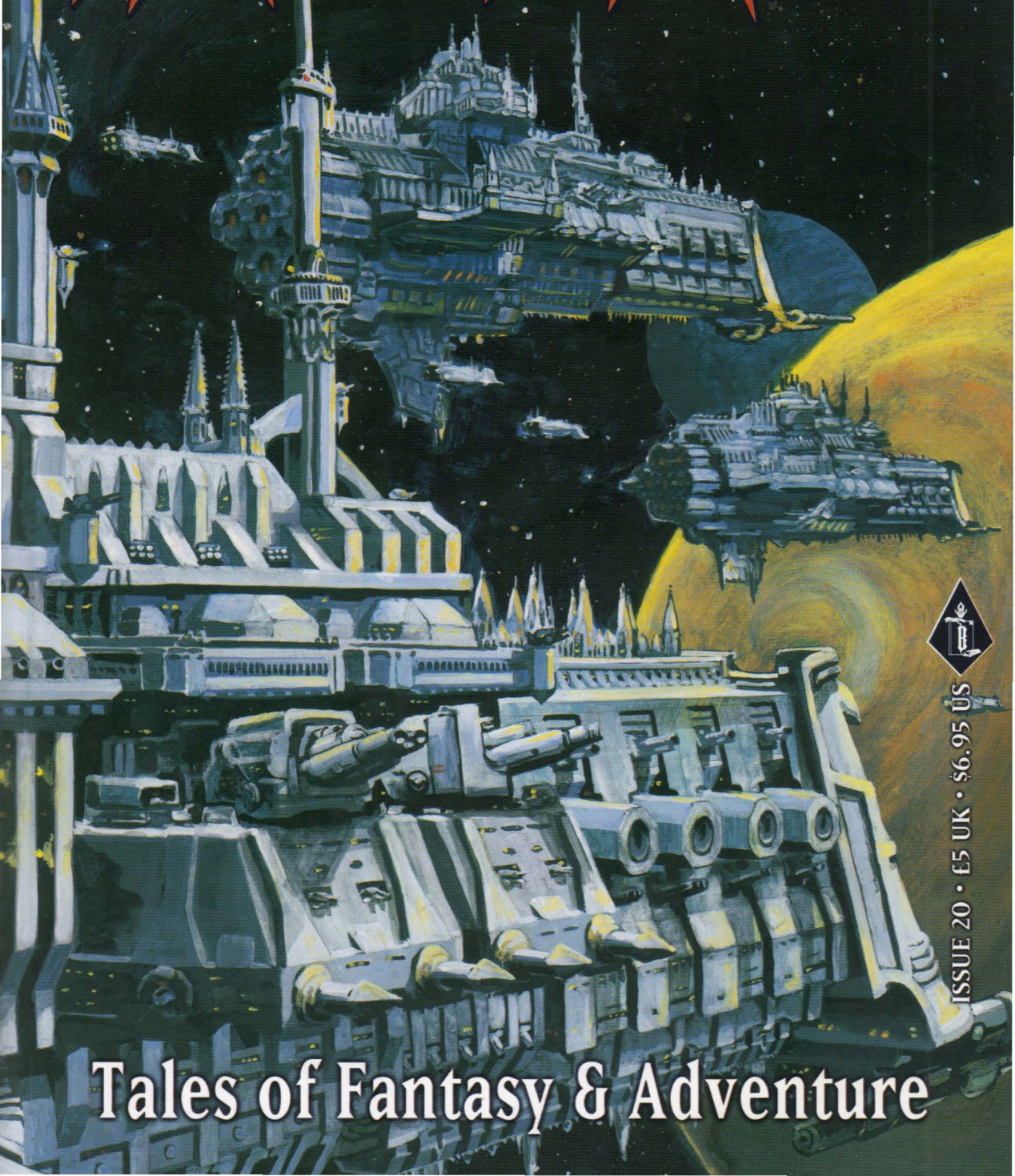


# INFERNO!



ISSUE 20 • £5 UK • \$6.95 US

Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

# INFERNO!

IT'S PRETTY obvious, really, that all of the stories, features and comic strips in Inferno! are inspired by the dark and gothic worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000, as detailed in Games Workshop's world-famous games of the same names. As I mentioned two issues ago (we'll gloss over last issue shall we? Rest assured that heads have rolled!), we use the established background worlds from these games as a canvas on which our new heroes can play out their brand new adventures – and in the process adding yet more rich detail to those game backgrounds.

