battle the XXIV enjoyed their first meal in two days.



Even villagers triggered ambushes in the Krasnoyv passes against the fleeing Orks.

As Darkness Descended

the Deathskull Orks ran towards the apparent safety of the Krasnoyv Mountains, Gorgar leading the headlong flight. The Roskans were exhausted by their momentous struggle, many collapsing to sleep where they lay, as their officers counted the cost of the victory.

The Heroic XXIV

were reduced from a full complement of over three hundred men to less than fifty. Lord Kralj immediately

offered these stalwart soldiers leave, but to a man they vowed to pursue the Ork horde to its final end.

Scattered and Demoralised

the greenskins fell easy prey to their pursuers, who knew the rocky paths and deep gorges that traversed the mountains. Small bands of Orks were quickly overrun and slaughtered by the jubilant guardsmen. All hope of escape was finally lost when the first Imperial reinforcements destroyed the warfleet that lay in orbit.

Gorgar was Trapped

with the last of his nobz in Stry ravine, a dead-end gorge. The XXIV requested the honour, and yelling their battle-cry *Macte virtute* (Be honoured in your valour) charged in to finish the task.

The Battle of Nis-Pazar

illustrates how outnumbered guardsmen, through good tactics and determined resistance, can better one of the Imperium's most prevalent foes. This battle should be a lasting example and inspiration to all of us. *



Gorgar's decapitated head was passed as a trophy amongst the XXIV, who all wanted to touch the symbol of their victory.



Angels by Robert Earl



IT WAS ALMOST forty summers ago, but I still remember. Sometimes, though, the remembering is hard. In the warmth of a high summer's sun or in the smog of the inn, surrounded by familiar faces, it seems that it was only a dream or an old man's tale grown tall with the telling.

But when the wolves came last winter it was as clear as the summer's sky over the fields. And when Mary lay screaming in her first labour, the memory was the only thing that kept the fear from freezing me.

When it happened, Pasternach was smaller than it is now, much smaller. There was nothing north of the stream but the shadow of the mill, for all of the cottages, and even the workshops, were tucked safely behind the stockade. They huddled around the green, their backs to the world, but between their sturdy gables we could see the battle of distant treetops against the wind.

The stockade itself was higher back then. It had to be, for we had worse to worry about in those days than the prices come harvest time. The Emperor, may the gods protect him, had yet to start clearing the forest hereabouts. And the forest was near.

From time to time, lying in our beds, we would hear cries floating through the darkness of the night, savage cries that were neither human or animal. When they became too much to ignore the council and the rest of the men would meet on the green.

There, amidst the comforting smells of smoke and stew and dung they would drink and argue for a day or so. Then they would decide to do what they always decided to do – which was to send out a patrol. But always by daylight and never with very much enthusiasm.

Sometimes the patrols would return in triumph carrying with them rabbits or even deer, but mostly they just returned hurriedly.

They were fools to avoid finding the enemy before he found us, but one cannot blame them, not really. Which of us wouldn't rather pull the blankets up over our heads and hope for the best?

One autumn the shadow of the forest grew longer. Rumours pulsed along the narrow tracks and open rivers of the land, rumours of northern sorcery and a hideous new progeny of the terrible art.

One of the scrawny, haunted-looking rangers who occasionally drifted through on the road to the city stopped for long enough in the village to frighten us all. He told a tale of lights in the sky, great fiery displays to rival the borealis, of villages found mysteriously deserted and gutted by fire, of horribly cloven two-footed tracks in the cooling ash.

After he had left, everybody told everyone else that he had been mad or a liar, and what else could you expect from a ranger? But even I noticed that after this the men of the patrols stayed nearer to home and kept their eyes more firmly shut. They even stopped bringing back game. Then, after Mullens was taken, the patrols from Pasternach stopped all together.



MULLENS WAS a scarred old bull of a man. He had arrived at the village two years before, still dressed in his patched halberdier's uniform, and I think that my brother and I were only slightly more overawed by him than our parents were.

Even Alderman Fauser was at a loss for words when the old soldier took his hand in a painful, white knuckled grip and allowed the two massive war dogs that comprised the whole of his luggage to sniff his new neighbour's breeches.

In spite of his strange manners and southland accent, Mullens soon became popular in Pasternach. His hounds brought down many a wild boar which he would arrange to be roasted for the whole village in return for his fill of ale. When these feasts were finished apart from bones to gnaw and the dying embers of the fire, he would fill our imaginations with blood-curdling tales of death and glory from his time in the Emperor's great army.

Even more welcome was the fact that he was willing to hire any man who needed the coin. A couple of miles to the west of the village lay a derelict way station with a few neglected fields which Mullens had bought for his retirement. Because he always asked for the villagers' advice, as well as paying their sons to help him, the whole village took some pride in the way that Mullens rebuilt the crumbling stone walls of the gatehouse and cleared the land that it stood over.

It was some small measure of the affection in which he had become held, then, that when the old soldier didn't turn up at the village for two whole weeks a patrol went almost willingly to see if anything was amiss with him.

Though I was but young then, I will never forget the grim silence with which they returned to their families that afternoon and the sense of outrage that clung to them like the smell of the smoke. And the sight and sound of Gustav the blacksmith, iron-faced and iron-handed, suddenly choking and rushing into his hut. I tried to convince myself that the agony of sobbing we could all hear from within was the smith's wife. The thought of this, the hardest of men breaking down, was too unnerving.

None of the men who went to check on Mullens's farm, then burned it to the ground, ever did tell of what they had

found there. Today, all being safely buried in the hallowed ground next to the village shrine, they never will. But over the years I have managed to piece together fragments of whispered conversations or the drunken rambling of men quickly hushed by their fellows. Not much, I grant you, but enough to give some idea of the bloody nightmare those men encountered.

I know that, amongst other things, they found Mullens at the farm – or at least what was left of him. He had been eaten right down to the bone, but even as he fell he had not abandoned his weapon. Skeletal fingers locked desperately around the haft of a bloodied spear. Even now, the image fills me with a kind of horrified wonder.

His dogs were found lying on either side of their master. Their ruined and convulsed bodies bore witness to the desperate resistance they had put up. They had died as they had lived, full of courage and loyalty. Few men can hope for such an epitaph and my eyes sting even now at the memory of those fine animals.

Of the attackers who had committed this foul atrocity, there was scant sign. A few bones, a few fly-encrusted brown stains on the stone of the walls and the splintered wood of the door. It seems that their flesh had tasted as sweet to their companions as any other.

To witness such scenes at first hand must have been like stepping into a waking nightmare – and though it sounds almost perverse to say it, I thank the gods for it. The horror of Mullens's farm was enough to shock the whole village into wakefulness at last. It was no longer possible to ignore the danger, and all of our lives were changed and reordered overnight.

There was a meeting on the green the next morning. Nobody drank. The only argument was when Frau Henning, our young farrier's mother, tried to prevent his volunteering to ride to the nearest Empire town for help and men-at-arms. But Gulmar's father overruled her tears and protestations with a fervour that was

close to rage. He was proud of his son's courage, I think, and didn't want to deny him the chance to prove it. That pride began to turn into a cancerous mixture of bitterness and regret a few short weeks later. Fuelled by grain alcohol and a nagging wife, it eventually killed him.

Of course we weren't to know that as we watched father and son bid each other farewell in the clear light of that bright morning. They were alive and together for the last time on this world and perhaps sensing it they shook hands as equals, maybe even friends, for the first time. Gulmar Henning never made it back but at least he didn't die a child.

As the hoofbeats of the farrier's borrowed horse faded into the distance, we all stood in a long, solemn silence, broken only by the accusing sobs of the boy's distraught and inconsolable mother. Then the discussion began and incredibly, insanely it seemed at the time, it was decided to do the unthinkable.

We abandoned the harvest.



THAT YEAR'S AUTUMN wheat was left to ripen then wither outside the palisade, a feast only for the teeming birds and vermin. While our golden lifeblood rotted back into the dark earth, the whole village worked at a fever pitch. The great mill wheel was lifted off its pole and wrestled through the gates, leaving a naked patch on the overgrown stone of the wall. Karsten the miller himself supervised this piece of necessary vandalism with shrill cries and fluttering hands. As he capered around he reminded me, despite his fleshy jowls and shiny head, of a hen that has lost its chicks. Even at that age, though, I had the sense to keep the thought to myself, as I did the private grievance that my brother and I would no longer be able to use the great wooden wheel as our private staircase over the wall into the village.

Most of the work was done in the forest, as more trees were felled to strengthen the stockade. By then I was confined to the village with the rest of the children, but even there I could hear the harsh cracks of axes biting into green wood and the occasional shocking crash of a falling tree. Throughout the next few weeks the sound of the men nibbling away at the edge of the forest became a constant rhythm that we all lived to.

Meanwhile Gulmar Henning's mother had taken to haunting the parapets in a painfully desperate vigil. She stood silently above the frenetic activity of the village, gaunt and crow-like in a windswept black cloak. She finally broke her silence after three days with a piercing shriek that sent us all rushing to the wall. My eyes followed the line of her trembling arm as it pointed to the east, and I saw it.

There was nothing much, just an orange glow on the horizon. Through the jagged arms of the black forest, the distant flames even looked a little comforting. The fire came from the direction of Groenveldt, thirty miles away, and I wondered aloud, quite innocently and without malice, if they were having a bonfire.

I turned to ask my father, but his tight-lipped expression of angry relief silenced me. I left the chill of the parapet and retreated to my bed, confused and afraid. The next day we began to work even harder.

I didn't have much time to reflect on the strange new turn our lives had taken, which was perhaps just as well. My days were spent with cleaning and splitting feathers for the growing bundles of arrows or spinning the sharpening stone at just the right pace to avoid Gustav the smith's wrath. My only break from all this was the occasional errand or, much to my disgust, doing the women's work and drawing the village's water.

Even though the work was hard, I do remember enjoying it, for the novelty made all of this excitement and panic a great game for a child as young as I was, albeit a slightly uneasy one. I couldn't

understand why everyone was so gloomy and foul-tempered. Even Stanislav the brewer, usually the jolliest and certainly the reddest-faced man in the village, snarled at me when I knocked over a pile of hoops he was finding for the smith.

Then came the night, just as winter was starting to tighten its icy grip on Pasternach and all the land around it, when I did understand.



I WAS SHOCKED from my sleep in the steely grey hour before dawn by the awful sound of a man screaming, screaming and never ceasing. I clambered out of the cot I shared with my brother, still too groggy with sleep to be truly alarmed, when my father burst through the door half dressed and crazy-eyed.

Even in the gloom I could see his knuckles were white from the grip he had on his scythe, as sharp and gleaming now as it had ever been. He shouted at my brother and me to get under the bed, but the undercurrent of terror in his voice froze me where I stood. I'd never heard the like before.

As my father charged outside I saw the other villagers dashing to the north wall in the torchlight. Alderman Fauser was already high on the stockade with half a dozen other men, hacking down into the darkness beyond. I was almost as surprised to hear the alderman spitting out such obscene oaths as I was to see the blood that ran from his pitchfork as he pulled it from one of the shadows. My father had his foot on the lower rung of the ladder when he stopped, turned, and bellowed a warning.

Over the south wall, with a hideous snarling and squealing, poured a wave of dark, misshapen forms. They clambered over the eaves of the cottages and squeezed through the gaps between the walls like a boiling mass of gargoyles brought to life by the night's pale moon.

When they reached the torchlit sanctuary of the village green I felt myself shrink at the sight of them.

The things were an obscene combination of man and beast, horribly melted and twisted together. But their deformities, far from weakening them, seemed to give them an abnormal strength. Their clothes were ragged strips, shredded and filthy, but the claws lashing at the end of their arms were sharp and bright enough to freeze me, my cry stopped in my gaping mouth.

The miller, who stood equally open-mouthed and incredulous in their path, was the first victim of this hellish tide. Without breaking their pace these twisted daemons tore him to pieces with a mercifully brief rending and shrieking. Even as they continued their charge I saw, with a rising gorge, shreds stripped from the man's separated limbs being crammed into their fanged, bestial mouths.

With a dreadful roar my father and the rest of the villagers turned to meet this vile onslaught. In the middle of the green, steel met claw in a nightmare of blood and savagery. The men of Pasternach fought with the burning madness of fear that night, but even so they were no match for the savage breeding and sheer weight of numbers of the enemy.

Gradually, remorselessly, the villagers were pushed back to the north wall by the ravenous horde before them. Every man who went down was fallen upon in a hideous feeding frenzy that merely seemed to fuel the enemies' bloodlust rather than sate it.

Then, in one terrible moment, two terrible things happened at once. The Alderman, our appointed leader, was torn from his perch atop the wall by a second, slashing swarm of the monsters. And, infinitely worse, my father collapsed under a crushing blow. His opponent, a writhing bundle of fang, claw and muscle, roared in delighted triumph and lunged forward to feed.

There was no bravery in what I did, for without fear to overcome there can be

no real courage. It's true that I had to plunge through the wave of horror which engulfed me to seize a rock and run yelling defiance at the beast-thing. There was no fear, though, only a sort of divine rage at the abomination before me.

Turning to face me, the beast let out a dreadful baying laugh. It towered above me, so close that I could smell the reek of it and see with crystal clarity a single drop of saliva roll down one curved yellow fang. Still, in the face of its laughter and in the face of its power I raised my feeble weapon and leapt towards its claws.

My blow never landed, nor did it need to. For in that dread moment, knowing my weakness and knowing my faith, the gods heard my raging prayers and struck for me! With a piercing whine and a blinding flash of light brighter than any storm, the corrupt beast in front of me burst apart in a spray of blood. The struggle around me stuttered into silence as man and monster alike looked in wonder at the astonishing, blinding death of my enemy.

Then the angels appeared.



THERE WERE FOUR of them, one on each wall of the village stockade, and they were both beautiful and terrible. They were clad as great armoured knights, and they moved as if they had the power of giants contained within them. Their huge, shining armour was of a strange and wondrous design, the sweeps and curves of it coloured in hues of blue and green. In their hands they held bizarre weapons: swords bearing teeth; ornate, carved metal wands; incomprehensible bundles of steel pipes which gleamed dully with a strange menace.

One of their number wore hugely distorted gauntlets, vast hands made of some worked metal which sparked and

crackled with bound lightning. He lifted the flaring blue gloves above his armoured head and closed the steel fingers into a fist. It was the signal to begin.

In total silence, and in perfect harmony, three of the armoured figures plunged into the squalling mass of daemons below. The killing began as soon as their vast iron-shod feet hit the ground.

Fanged swords squealed and screamed like cats on a fire as they bit down into flesh and bone. They spat great gouts of blood and flesh high into the black vault of the night, and the shrieks of their victims added to the din.

I felt a curiously warm drizzle begin to fall and casually licked a droplet from my lips. It had the salty, coppery taste of fresh blood. Suddenly I was bent double, wracked and spasming, seized by a fit of vomiting.

Through my tears I saw the terrible blue fire of the steel fists. The being that wielded them strode amongst the shadows of his enemies with a hypnotic grace, a terrible dance of death. As he twisted and swung, the massive burning hands snatched at heads, limbs, torsos. Muscle and bone split asunder at his divine touch into hideous steaming wounds. The stink of burning carrion started to drift through the village.

At first the corrupt pack of abominations teeming within the stockade had reeled under the wrath of our saviours. They died like animals in a slaughter-house, shocked and bewildered, until an enraged roar cut through their stupor. The chilling cry was returned from another beast-thing, and then another, until it echoed back and forth from a score of deformed throats. It rose to a savage crescendo and once more the daemons flung themselves into the attack with a terrifying ferocity.

But as the fiends hurled themselves towards the blood-spattered angels, a staccato shriek from above suffocated their war cry. Hands clutched desperately over my ears, I looked up and saw the

fourth of our saviours, still standing atop the wooden stockade, thrown into sharp and flickering relief by guttering flames. The bundle of steel pipes he held whirled and flared as they spat burning lances of fire into the charging forms of the enemy.

The living were lifted, torn into bloody ruins, and hurled to the ground. The dead were shredded further, their remains beaten deeply down into the wet soil. Jaws snapped open in rictus howls of agony, inaudible over the awesome noise of their execution.

Still the daemons fought. Despite the lines of holy, magical fire that sliced through them like a new scythe through ripe corn, despite the fresh meat afforded by the rising piles of the dead, despite everything they fought back against the angels. Their blood lust drove them to total annihilation. Claws and fangs cracked and splintered on celestial armour. Divine weapons ate eagerly through verminous hides into the twisted bones beneath. Tainted blood splashed, stinking and steaming, into the cold night air. It was a massacre.

At the last, some semblance of realisation must have come to the last few survivors from the warband, and the last of the monsters tried to flee. I watched the panic, the sheer terror, in their rolling yellow eyes with grim satisfaction, barely able to understand what I had witnessed. They rushed past the angel with the blazing steel fists, leaving two of their number slashed and dying at his feet, and leapt for the stockade.

There was to be no escape from the divine wrath of our saviours. Burning spears chased them, found them, and ripped them apart in arcs of blood and fire. The sizzling gore splattered across the splintered timber of the stockade in glistening sweeps and curves. I stared into the grisly patterns, my mind a shocked blank, and suddenly I imagined I could see the bloodied face of Gulmar, the young farrier, staring back out at me.

I began to shake and gag with the dry heaves. My ears still shrilled and rang

painfully from the noise of their deafening weapons. For a time I could do nothing but crouch and heave and cry. It was a long while before I realised that the battle was over.

The angels stood amongst great banks of corpses, silent and still in the gloom like terrible statues. Even then, covered in gore and stinking of burnt flesh, they were beautiful. For one long moment we stood together, angel and boy, in the midst of the carnage. Then, as silently as they had appeared, they faded from our sight and were gone.