Recently, however, we have noticed a distinct upsurge in reports of people letting it work the other way. That is, using the stories and strips from Inferno! and Warhammer Monthly to inspire their own amazing games of Warhammer, 40K and beyond. We've heard about Gaunt's Ghosts scenarios and seen armies of converted miniatures painted up as the Tanith First-and-Only. We've enjoyed a selection of Ephrael Stern-inspired

adventures, and games in which a certain doomed Dark Elf and his Cold One mount feature heavily.

Even the Citadel Journal has got in on the action, with an epic Warhammer adventure based around the theme of escaping from the legendary Dark Elf dungeons of Hag Graef, as related in our story Mormacar's Lament (seek out Journal #29 for more details).

This has become uppermost in my mind because this issue, all being well, will be hot off the presses at Games Day, our annual get-together of hobby enthusiasts at the National Indoor Arena in Birmingham in the UK.

For the day, along with all the regular – and seriously popular – signing sessions, seminars and displays of artwork from forthcoming publications, the Black Library have come up with a selection of participation and demo games based squarely around a selection of your favourite comic and fiction heroes. From a Necromunda Rex game featuring six-inch high renditions of your favourite Kal Jerico characters which

was so popular at Black Library Day back in July, to a one-on-one adventure starring those Mordheim mercenaries, Ulli and Marquand.

It might sound a bit soppy, but we're always genuinely flattered when gamers decide to recreate one of our stories or comics for their games. It means we're inspiring gamers as much as we ourselves are inspired by the games. So anyway, if you've come up with a great scenario or adventure featuring a Black Library character, for whatever game system, why not write and tell us about it? It might just make our day.

**M**EANWHILE, in this issue, we have another tale with a twist from Talabheim's finest ale house, The Ten Tailed Cat, four storming action stories... and a sensational blood-soaked tour around the dangerous streets of Mordheim courtesy of the inimitable Ralph Horsley. Here's hoping they inspire you!

Marc Gascoigne  
Editor

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# CONTENTS

## A BLACK LIBRARY™ PUBLICATION

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Kenson Low

## 4 The Gifts of Tal Dur

In the aftermath of the siege of Erengrad two of its defenders track down a former comrade for whom Chaos has left an indelible mark.

Story Neil McIntosh • Illustration Des Hanley

## 17 Tales from the Ten Tailed Cat

*The Ratcatcher's Tale.* Just what is lurking in the sewers beneath Talabheim? Another story with a twist in the tail from the finest alehouse in the city.

Script Gordon Rennie • Art Paul Jeacock

## 20 The Plague Pit

A young sorcerer employs Torben Badenov and his band of mercenaries to protect him while he deciphers the mysterious runes in an ancient burial ground – but what secrets do they hold?

Story Jonathan Green • Illustration Tiernen Trevallion

## 38 Hive Fleet Horror

An apothecary with a past he's trying to escape becomes embroiled in the tyrannid invasion of a backwater planet.

Story Barrington J. Bayley • Illustration Adrian Smith

## 47 Treasure Hunt

Join Kaptain Karl Klenau Schroder and his men on a blood-soaked tour around the cursed streets of Mordheim.

Feature Ralph Horsley

## 54 Deus ex Mechanicus

Naogeddon is meant to be a dead world but something lives there and it wants the team of explorators who have woken it after six hundred million years eradicated.