I like to think I was the only one who saw the star rise from the forest that night. It was no more than a silent, distant flash of light and I would have missed it too if I hadn't looked up from the well at precisely the right moment. As I carried the water back to bathe my father's wounds I marvelled at the glimpse I had been afforded of their celestial chariot. And even now I still smile to myself when some travelling sage or other tries to tell us what the stars are.



IT WAS ALMOST forty summers ago, but still I remember. When the wolves came last winter the memory gave me the courage to find and destroy them in their own lair and when Mary lay screaming in her first labour the memory gave me the strength to break the taboos and deliver my son.

Now, as the voices of my people fade away and all I can hear is the ticking of the deathwatch in my ears, I remember the events of that singular night and I am not afraid. For I know that in the darkness that I soon must face, the gods will send their angels to watch over me again.

And this time they will not fade. ●

THE ORBITAL BOMBARDMENT OF OBZIDION CITY HAS BEEN AVERTED SAVING THE SOULS OF THE MILLIONS OF CITIZENS HELD HOSTAGE IN THE LINDERCITY CATACOMBS.

OBZIDION MAY STILL BE DOOMED HOWEVER. THE DIVERTED BOMBARDMENT HAS OPENED A SEISMIC RIFT WHICH LOOKS CERTAIN TO DESTROY THE CITY ANYWAY.

AND NOW, THE SABOTAGED BOMBARDMENT PLATFORM ITSELF HURTLES ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH THE CITY.

UHH... I CAN FEEL THE DAEMON N'GREL B'HAAM EMERGING FROM THE WARP! A MILLION DEATHS IN THE CITY WILL SWELL HIS POWER MIGHTILY.

SISTER, WE MUST DIVERT THIS PLATFORM - DROP IT ON THE DAEMON'S TEMPLE IN... THE PANTAS MOUNTAINS!

WE STILL HAVE... CONTROL... JUST... THERE, IT IS DONE, IMPACT IN SIXTEEN MINUTES!

THEN I MUST GET AHEAD AND DRAW THE DAEMON OUT! GET ME A THUNDERHAWK AND SOME LOYAL GUARDSMEN, NOW!

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Thirteen

SCRIPT & ART: DAVID PUGH

"MEANWHILE, ANTENOR MUST OCCUPY THE DAEMONS ALREADY ABOARD THIS PLATFORM!"

COME YOU DISEASED SCUM - I WILL GLADLY PURGE YOU!

ANOTHER PUNY LITTLE MAN... SHAKING HIS BIG FIST AT ME!!

DAKKA
DAKKA
DAKKA!

KABLAM!
KABLAM!



... BUT NO MATCH
FOR THE TALONS
OF CHAOS!

SKLATCH!

++ANTENOR...?++

...ACTIVATE YOUR
HOMING BEACON **NOW!**
I GO TO MEET WITH A
DAEMON LORD - I'LL
EXPLAIN ON THE WAY
DOWN. YOU **MUST**
HOLD FOR A WHILE
LONGER!

EMPEROR
BE WITH YOU
BROTHER!

++ANTENOR...?++

BY THE EMPEROR
TROILUS, YOU PICK
YOUR TIME TO ...

KA-BLAM!

MEN, WE TAKE
THE BATTLE TO
THE PLANET...

ARE YOU
WITH ME?

FOR THE
EMPEROR!

"THEN QUICKLY INTO
THE THUNDERHAWK!"



TO MOUNT
JEZREEL...

DEATH TO
N'GREAL B'HAAN!

ABOARD THE BLAZING
BATTLE STATION.

HA! YOUR PUNY
HUMANS CANNOT SURVIVE
THE RAGING FIRES, SPACE
MARINE!

AAARGH!

UURGH!

THEN I WILL DELIGHT
IN DESTROYING YOU
MYSELF!

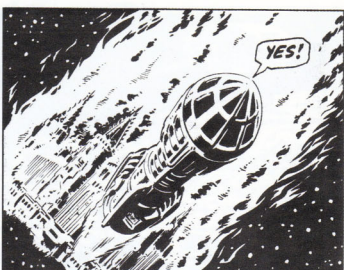
KABLAM!

BRAVE WORDS
FOR ONE SO
ALONE!

SKLAAAASH!

"YOU MUST BE THE
LAST SERVANT OF YOUR
ROTTING EMPEROR TO
SURVIVE OUR ASSAULT!"

THE HEAT...
PRESSURE...MUST
GET OUT...



MEANWHILE...



TO BE CONTINUED...



IT WAS ONE of the workmen who told us, running over from the charred shell of the Temple of Morr where he had been working. The news must have been all over Middenheim by the time we heard it, retold from marketplace to coffee house, from inn to slum, shouted from window to window high above the twisted streets and steep alleys. It would be on everyone's lips by now. We stopped digging, rested on our spades and pickaxes, and stood in the half-finished grave as we contemplated what we had learned. It was the start of a spring day in the City of the White Wolf, and death was in the air.

Spring comes late to Middenheim. The ground in Morrspark stays frozen for months. Digging graves is hard and we welcomed the rest, although there would be more work soon. Countess Sophia of Altdorf, courtier and Imperial Plenipotentiary to the Graf of Middenheim, former wife of the Dauphin of Bretonnia, beauty, socialite, diplomat, patroness of orphans and the diseased, had been murdered in her bed. We felt more than sorrow at the death. We were priests of Morr, God of Death. This would be a busy week for us.

We looked at each other, placed our tools on the ground and walked through the gravestones towards the Temple of Morr where it stood at the centre of the park, swathed in scaffolding as if wrapped in bandages and splints. There were people crossing the park, hundreds of them in ones and twos, heading towards it as well. Some of them were crying.



THE RECENT FIRE had burned the temple almost to the ground, but the underground Factorum and the catacombs, where the wealthy dead rested, were intact and in use. All of Morr's priests in Middenheim – four of us, plus one from the Temple of Shallya assisting while the priests who had died in the fire were replaced – gathered in the darkness of the Factorum, the ritual room where the dead are prepared for burial,

cremation or the long drop off the Cliff of Sighs to the rocks far below. Corpses lay on two of the granite slabs and the doorway to the burial vaults stood, black and forbidding, like the mouth of the underworld. The room was filled with the smells of death, embalming oils and tension.

Father Ralf came slowly down the steps into the Factorum, clearing his throat noisily. The High Priest's chain of office hung heavily around his neck, and he fingered it as he looked at us. Approaching sixty and with bad arthritis, he had never expected to rise as high as this job and didn't particularly welcome it, but there had been nobody else. All the other priests were too young, too inexperienced, or me. He didn't like me. That was fine: nobody liked me. Many days, I didn't like myself.

'I'll keep this short,' he started. 'I'm sure we're all shocked by the death of Countess Sophia. But the job of the Temple is to provide moral and spiritual reassurance at a time like this. We must be strong, and be seen to be strong.' He broke off for a fit of coughing, then resumed: 'I myself will see to the late Countess's funeral arrangements. Pieter, Wolmar and Olaf, you stay in the temple. There will be many mourners, and they will need your presence and counsel. The rest of you will attend to normal business.'

'The rest of us,' I said, 'is two of us.' I gestured at myself and Brother Jakob. 'And the Countess's murder won't stop ordinary people from dying.'

Father Ralf glowered at me with his rheummy eyes. 'These are exceptional times, brother. If you had not burned down the temple, then perhaps your workload would be lighter.'

I thought about reminding him that I'd burnt it down partly to save his life, but it wasn't a good idea. Not today, not with this mood in the air. Ralf might be inexperienced at running things, but he was keen to make his authority felt, and prone to over-react. Best to let it go. 'So,' I asked, 'should Brother Jakob and I return to grave-digging, or is there more pressing business for us?'

'Jakob will finish the grave. As for you, a flophouse in the Altquartier, Sargant's, has sent word that a drunk beggar has died there. You seem to have a fondness for such people: deal with the body. And brother, don't make a mountain out of it. We have more important things to worry about.'

I waited while the others left, filing up the stairs into the daylight and the crowd of mourners outside. Jakob hung back as well. I felt sorry for him. He'd only been at the temple a few months, and the upheavals which had followed the death of Father Zimmerman had unnerved him. Now there was something really big happening, and instead of being allowed to help he had been sent to dig graves.

'Why us?' he asked, and there was bitterness in his voice.

'Because you're young and I'm not liked, and neither of us would do a good job of comforting the mourners,' I said. 'You'd best get on with that grave while the sun's thawing the ground.'

He looked at me with curiosity in his eyes. 'What did Father Ralf mean when he said you had a fondness for beggars?'

'Go and dig,' I said.



3THOUGHT ABOUT Jakob's question as I walked through the ancient city's winding streets to the Altquartier. Was it beggars I cared about? No. But anyone who died alone and unmourned, whose death nobody cared about: those were my people. Somebody should care for them, and if no one was willing to do it before they died, then I would do it afterwards. People often showed their best side in death, losing their unappealing habits, becoming calm and serene. It was much easier not to hate them in that state; and besides, it was my job. If that job sometimes brought me unexplained deaths, then I regarded it as my duty to find out what I could about them. Besides, as I told my few friends, it passed the time.