Story Andy Chambers

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GW Product Code: 6071 9999 020

ISBN 1-84154-115-X



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# The Gifts of Tal Sur

by Neil McIntosh

IT WAS A crowd of about the size that might gather on any festival day in a small place like Mielstadt, but Stefan sensed nothing festive about the mood of the townsfolk jostling each other in the square. Fear mixed with anger hung in the air. Not for the first time, he and Bruno had stepped into trouble without looking for it.

Stefan exchanged a brief nod of encouragement with his companion and nudged his horse forward. The crowd parted grudgingly before the horsemen. Stefan scanned the mass of faces obscured by cowls or a mask of grime, looking for the one familiar face. No sign. Now the two riders were within arms' length of the crude wooden structure which had been erected at the centre of the square.

Stefan reached down from the saddle with a length of rope to tether the horse against an upright. Bruno glanced across at him, eyebrow arcing in disbelief. 'Here?'

Stefan nodded. 'Here.' Up to now the crowd had been wary of them, but passive. But now a thick set man with a face blotched crimson from exertion, hatred or too much cheap Bretonnian gin muscled his way through to the front and stood facing the newcomers, hands set squarely upon spread hips.

Here we go, Stefan thought - I've met your kind plenty of times before. Instinctively, his free hand felt for the hilt of the sword hanging by his left side. The mob fell silent, expectantly.

Red Face extended a finger towards Stefan. 'You'd better listen carefully,' he said.

Somewhat reluctantly, Stefan leant down out of the saddle. The man's breath smelt of something that should have been long buried. Dabs of spittle dotted Stefan's face as the self-appointed mob leader addressed him.

'I'll give you a second chance since you've only just arrived.' The man ran an eye over the two of them and sneered: 'Fancy gentlemen up out of the city, no doubt. You see, the thing is-' he gestured towards the wooden platform behind him - 'you can't tie those horses up here.'

'Really?' Stefan made a rapid sweep of the activity in the square as he spoke. 'And why would that be?'

He already had the answer to that question. A young woman, slender and wiry with cropped, bronze hair was being jostled through the crowd towards the platform. Her blouse was torn and dirty, and her expression was defiant but very, very scared. Up on the platform, a noose swung ready, waiting for her neck.

Red Face twisted his mouth into a snarl. 'Because,' he said 'we've got a mutant to deal with here, and you and your friend are in the way.'

'Well,' Stefan replied evenly, 'we're sorry about that, aren't we, Bruno?'

'Absolutely,' Bruno agreed, drawing his horse closer to his companion as he spoke. 'We hate getting in peoples' way.'

There were uniformed men at the edge of the square, at least a dozen of them. They were dressed like the regular soldiers of the Empire, but from the way they busied themselves with pretending not to notice what was going on, Stefan guessed they were local militia, toy soldiers waiting to see which way the wind was going to blow before wading in. No use looking for any help there.

Red Face had drawn a few like-minded townsfolk to his cause. Stefan and Bruno now found themselves inside a tightening ring of six or seven heavily built men, all clutching daggers or wooden staves.

'Maybe your ears are no better than your eyes,' one of the roughnecks said. 'Maybe you've not heard about the troubles out east

towards Kislev. Evil work, corruption and decay, and creeping this way.' More voices joined in loud agreement.

'On the contrary,' Stefan told him. 'We know all about that.'

Somewhere in the crowd, he heard a voice mutter: 'Easterners' and another 'Snow in their beards'

'Aye,' Red Face went on, taking encouragement from his supporters. 'And we're not about to let evil take root around here! No witchcraft in Mielstadt!'

The crowd roared their approval. 'So then.' Red Face drew a long knife from its pouch and waved the greasy, pitted blade before Stefan's face. 'Why don't the two of you turn around and get out of our way? We've got a hanging to finish.'

Stefan met Bruno's gaze. The look that passed between them was almost imperceptible, but it signalled agreement.

'I don't think so,' Stefan replied, coldly but politely. Red Face took a step back. The tiniest of doubts mixed with the disbelief on his face.

'I don't think so what?' he demanded.

Stefan ignored him and looked instead across towards the figure tethered on the platform of the gallows. 'Hey, you!' he called, 'What's your name?'