The town was awash with news and gossip about the death of the Countess.

People saw my robes and stopped me in the street to pour out their grief, and it seemed that everyone had something to say: some testament to her goodness, some anecdote about her legendary love-affairs, or just sobs and moans. I noticed that it was only the humans who seemed to be so carried away. The Elves, Dwarfs and Halflings seemed to be more reserved, but they have always been few in Middenheim. The marketplaces were still busy but the street-entertainers were absent: no jugglers, no Dwarf wrestlers, no illusionists making bursts of pretty lights with their petty magics. The city was more alive than at any time since the last Carnival, but its life was strangely subdued.

All the talk on the streets was of the killing: was it murder or assassination – and if the latter, who was to blame? Most of the people with theories seemed to believe the Bretonnians were behind it somehow. The Countess's death would not only allow the Dauphin to re-marry, but she was still well-loved in her own country. Tensions had been high between the Empire and Bretonnia for the last few months, and there are few better ways to spur an invading army than the murder of a national treasure, particularly one in a foreign country who might be embarrassing if left alive. Other theories blamed beast-men, probably remembering a few months back to when the Templar's Arms was attacked by mutants, or mythical Skaven creeping up from the long-abandoned tunnels under the city. I heard all these ideas and more, and I let them wash over me like spring rain over the city's granite walls. It was just a death, no more important to me than any other.

The twisting streets narrowed and became darker, lost in shadows from the high buildings, as I entered the Altquartier. Buildings come and go here but its slum-like feel never changes. Sargant's flophouse was a new name to me but looking at its exterior, a former merchant's warehouse off a typically steep Middenheim alley, I knew what it would be like inside: infested with lice, fleas and vermin, with straw mattresses on the bare floors of long dormitories, and the smell

of boiled cabbage, dirt and desperation. Like every other flophouse in the city, it stank of wretchedness. Shapeless men in rags, some with crutches or terrible scars, stood outside and passed a skin of cheap wine between them. As I approached the door they moved aside, respectful for the robes of a Morr worshipper. Even those with nothing to live for are still afraid of death.

A big, bald man, muscle gone mostly to fat, was waiting just inside. His clothes were mock-opulent, cheap copies of the latest fashions, and he wore a short, business-like knife on his belt. I didn't expect him to be worried by my appearance, and I was right.

'You're Sargant,' I said.

He didn't move, but stared at me for a long moment.

'Didn't you used to be Dieter Brossmann?' he said, an edge to his voice. I met his gaze.

'That was my name a long time ago,' I said slowly. 'For eight years I have been a humble priest of Morr. Now, the body.'

'Aye. Follow me then.'

I accompanied him down dark corridors, hoping he would ask no further questions about the man I had once been, and waited as he unlocked a thin pine door. The room beyond was small and windowless, and Sargant didn't follow me in. I saw a bed with a body on it, and one chair nearby. A small oil lamp stood on it, illuminating the face of the corpse.

It was Reinhold. Morr took me, but it was Reinhold! He looked old and worn and tired and dirty, but he hadn't changed so much from ten years ago, when I ran the largest family firm in Middenheim and he was my eyes and ears. Little Reinhold, who knew every watchman and warehouse guard in the city, who could pick any lock in half a minute, and who even knew at least a part of the ancient Dwarf tunnels under the city. Reinhold, who had taught me so much. What had brought him to this end, I wondered, and then thought, I did. Partly, at least, when I closed down the firm and became a priest.

But there would be time for such thoughts later. I had a job to do. Grateful

that Sargent had left me alone, and guessing that he couldn't have known the link between Reinhold and my former self, I placed my fingers on the body's forehead – the skin felt greasy and cold – and began to chant the Blessing of Protection, to seal it against the influence of the dark forces that prey on corpses. Reinhold's soul was already with Morr and beyond my help. I'd light a candle for him when I returned to the Temple.

In the candlelight, Reinhold's face looked old and solid, as if carved from the pine-wood of the Drakwald forest. I moved my fingers slowly over his face and downwards as I intoned the ancient words of the prayer. I reached his throat – and stopped. There was a mark, an indentation about the size of a gold crown, pressed deep into the flesh around his Adam's apple.

I'd heard of this trick. You wrap a coin or a stone in a piece of cloth. Then you loop it around your victim's throat and pull hard. The coin cuts off the windpipe – or the main vein, I was never sure which – and death comes a little quieter and less obvious. Reinhold had been murdered.

His pockets. Sargent would almost certainly have been through them, but there might still be something there that could tell me a little. Reinhold's clothes had the hard, clammy feel of grease, dirt and sweat that comes from being worn day after day for months, and with a smell to match, and I felt unclean handling them. More than that, it felt like I was invading my dead friend's privacy. But that didn't stop me.

A handkerchief, filthy. A grubby copy of a small Sigmarite prayer-book. Five bent strands of wire, which I recognised as improvised lock-picks. Bits of gravel. No money. The right pocket was even clammier than the left one, and contained only a small clasp-knife, very blunt and rusty. I pulled out the blade, and was not too surprised to see it had reasonably fresh blood on it. That was the Reinhold I'd known.

I sat in the semi-darkness and thought for a moment, then resumed the Blessing of Protection. There was little I could do

for Reinhold now. Part of me knew that Reinhold's last journey was destined to be the long drop off the Cliff of Sighs, the pauper's exit from life and the city, but that was inevitable. He had no family vault under the Temple, nor the money to pay for a grave-site in Morrspark where the more wealthy dead already lay four, sometimes five deep. The best I could do for him was to find out why he had died. I wasn't looking for revenge: that's not what being a priest of Morr is about. It would be enough to find out the reason.

As I finished the blessing the door opened and Sargent came in. 'Done?' he asked.

'Almost.' I stood up and moved to the door, heading back towards the street. No point in letting him know what I knew. 'I'll send a cart for the body. Did he die in that room?'

'Aye. Most nights he was in the dormitory wi' others, but last night he came up late with money and asked for a room for hisself. He smelled of drink and he had sausage and a skin of wine for his friend. They drank past eleven bells, then he went asleep. This morning, there he was, stiff as a board. "Eat, drink an' be merry," he said t'me yestiddy, "for tomorrer we die." An' he were right.'

I stared at him. Did Reinhold know he was going to die – that someone was planning to kill him? And if so, why did he go quietly to it instead of fighting? Had life on the street really ground him down so far that he wouldn't even defend himself against assassination? Or was there another reason? I needed to know more about Reinhold's recent life, and I knew I wouldn't get the information from Sargent.

'This friend of Reinhold's,' I asked. 'Can you give me a name?'

'Louise,' he said. 'Little Bretonnian rat, she is. Here most evenings. They were courtin'. Wanted to spend last night together, but I won't be havin' that kind o' behaviour, not in my house.'

No, of course not. You'd take money from people with nothing for a night's shelter in this squalor, but you'll forbid them anything that might give them a

moment's comfort, even something as little as the warmth of another person's care. I knew too many men like Sargent: Middenheim was full of them. We were almost back at the flophouse's front door when I noticed something that surprised me. 'You're wearing a black armband,' I said. 'Are you in mourning?'

The big man looked down at his arm, as if momentarily surprised. 'Aye,' he said.

'For Reinhold?' I asked.

He stared back at me. 'Not that old drunk,' he sneered. 'The Countess.'

He turned and was gone, back into the sordid darkness of his domain. I watched him go, then looked over at the group of beggars who still stood around the door. One of them glanced up at me, and I caught his eye. He twitched like a mouse trapped by an owl. 'Don't run away,' I said. 'I'm looking for Louise.'



IT TOOK A COUPLE of coins and two hours of being guided through the city's many back-alleys to cheap inns and beggars' hideaways in old cisterns and abandoned cellars, but eventually we found her: a bag of rags and bones huddled near a brazier near the watchpost beside the ruins of the South Gate. She looked up as we approached, recognising my guide. Her face was bloody and bruised. I crouched down in front of her.

'Who did this to you?' I asked.

'Men.' The word sounded thick and blurred, although whether it was from her Bretonnian accent or her torn lip was hard to say. I realised I had no idea how old she was – twenty, thirty, fifty even. Street people age fast, and rain, frost and cheap wine hadn't been kind to her.

'What men?'

'Men who hear my voice, who say I am spy, I kill the Countess. Stupid men, Lady take them!' she said. 'Who are you to ask such things?'

She gazed at me with grey eyes, and I remembered another woman. But she had been blonde, and her face had been filled

with life and joy. Filomena had been her name. and I had loved her... and not seen her for eight years. There was a silence. I remembered Louise had asked me a question.

'I was a friend of Reinhold,' I said and she turned away, her shoulders hunched. I didn't move to comfort her: she had so little left in her life, I felt I should let her keep her grief. At least I didn't have to tell her the news. After a long minute she turned back to me, tears streaking the filth on her face.

'You are priest, you bury him, yes?' she said.

'I will attend to him in death.' The reply seemed to satisfy her. 'Louise... was there anyone who hated Reinhold?'

'Hated?' She looked blank. I tried another tack.

'What did Reinhold do yesterday? Was he working?'

Louise wiped her face on a filthy sleeve. 'Didn't get work. He went looking but didn't get.'

'So what did he do?'

'Morning, Wendenbahn for begging.' I nodded: the street was popular with merchants, who gave charity to beggars for luck. 'Came back at two bells, scared.'

'Scared?'

'Saw a man. Reiner said man looked for him. No friend. Then he take his... he go out again and he.... He come back late,' she finished lamely. No, that wasn't it. She was hiding something from me, something important, because she was nervous of me. I knew how to deal with that: move to a safe subject, build up her confidence, and come back to the secret later.

'Louise,' I asked, 'do you know who this man was? Did Reinhold tell you anything about him?'

A long pause as she tried to remember. 'From the west. From Marienburg. From past days, Reiner said. Called him "Grubworm".'

Grubworm: Claus Grubheimer. I remembered. Strange, however much we try to escape our pasts, it's always there, waiting behind us to tap our shoulder or slip a blade into our back. Ten or eleven

years ago, a fresh-faced merchant with an Empire name and a Bretonnian accent had arrived in Middenheim, bringing big ideas and a permit to trade herbs from Loren. While I shook his hand and talked to him of partnership and assistance, Reinhold had picked his locks, copied his paperwork and stolen his samples. Then we planted some Black Lotus on him and tipped off the Watch what he was trading. I'd had a five-crown bet with Reinhold that they'd have his head on a pole before he could flee the city. Reinhold had won, and that was the last time either of us had seen Grubheimer. Until yesterday.

But had Grubheimer killed Reinhold? And if he had, was he looking for me? And what about Yan the Norse and Three-Fingered Kaspar, who'd also worked for me then? I hadn't seen them in years. Perhaps they were dead too. Fingers of cold panic gripped my shoulders. Be calm, I told myself, be calm. And yet my old instincts, long buried under my life as a priest, were screaming that if Grubheimer was in town, it was for one reason: revenge. I needed time to think, but if Reinhold was already dead then time was the one thing I didn't have.

'I have to go back to the Temple,' I said and stood. Louise's eyes followed me.

'Money?' she asked, in her voice the only sound of hope I'd heard from her. I looked down at her pitiful form.

'Reinhold gave you nothing at all?' I asked. She said nothing, but her eyes broke away from mine. There was something she didn't want to tell me: that hidden detail again. It could wait. I turned away, to begin the walk back through the maze of cold streets filled with sorrowful people. Something in me was crystallising, hard and sharp. I knew I'd find out what it was in a moment.

'Wait! The Countess-' she said behind me.

'No. Don't talk to me about the Countess,' I said, and walked away.

The hard thing inside me was steely-cold with fear, and something else. I knew that if Grubheimer was back in the city, he was here to kill me: he might be a citizen of Marienburg but his blood was Bretonnian,

and they were not a people to forgive their enemies. I had forgiven mine eight years ago, when I became a priest and tried to forget all of the many bad things I had done. I regretted none of those things, but when I joined the Temple of Morr I knew I would never do anything like that again. Now, eight years later, a priest would be an easy target for Grubheimer to kill.

Ever since my wife and child had disappeared, a part of me had wanted to die but it was a very small part, and as I passed through the narrow streets I could feel the hardness in me building, to fight against it. Grubheimer was a desperate man, a man who would garrote a beggar in his bed for a ten year-old revenge. If the priest I now was to survive this, then I would need to be hard. I would need to become once more the man I had left behind: to think about life in a way I had tried to forget for eight years. It was not an appealing prospect.

But even as I wondered about it, I felt the coldness in me swell and grow, filling me with dead emotions, covering the mind of the priest of Morr and replacing them with old thoughts, old behaviours. Was the life I had led for eight years really so easily overcome? Had the past I had fought to hard to bury really so close to the surface? And having let the wolf out from the cage, could I ever get it back in there again?

Part of me felt panicked and sick, but I looked down at my right hand. My fist was clenched; not in anger, I realised, but in resolution. And then I looked up at an alley I was passing, and I knew what needed to be done. I walked into the gloom I used to know well, knocked hard on the door of the Black Horse tavern, and entered.

Its decor had not improved. The noontime drinkers were fewer and more subdued than I remembered, and I didn't recognise the young man in the apron who moved towards me as I crossed the threshold. He opened his mouth.

'Stop,' I said. 'Is Grizzly Bruno here?'

He chewed his lip, which is what you'd do if you're new in your job and a priest

comes into a hole like the Black Horse and asks for a man with a reputation like Grizzly Bruno's. But his eyes flicked to the ceiling. I thought they would; I'd been watching for it.

'He's upstairs,' I said.

'He's asleep.'

'No I'm not,' came a heavy voice and there was Bruno, as huge and bear-like as ever. We stood awkwardly, unsure of how to greet each other. Finally he said, 'Father,' and I, grateful to escape one of his hugs, said, 'Bruno.'

'Been a long time,' he said.

'It has.'

'I take it this isn't social.'

'It isn't.'

'Well, father,' and he put weight on the word, 'what business can I help you with on a day like today?'

'Bruno, do you remember a Bretonnian herb trader called Grubheimer? About ten years ago? Got himself chased out of town for smuggling Black Lotus?'

'Can't say I do, father. It's been a long time.' But he looked interested.

'Some associates of mine,' I said carefully, 'were not unacquainted with the bag of weed that the Watch found on him. Now he's back in town, and from what I hear he's not happy. Very not happy.'

'I thought you'd put things like that behind you. When your wife and boy went missing.'

There was a pause. It came from me. 'I did,' I said, 'but it looks like he didn't. And I do not care to be reminded of it.'

'So – what? You want him warned away? Out of the city? Dealt with?'

'I need to know where he's staying. That'll suffice for the time.'

'A shame,' Bruno said, 'but I'll get someone on it. Can I offer you a glass of brandy and the warmth of my hearth? I'd appreciate your advice on a piece of tricky business.'

'I'm sorry, Bruno,' I said. 'I don't do that any more.'

'But you still ask for favours from old friends. I understand.' I started to say something but he held up one slab-like hand. 'No. Today I forgive you. With such

a big death in the city, Morr's people must have much to do.'

'All deaths are the same size,' I said. 'It's only the living who think different.'

He looked at me for a moment, then shrugged. 'Whatever you say. You're the priest. I'll send a messenger to the Temple if I hear of your Grubheimer.'

'Thanks, Bruno,' I said. 'And any time you or your boys need advice on death, you know where to find me.'

He chuckled. 'Maybe I'll do that. But when it comes to death we have more experience than you, I think.'

A recent memory filled my head: a man plunging down into blizzard-whipped snow from the Cliff of Sighs, his blood still warm on my hands. 'Oh,' I said, 'you might be surprised.'



THERE WAS NO need to bring Reinhold's body back to the Temple. A pauper's body should be flung from the Cliff of Sighs with the briefest of blessings. But however he might have died, Reinhold had lived as more than a pauper. Besides, with Father Ralf and the others occupied with the death of the Countess, nobody was going to notice, and preparing the body would give me time to think.

On my way back to the Temple, crossing from the hubbub of the streets into the relative solitude of the frozen Morrspark, I heard the sound of a spade ringing against the unyielding ground. Brother Jakob was still digging. He was stood in the grave, and the sight of him there sent an unexplained shiver down my back. I walked over, and he looked up, his face pale with cold.

'I don't suppose you're here to help,' he said bitterly.

'No, brother,' I said. 'I have other business.'

He put down the spade, rubbed his hands to get the blood back into them, and looked at me.

'You told me you're not liked around here, brother?' he asked.

'It's true enough,' I said.

'So why do you stay?'

I looked down at him. 'Why? Don't assume that "being hated" is the same as "hating", Brother. I have devoted my life to Morr. I work in his temple, and I tolerate the pettiness of those whose dedication is less than my own.' I paused to stamp my feet; they were going numb. My words sounded hollow, even to me. 'But that's not what you meant to ask. You want to know why you should stay.'

He stared at me as if I had just told him his innermost secret. He paused. 'I hate it here.'

'I know.'

'I want to run away.'

'What do you want to do?'

'I want to be a knight, fight for the Empire, live and die a hero. But without my father's help I'd never get a rank or a command.'

Ah, his father, some minor noble with three sons in the army and the youngest sent into the priesthood to pray for them. 'Run away. Join a band of mercenaries,' I suggested.

He looked at me with disdain. 'There's no honour in that,' he said. 'And mostly they're Tilean too.' He spat on the cold earth.

'But it would be better than being a priest, eh?' I said. 'Life's what you make of it. If you do not make your own way, a way will be made for you. You must choose, brother, you must choose.'