It seemed to take the young woman a few seconds to realise that Stefan was now addressing her. Then she replied, in a clear but faltering voice: 'Katarin. Katarin de Lucht.'

'Very well, Katarin. Tell me this: is there anything in your heart that is not loyal to the memory of our Emperor, or true to the teachings of Sigmar?'

The young woman shook her head, vigorously. 'Nothing, I swear.'

Stefan turned to Bruno and shrugged. 'See? A simple case of mistaken identity.'

'That's how it looks to me,' Bruno agreed.

Red Face spread his arms wide in a gesture to the crowd. His face spread open in an unpleasant grin. 'Better make room for two more on that gallows, friends. Looks like we've got our work cut out today.'

The big man moved with surprising speed, twisting in towards Stefan to grasp the fabric of his tunic near the neck. Stefan was dragged forwards, fighting to stay in the saddle. He fastened onto Red Face's wrist with his right hand and drew his sword with his left. Red Face was fast, but Stefan was faster. Unlike his opponent, his judgement wasn't clouded by drink. If he stayed on his horse to fight he'd

have to kill the other man. He didn't want to do that, not yet. Still gripping Red Face by the wrist he swung out of the saddle and dropped to the ground, his sword slicing the air in a single movement. Red Face toppled back off-balance into the crowd as Stefan pressed home his attack. To his rear, Bruno kept other would-be aggressors at sword's length.

Red Face had dropped onto his knees. His face was streaming with perspiration. He lunged at Stefan, aiming the knife at his gut. The younger man side-stepped the blow and brought his own blade down in a single stroke, skewering his attacker through the hand. Red Face shrieked like a pig as blood flowed out onto the dry dust of the town square.

'Murderer!' he screamed, scanning the faces around him for support. 'Ralf! – Helmut! Get the bastard!' But his friends had now gone very quiet. Like the rest of the mob, they sensed the change in the wind. Stefan pulled his sword clear. His opponent scrambled to his feet, one hand now stuffed inside his tunic. Red Face made ready to try his luck with the dagger again, but, before he could do so, Stefan had the point of his sword tucked neatly underneath the other man's chin.

'Believe me, friend, if I'd wanted to murder you we wouldn't be having this conversation now.' He looked round for Bruno and found his comrade circling the gallows, clearing a space between the platform and the crowd. 'All well?' Stefan asked.

'Like sleeping babes,' Bruno assured him. Stefan turned his attention back to Red Face and pressed the point of the sword home till it nicked at the leathery flesh on his opponent's neck.

'Don't let's repeat this,' he suggested.

Red Face appeared to gather himself for a final onslaught then thought better of it. He turned away from Stefan with a muttered curse and vanished into the crowd.

'Right,' said Stefan. 'I think Katarin's been up there long enough. Who's going to help her down?'

Faces amongst the mob looked cowed rather than bloodthirsty now. Red Face's experience had had a sobering effect. A few men and women stepped forward, hesitantly, at Stefan's command. As they did so, the militia waded into the crowd, suddenly keen to impose their authority. Stefan found himself with a brace of crossbows aimed carefully at his head. He sheathed his sword and raised one arm to head height.

The militia chief cleared his throat self-consciously. 'I think you and your friend better come with us,' he said. 'And you others,' he glared at whoever in the crowd was prepared to meet his eye. 'Get back to your homes before I decide to take some of you in too.'



**A**UGUSTUS SIERCK, acting Graf of Mielstadt, was a man who disliked change. Disliked the kind of change which, of late, had caused him to fix iron bars across the once elegant windows of his office, the only half-decent building in Mielstadt. Change which had persuaded him, against his better judgement, to allow the daubing of crude protective runes on the walls of houses in the town. Now change had brought him two outsiders, and a little matter of a domestic problem which otherwise might have sorted itself.

'The point is,' he said, pounding the expanse of oak desk for emphasis, 'we don't really want or need your sort troubling us here in Mielstadt.'