He didn't reply. As I walked away I heard the ring of the shovel against the earth, striking out like a slowly tolling bell.



THE HALF-REBUILT Temple was crowded with mourners, its normally quiet spaces filled with noise and jostling. Father Ralf's coffers would be doing well and he would be revelling in the attention which was being paid to him. The throng of people, normally obedient to one wearing the robes of Morr, seemed not to notice me and I had to shove my way between them

as I made my way towards the entrance to the priests' quarters in the far wall, and my cell which lay beyond.

I didn't get there. A wailing woman tugged at my robe, begging for a blessing, and then a man in rich clothes wanted to know what the Countess's death augured for the spring rains, and I was trapped by the crowd, speaking words of comfort and saying short prayers for someone I didn't care for to people I hated. Then Father Ralf stood beside me, at my shoulder.

'Is the soul of our departed brother flying to Morr?' he asked, using the Temple's code to ask if I'd tipped the corpse from the Cliff of Sighs. I shook my head.

'Sadly, his passing was swift but not welcomed,' I said, meaning he was killed. Father Ralf looked exasperated.

'I sorrow. I must learn more of this. Be in the Factorum in five minutes.' He turned away to minister to the needs of some well-dressed goodwife. I left: I'd been heading to the Factorum anyway. The Watch would be bringing Reinhold's body there soon.

The Factorum was cold and smelled of death. I sat on one of the scrubbed marble slabs, thinking, waiting for the corpse, and trying to piece together what I knew. Reinhold had failed to find work yesterday, but he had come back with money all the same: money, and the news that Grubheimer was back in town. He returned late, got drunk, took a room alone, and there he was killed. Killed by an assassin, killed almost as if expecting it, almost as if he offered no resistance. Almost as if he felt he should die. That's a rare thought for Middenheimers, who cling as tenaciously to life as their ancient city clings to its rocky mountaintop.

Yet the more I thought about the way Reinhold had looked, the more I believed he had been prepared to die. He hadn't put up a fight. People reach that state for many reasons but desperation is not one of them: it may be a reason to take one's own life, but not to lie back quietly and let it be taken. Drugs, perhaps his wine was drugged? No; if they wanted Reinhold dead, they could have poisoned the wine.

There was something more here. I'd seen it before: the sense of something completed, finished, over. A man who was determined to leave on a high note, so when people looked at his life they'd say, 'What did he accomplish? He accomplished this.'

But Reinhold had been a down-and-out, unable to find a day's work to pay for a night's lodging. The thought of imminent death can drive one to incredible ends, but only to escape it – not to welcome it. What had happened to him?

I knew I didn't have the secret of this yet but, looking at the facts, I thought I knew where it had to be hidden. I needed to find where Reinhold had got the money, and I needed to know whether he had got it before or after he saw Grubheimer in Wendenbahn. This wasn't some penny-pamphlet tale of intrigue: I was already certain that my friend had been killed by Grubheimer or someone hired by him. And I knew that meant Grubheimer would come after me. Possibly he wanted to kill my old associates first, working his way through what was left of my organisation, knowing that I'd know he was coming for me. That was good. It might give me some time.

There was a sharp knock at the door and Father Ralf entered without waiting for permission. He glared at me. I stood up, my knee-joints cracking.

'I told you to deal with this matter quickly,' he said, 'and you start a murder enquiry out of a flop-house stabbing.'

'It was more than that,' I said. 'I sense it. The dead man was a friend of mine.' My voice sounded false to me. It was my old self, Dieter, playing the role of a priest of Morr. It made me uneasy.

Father Ralf glared at me in exasperation. 'Friendship has no place in the life of a priest of Morr, brother. Besides, I did not think you cultivated friends.'

'He was a friend in my former life.'

No answer. Even Father Ralf knew of my past and my old reputation, and therefore what sort of man the deceased must have been. There was a long pause. Our breaths formed white mist, swirling in the cold lamp-lit air.

'Well,' he said, then stopped a moment. 'And another thing. I've learned you spent the afternoon walking around the city with beggars, refusing to listen to mourners who tried to speak to you. This is not behaviour becoming of a priest of our order, brother. It makes us look haughty at a time when we must be at our most open and approachable. Ar-Ulric himself mentioned the matter to me'

I said nothing. I didn't remember ignoring anyone on the street but that didn't mean it hadn't happened. But I doubted that Ar-Ulric, the highest priest of Ulric in the whole Empire, had taken any interest in the matter. Father Ralf was trying to intimidate me and make himself look important at the same time. It might have worked if I cared about either him or Ar-Ulric. But I didn't.

'At six bells we are holding the mass ritual of mourning and remembrance for the Countess,' he continued, 'to be led by myself and Ar-Ulric. You will take part prominently because it is important that you are seen there. And you will be seen to weep for the Countess. Am I clear?'

'Yes, father,' I said plainly. Disagreeing would only have started an argument, and I needed to get rid of him so I could think. He seemed to want an argument anyway, but we were interrupted by another knock at the door. I opened it, and in a blast of cold air there was Schtutt.

'Help me get this dead bugger inside, father,' he said, gesturing to a lump lying on a cart behind him 'I'd have brought one of the lads but everyone is over at the Nordgarten, minding the mourners at Countess Sophie's townhouse.' Then he noticed Father Ralf behind me and dropped into an embarrassed silence.

Ralf made for the door, turning back to me as he reached it. 'Six bells, brother. Do not be late,' he said, and left.

Together Schtutt and I lifted the body – the rigor mortis was wearing off and Reinhold felt like a sack of logs – and carried it down the steps, dumping it on one of the marble slabs. Schtutt was panting.

'I'm not as fit as I used to be in the old days, eh?' He wiped his brow. 'But none of

us are. He certainly isn't.' He gestured at the body. He seemed to be in a mood to chat but I, aware of the passing of time and the presence of Grubheimer somewhere in the city, wasn't. Still, a thought pricked me.

'Schtutt, do you remember a Marienburger named Grubheimer? Tall, greasy black hair, Bretonnian accent, got run out of the city for smuggling Black Lotus? About ten years back?'

'Can't say I do. But if he sounds Bretonnian he wants to watch out. The city's too hot for them at the moment, with the rumours about them killing the Countess and all. There've been two stabbed in brawls already, and another one fell from a high window and broke his neck.'

'Unfortunate,' I said nervously, feeling panicky and distracted. The notion struck me that if Grubheimer had learned which flop-house Reinhold was staying in, he must know by now that I had become a priest, and if I stayed around the Temple I would be an easy victim. I needed to move. 'But I should—'

'Though,' Schtutt said, warming to his theme, 'I've heard from the best authority that the Countess was not assassinated.'

'No?' I feigned interest.

'No. More like a robbery, they reckon. There's an old Dwarf tunnel as comes out in the Countess's cellar. Nobody knew it was there, but the murderer got in that way. And a stack of her jewels was missing, including the Dauphin of Bretonnia's engagement ring. Money gone too. She must have come across the robber, and—'

So the Dwarfs were likely to pick up the blame for the killing. They didn't do well in Middenheim. 'A tragedy, truly,' I said. 'We are all the poorer for her loss. Now, there is much I must do.'

'Aye. I'll be off.' He looked discomforted at having his chat cut short, but left anyway.

I sat on the cold slab next to Reinhold and stared down at the body of my friend. How did his death piece together? And why were my instincts telling me that it was important to work out why Reinhold had lain down to die, when there was a

man in the city trying to kill me? When I had allowed myself to think like my old self once more, I had expected a surge of ruthlessness, of sudden thought and decisive action, but there had been none of that. Perhaps the thing I had feared, the part of me I had buried eight years ago when I joined Morr's temple, had lost its edge in time, as I had hoped. Perhaps I had succeeded in destroying my dark half. Perhaps that success would lead to my own destruction.

I still needed to know where Reinhold had got his money. If I was honest, other than running and hiding, I could think of nothing better to do. The old Dieter had never run or hidden, and I wasn't going to start now. I needed to talk to Louise again.



THE SUN HAD SET by the time I left the Factorum and the wind had picked up. Down by South Gate it chilled my marrow and blew the embers of the guards' brazier into fierce redness. I gazed out over the long, twisting bridge, lit by torches, as it curved down from the cliff's edge to the ground hundreds of feet below. Workmen were still busy with ladders and ropes, lanterns and stone and mortar, toiling to repair the huge breach in the viaduct that the magics of the traitor-wizard Karl-Heinz Wasmeier had caused, as he fled from the city after the last carnival. It would take weeks more to finish the job.

Behind me, in the glow of the brazier, Louise finished the pie I had bought her, with the appetite of a woman who has not eaten all day. Now she would be more inclined to talk. She knew I had been Reinhold's friend, but I would still be asking hard questions. Better to start with softer ones, to make it sound as if I cared.

'How did you come to Middenheim?' I asked. She glanced at me in that way that horses do if they're nervous and about to shy. I smiled at her, my face feeling odd at the unaccustomed gesture.