Stefan stood before the Graf impassively, Bruno and Katrin flanking him on either side. Since their 'rescue' by the Graf's militia, they hadn't been badly treated, but welcome had been kept to a minimum. The office they now stood in was shabby and austere but for a gilt-framed oil painting of a fashionably dressed man posed on bended knee before an aristocratic, pale-skinned woman. The picture looked oddly out of place amongst the rustic trappings of Mielstadt.

Stefan bowed, non-committally. He assumed that the Graf's remarks applied equally to all three of them. Sierck pulled back his chair and drew himself up to his full height, which wasn't that much. On tiptoe he would barely reach to Stefan's shoulder, though his girth went some way to lending weight to his aura of self-importance. Sierck made a slow circular tour around his visitors, surveying their appearance with obvious distrust.

'So, I'm to believe you're silver merchants,' he said at last, 'just "passing through" on your way back west. And you're in Mielstadt looking for a friend?'

'A fellow traveller,' Stefan corrected him. 'He took something which isn't rightly his. We need to see things returned to their proper place.'

Sierck snorted. 'Well, I doubt that you'll find him here.'

'Nonetheless,' Stefan replied, 'I think it may be worth our while looking.' Sierck circled again, fingering his chain of office. Stefan imagined the Graf doubted his story, but lacked the wit to imagine what the truth might be.

'Pretty accomplished swordsmen for merchants, aren't you?'

'The road's a perilous place for travellers,' Bruno replied. 'Especially those with something of value to protect.'

The Graf paused, distracted by some thought or calculation. 'I'm not a country fool,' he said at last. 'Don't think I've spent my entire life cooped up in a Morr-forsaken hole like this. I'm a civilised man.'

Stefan returned his look, blankly. The Graf's face reddened with irritation.

'The point is,' Sierck continued, 'that business over in Erengard cast a shadow, and it's falling this way. People don't like it. I don't like it.' He puffed out his chest. 'Stay at your own risk,' he said, 'but if you're not gone by dusk tomorrow, then I'll see to it that you're dealt with.'

Stefan bowed once more. 'You are very kind.'

'And you,' Sierck stabbed an accusing finger towards Katarin, 'You'll be gone too, if you know what's good for you. There's no place for sorcery here, not now, not ever.'

'But I'm not—'

Stefan cut short Katarin's protest. 'Save your breath,' he advised 'We've finished our business here.'

The three kept silent until they were beyond earshot of the Graf and his militia. Finally Katarin said: 'It's true, though. I'm no sorceress.'

'I don't doubt it,' Stefan replied. 'Nor do you look much like a mutant to me either.'

Katarin's face softened in a smile. 'For that matter,' she observed, 'you don't look much like merchants. But whoever you are, I owe you the debt of my life.'

'Perhaps we both owe the other a longer talk. In better surroundings. Do you know a place where we can find lodgings, and something to eat and drink?'

'Just one. But it's close by,' Katarin confirmed. 'I'll take you there.'

THE TETHERED Boar might once have been the kind of place where travellers from afar would come to rest and swap tales of the road. There was little enough of that cheer left now. About one thing at least the Graf had been right: something cold and dark had trailed its fingers through Mielstadt. It had been there in the town square that afternoon, and it was there in the hush that fell upon the room as Stefan and his companions took their seats in the shadow of an alcove.

'Not so long ago they'd have been as welcoming as folk anywhere in the Empire,' Katarin observed, 'but ever since word reached here of the troubles at Erengard, people have been on edge. If the stories can be believed, things were bad.'

'They were.' Stefan replied. 'Very bad indeed.'

Katarin's eyes widened. 'You were there?'

Bruno raised his mug and took a long draught of beer. 'To the bitter end.'

Katarin bit on her lip. 'The stories...' she whispered 'daemons laying siege to the city... were they true?'

Stefan appraised the young woman sitting opposite. No sorceress, for sure, but not naïve, either. Something in those pale grey eyes spoke of a wisdom and a knowledge beyond the realm of many men.

'You know of the dark powers,' Stefan said quietly. Katarin's face flushed.