She said, 'Back home, in Bretonnia, I worked for a woman. She was with a noble, brought me here when that was... when she left him. She was wild, fierce, but much money. I serve for six years. Then she throw me in the street with nothing. For no reason.' She stopped. I had expected anger or rage, but she must have told this story so many times that its emotion had all drained away. Yet I could tell there was still deep, black pain, far below. But was there resentment? Hatred? I didn't know.

I looked at her for a moment while I groped for the right thing to say. Then it came to me, all of it, in a sudden rush like a spring flood, and I said, 'You're talking about the Countess! You said her name this afternoon. You were trying to tell me something.'

Louise didn't speak but her eyes said I was right.

'Louise, what are you afraid of?'

She said nothing.

'Did Reinhold give you something last night?'

She nodded, despite herself. Tears were beginning to streak her cheeks. With frightening speed, skeins of logic were weaving themselves together in my mind.

'Reinhold knew how much you hated the Countess, didn't he? And you're afraid that he had something to do with her death. You're scared, because you realise now that you don't really want her dead, and because you don't want to believe Reinhold could do something like that... and because if he did kill her, then people might think you're involved too.'

She shook her head. For a moment I was confused.

'Louise, do you mean that's not what you believe, or,' and the realisation hit me hard and sudden, 'or because it's what you know?'

She nodded, a little nod, her silent weeping unabated.

'Did he give you some jewellery last night?'

A tiny nod.

'And you recognised it.'

Another, tinier.

'Because it was the Countess's.'

She didn't need to nod. I already knew I had the truth. I took a deep breath. This wasn't going to be easy.

'Louise, you have to trust me. The jewellery was the Countess's, but Reinhold didn't get it from her. He stole it from the man who killed her – that Bretonnian he saw earlier that day.'

'The Grubworm,' she said in a small voice.

'Yes, Grubworm. And then Grubworm went to the flop-house and killed Reinhold to get it back, but he'd already given it to you.' I paused. She said nothing. I had no idea if she believed me. 'Louise, it is my duty as a priest of Morr to understand death. We commune with Death, we speak to it. We live our lives surrounded by it, and we comprehend things about it that most people could never understand. We know who killed the Countess. He will be arrested soon. Reinhold had nothing to do with it.'

I paused to let my words sink in. She still said nothing, her head buried in her hands. The cold wind blew between us, the thin flames of the brazier warming nothing at all.

'But you must give me the jewellery,' I said.

At last she looked up and met my eye. A long moment passed, and then she scabbled amongst her dirty rags, and I knew I had won. She held out a balled fist, and I reached out to receive what lay within. As I did, she grabbed my arm with her other hand, and held hard.

'I have your word for the truth?' she hissed.

'You have my solemn word as a priest of Morr,' I lied.

A jewelled ring fell into my hand: heavy, with the soft warmth that only solid gold has. I cradled it, thinking. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but I knew that at least I now had the truth of yesterday evening in my grasp.

Because Reinhold had killed the Countess. He knew the old Dwarfish tunnels under the city better than anyone except a Dwarf. He could pick the locks, there had been blood on his pocket-knife, and he'd given Louise that ring. More

importantly, I'd known Reinhold for long enough to understand what he was capable of doing. He believed that the ends justified the means, and his means were ruthless. I'd never asked him to kill anyone, but he had killed while working for me, more than once.

So he'd seen Grubheimer in town. Maybe Grubheimer had spied him and threatened him. Or maybe Reinhold had simply heard that the man was back and asking dangerous questions. Anyway, he'd realised his days were numbered, and so he looked for a grand gesture, a last stab at posthumous fame, on which to die. And given that his lover had reason to hate her, what better than the murder of the beloved Countess Sophie?

He'd stolen some of her jewellery to make it look like a burglary, fenced most of it cheaply before the murder was discovered, drunk or gave away most of the money and used the rest to buy a squalid room for the night. He gave his girlfriend her ex-employer's famed engagement ring. Then he died. Maybe he died happy. I hoped there had been a tiny shred of contentment in his mind as Grubheimer's garrotte had throttled the life from him.

But Reinhold wasn't stupid. He knew – he must have known – that the jewellery he had stolen, fenced or given to Louise would be traced back to him, and his name would resound around the city: Reinhold the Knife, the man who killed Countess Sophia. A black legend, but for some people infamy is better than anonymity. Particularly if you're dead. I guessed – no, knew – that he had wanted that to be his epitaph.

Louise coughed, a long, racking cough, and I remembered where I was. There was still the business with Grubheimer to be concluded. The ring in my hand could come in useful, though at that moment I didn't know how.

'I must go,' I said, and turned away. Louise grabbed my arm again.

'One thing more,' she said. 'You say you Reinhold's friend, but he never mentioned priest. What friend were you, to let him live like this?'

I turned back slowly. 'When Reinhold knew me,' I said quietly, 'my name was Dieter Brossmann.'

Louise dropped my arm, staring wildly. She made a strange sound, half gasp, half scream.

'You!' she spat. 'You betrayed him! You let him sink in life, to the dregs! You – you are no friend! He should have killed you! You should die! You are evil! Evil! Give me my ring!' She made a lunge for me. 'GIVE ME MY RING!'

Two Watchmen began to run towards us. A Bretonnian beggar-woman screaming at a priest – they would know who to arrest. I turned away, leaving them to it, and walked swiftly back up the steep streets towards Morrspark and the Temple.



HALF THE CITY must have been crowded into the park. It was full: nobles, knights and rich merchants jostled by shoemakers, peddlers and servants. They were all packed into the cold, dark expanse, lit by occasional torches on high poles. People were even standing on the graves to get a better view of the ceremony on the Temple's steps. And yet there was no sound from any of them. As I pushed my way through the silent masses I could hear Ar-Ulric's great voice booming out over the park, interspersed with the higher, weaker tones of Father Ralf. I didn't bother to listen to what they were saying. All that mattered was that I had missed the start. There would be trouble later. If I lived that long.

I shouldered my way between the gathered ranks, heading for the Temple and the small door at its rear. I needed to be alone, and to hide the Countess's ring, and my cell would be the best place for both. As Father Ralf and Ar-Ulric were on the steps at the front of the temple, the press was less great at the back and as I approached the door I could see it was ajar.

As I put my hand on the ornate handle, a voice behind me said, 'Dieter.'

I whirled around. There, a few paces away, was a figure I knew: medium height, greased hair greying at the temples, and a nose that spoke of aristocracy and brawling. He was larger these days, fatter or more heavily muscled. I didn't want to find out which. Instead I leapt through the door and slammed it behind me.

Grubheimer! Grubheimer was here. He had spoken to me. He had wanted me to see him. He hadn't tried to kill me. Which meant... which meant... he must have set a trap for me. And I had almost certainly jumped into it.

He had called me Dieter, and I had answered to that name for the first time in eight years. I did feel more like my old self now: calmer, more confident, more ruthless. And part of me, the priest, felt appalled and scared by that, but I ignored it. For now I had to be Dieter, or die.

I ran to my cell. It was pitifully obvious that someone had moved the thin mattress since I had been here. I lifted it, and underneath lay a small leather pouch. I pulled it open and stared at the fine grey dust inside. I didn't have to smell it to recognise it: Black Lotus powder. A foul substance. Fatal to its owners, in more ways than one. Grubheimer had put this here. He was framing me the way I'd framed him ten years ago.

Then I heard footsteps, fast and light, in the corridor. They stopped outside. I tucked the pouch in my robes, grabbed a chair as a weapon, and yanked the door open. In the corridor stood Brother Jakob.

'I saw you come in,' he said. 'Father Ralf is furious. I thought I'd better tell you.'

If he'd thought that might worry me, he was wrong. I moved forward, into the corridor, grasping him by the arm. 'There are bigger things in the air tonight. Come with me.' The implications of the Black Lotus were still flooding through my mind. Grubheimer must have known I'd find the drug. He must want me to be caught with it in person, and that meant he'd act as soon as he could. I had to dispose of the powder immediately. One hiding place came to mind and I acted without thinking of the consequences. Like Dieter.

'Take this for safekeeping,' I said, thrusting the pouch into Jakob's hands.

'What is it?'

'Something many men would kill for. If you see trouble, stick close to me.'

I unbolted the door and we stepped outside. The massed mourners were singing the last verse of a funeral hymn, filling the world with the music of sorrow and regret. At any other time I would have been deeply moved by it, but right now it was a distraction. Almost dragging Jakob by the arm, I made my way around to the front of the Temple.

We didn't get far. A knot of Watch uniforms was moving roughly through the crowd towards us, carrying flaming torches to light their path. At their centre was Grubheimer. He pointed to me. 'This is the man,' he said. 'He is the one who offered to sell me Black Lotus this afternoon.'

'Officer, this man lies,' I said, not to Grubheimer but to the Watch Captain with him, a man I didn't know. 'I am nothing but a priest of Morr.' My voice sounded loud: the hymn had ended and from the front of the Temple Father Ralf was proclaiming a prayer. I knew its words well. The crowd around us were silent, their attention on us.

'Search him,' Grubheimer said, his voice gruff, his accent strong. 'A brown leather pouch.'

Jakob stared at me, suddenly trying to pull free of my grasp. I didn't let him go. And with a lurch I realised that I still had the Countess's ring in my closed hand. If they searched me, Grubheimer would have been more triumphant than he could possibly have dreamed.

'I have no such pouch,' I said. Jakob pulled harder. From the temple steps, I could hear Father Ralf nearing the end of the prayer to Morr.

'Maybe his catamite has it,' Grubheimer said. I drew myself up, aware of the aura my priestly robes would give me, and knowing how little they matched my terrified thoughts. And suddenly I remembered a cool, calm voice – not mine, not Dieter's, but Reinhold's – and I knew what to do.

'You accuse me of this crime,' I said slowly and with emphasis, 'because I know who you killed last night.' Grubheimer face showed surprise, but not worry. I took a quick step forward. Before he could react I had dipped my hand into Grubheimer's waistcoat pocket and a moment later held up a heavy gold ring to the Watchmen's eyes. A simple sleight-of-hand. Reinhold had taught his friend Dieter how to do it, years ago.

'The Countess's engagement ring,' I said, measuring my voice carefully against the last words of Father Ralf's prayer. 'This is the assassin who killed her.'

The prayer ended. Silence spread across the park.

'This Bretonnian,' I proclaimed with a voice like the wrath of gods, 'is the man who killed the Countess!'

Scared realisation broke across Grubheimer's face like a crack of thunder. There was a murmuring of voices. Hundreds of people had turned to look at us. How must it seem to them? Two priests, members of the Watch, and one accused man. Grubheimer knew he was caught: I saw it in his face. I grasped Brother Jakob's arm more tightly and watched as Grubheimer did what I'd expected: he panicked. But not the way I'd hoped. He didn't run. He pulled a knife and lunged at me.

Without thinking, I spun away, dragging Brother Jakob around in front of me as I went. His feet slipped on the cold, hard ground, and he screamed as he began to fall. Grubheimer's knife met his chest, slicing through the thin black robes. Blood sprayed across the crowd. I lost my balance and fell.

Someone shouted, 'Murderer!' and people began to run.

I hit the earth hard, smashing my nose against the frozen ground and knocking the wind out of me. Grubheimer stood fixedly above me, staring down, knife in hand. He looked so startled. Something had emerged from his breast. It was six inches of sword-blade. Over the Bretonnian's shoulder, I could see the man who had stabbed him: tall, bearded, scarred. He seemed familiar. In an instant

he had pulled out his sword and disappeared into the milling crowd. Grubheimer crumpled slowly to the ground like a puppet, and died there. He didn't take his eyes off me for a moment.

There was movement: people were milling about, and there were cries of terror and sorrow. A rush of noise, of whispered words, swept across the park. The solemnity of the service was broken and lost.

Beside me on the ground lay Jakob. With one hand he was trying to staunch the bleeding from the slash across his stomach, but he wasn't succeeding. The light in his eyes was fading but he stared at me as if to say: you did this.

I reached over to him and placed my hand on his breast, over his heart, and tried to think of some farewell that would make sense, to either of us. I felt his heartbeat flutter and cease, and I realised there was only one thing I could say. I knelt beside him, placed my other hand on his forehead, and began the Ritual of Final Parting, willing his soul into the arms of Morr.

That was the last touch. It was done. I was safe. Overwhelming relief and tiredness swept through me and I slumped, lying beside Jakob, my face level with his dead eyes. You, I thought: a life among the dead was no place for a man like you. You said you wanted to die a hero's death. Well, you did. The man who gave his life to stop the Countess's assassin from escaping. And perhaps you died happy.

I doubted it, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that I would be the person who attended to his corpse, and that would let me dispose of the Black Lotus.

I would need a story to explain how I had discovered Grubheimer's guilt and the ring, but that could wait. The people of Middenheim had their assassin. With the murderer revealed as a Bretonnian, the diplomatic crisis would get worse and there might even be a war, but if that happened it would be far away. Father Ralf would be furious I had spoiled his service of remembrance, but I would live with the consequences of that tomorrow.

And what of Louise? She had lost the man who made her grubby life worth living. And Reinhold: I had stolen his triumph, his posthumous glory, the infamy that would have kept his name alive long after his body had been devoured by worms, and I had given it to the man who killed him. But I had saved Louise from the knowledge that her lover had killed her mistress. Maybe that was a good thing. I didn't know, and I wasn't sure if I cared.

But it had worked. It had all come together. I had survived. Only one innocent had died. Reinhold was avenged. It felt good. I almost grinned.

A voice I recognised said, 'Father.' Above me, Grizzly Bruno offered me his hand, and I took it and climbed to my feet. Somehow I knew that his presence was no accident. People had gathered around us, pushing and shoving, trying to get a glimpse of the two bodies, and the Watch were attempting to keep order. The mood of mourning had been shattered; everyone was talking excitedly about the assassin. I could just hear Ar-Ulric's strident voice battling against the noise, but nobody was listening any more.

I turned to the man who had helped me. 'Thank you, Bruno.'

'More thanks than you know, father,' he said in a low voice. 'The man who stuck your Bretonnian? One of mine.'

'You had me followed?'

'And with good reason,' he smiled. 'You didn't notice?'

'No.' I forced a smile. 'The priestly life slows the instincts.'

'Not too much I hope, father. You owe me a favour, and I'd still appreciate your advice on that business I mentioned this afternoon. Right up your old street, it is.'

'My old street,' I repeated, a strange thoughtfulness in my voice. This afternoon I had wondered if I would be able to cage the wolf of my old memories and instincts once I had dealt with Grubworm. I had forgotten to ask myself if I would want to. I had forgotten how good victory tasted. I had forgotten so many things.

Bruno looked at me. 'How about it, father?'

I smiled and reached out to shake his hand.

'Call me Dieter,' I said. ●

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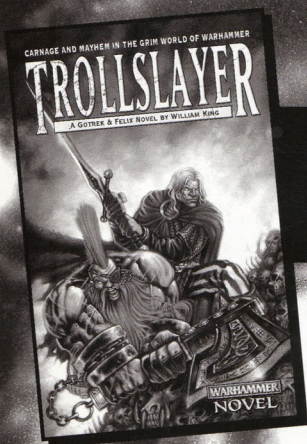
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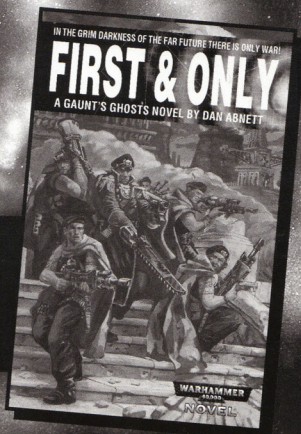
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Gilead's Test, by Dan Abnett

As he felt the hilt of his sword come into contact with his assailant's sternum, Gilead turned and swiftly scanned the area again. The foe were all around. Tall, darkly noble, yet twisted and corrupt. Elves, kin and yet not kin. Blasphemous parodies of their race, death pale, dressed in reeking black armour, eyes rotting in skulls, breaths foul from black-lipped mouths. Their rusting armour was decorated in flaking gilt, fading silks, worm-eaten brocades. Not Beastmen, not bulky warrior clans of Chaos. Elves.

Nightmare, by Gau Thorpe

Joshua stepped towards the cave mouth and two strange figures appeared, as if out of nowhere, and barred his path. The creatures were bunched and deformed. Pale, lidless eyes glowered at him from sunken sockets. One opened its mouth to speak, but all that issued forth was an incomprehensible burbling and hissing. Joshua stared at his hands, picturing them holding a long-bladed sword. As if at his command, a hefty metal falchion appeared in his grasp, its semi-transparent blade shimmering with an unearthly blue light. They are foul, Joshua thought to himself. I am the master here.

Angels, by Robert Earl

Over the south wall, with a hideous snarling and squealing, poured a wave of dark, misshapen forms like a boiling mass of gargoyles brought to life by the night's pale moon. When they reached the torchlit sanctuary of the village green I felt myself shrink at the sight of them. The things were an obscene combination of man and beast, horribly melted and twisted together. Their clothes were ragged strips, shredded and filthy, but the claws lashing at the end of their arms were sharp and bright enough to freeze me, my cry stopped in my gaping mouth.

The Bretonnian Connection, by James Wallis

It was one of the workmen who told us, running over from the Temple of Morr. The news must have been all over Middenheim by the time we heard it, shouted from window to window high above the twisted streets and steep alleys. It was the start of a spring day in the City of the White Wolf, and death was in the air. Countess Sophia of Altdorf, courtier and Imperial Plenipotente to the Graf of Middenheim, former wife of the Dauphin of Bretonnia, beauty, socialite, diplomat, had been murdered in her bed.

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