'I don't speak openly of such things,' she replied. 'I have knowledge, gifts – I don't know where they come from, but I try to use them for good. I know there are other powers, at least equal in strength, which serve evil.'

Stefan nodded. 'The Dark Lord of Change sent a champion, Kyros, with a mission to conquer Erengard. An army of five thousand – men, mutants and beastmen – laid siege to the city for three weeks. Many perished within the walls, but the city held.'

He paused, looking around the gloomy interior of the inn. 'We were amongst those who joined the expeditionary force that broke the siege. Kyros was slain.'

Katarin's eyes were still widening, despite the gloom. 'The story also goes that some of the dark knights broke free, escaped westwards.'

Bruno smiled, ruefully. 'At least one did.'

'That's why you're here?'

'That's why we're here.'

'Then you must...'

Stefan put a finger to his lips, silencing her. The inn door opened. A figure entered, instantly recognisable even without the cloth bandaging the wound on his wrist. Red Face walked to the bar, seemingly unaware of Stefan, and spoke quietly with the serving girl. As he turned back towards the door, his eyes momentarily locked Stefan in an icy glare before moving on. Within a matter of seconds he was gone again.

'I wonder what that was about?' Bruno pondered.

'What indeed?' Stefan agreed, uneasily. For a moment he appeared lost in his own thoughts. He took another tug at his beer and turned back towards Katarin.

'You're a healer of some sorts?'

'Some call me that. Others – well, you've seen what they call me. I can help heal, but that makes me different. Plenty of people round here don't like that these days.'

'They see an outsider,' Stefan said. 'Ignorance fathers fear, and fear is father to hatred.'

The serving girl brought over fresh beer. The candlelight lit her features as she reached across the table to collect empty mugs and plates. She was young, Bruno's age or less, with deep black hair that tumbled around her face in long tresses. Bruno met her smiling gaze and held it. 'Let me help you with those, miss...'

The girl smiled, briefly but warmly. 'Rhia,' she replied. 'That would be nice. Nice to have some decent company in for once.'

Stefan gave his comrade a hefty thump as he rose from the table to carry the tray of dishes for Rhia. 'He's happy now,' he laughed. Katarin laughed with him. Her eyes lingered on Stefan for a moment then flicked away.

'I've always been an outsider here,' she said. 'I never knew my mother or father. I was brought up by the woman I called my grandmother. When I was twelve she told me the truth: that she had found me when I was a baby, wrapped in blankets in the woods above Tal Dur.'

'Tal Dur?' Stefan leant forward. 'There is such a place then?'

Katarin sipped at her beer. 'Near the Reikshalle Falls, not three miles north of here. In the old tongues, Tal Dur meant "the healing pool".'

'And is it?' Stefan asked, 'a healing pool?'



Katarin looked around, warily. Custom in the bar had thinned. What few townsfolk were left seemed to be oblivious to them. Bruno leant on the counter, huddled close by Rhia, the two of them deep in conversation.

'The waters of Tal Dur can heal,' Katarin told him, 'as long as they are ministered by someone with the healing gift.'

'And if not,' Stefan asked, 'what then?'

'Tal Dur is a mirror upon the soul,' she said, quietly. 'The waters reflect whatever they find within us.' She took Stefan's hand and turned it within her own, examining the faint scars of a hundred battles. 'If you had been wounded, and I was to heal you, Tal Dur would speed the process. Your wounds would mend in minutes, not weeks, and better than new.' She paused. 'But if there was sickness in your soul and you went into the waters alone... well, don't enter Tal Dur alone.'

Stefan looked thoughtful. 'I think Tal Dur may well be the real reason we're here. What the one that we've been following may be seeking.'

'Not a friend, then, nor a comrade?'

Stefan shook his head, slowly, as if reliving a painful memory. 'A comrade once. His name is – or was – Alexei Zucharov. He was with us at Erengard. The three of us were like brothers. We'd pledged our swords in perpetuity to the struggle against the darkness, wherever we might find it. But Zucharov let greed seduce him. He took an amulet from a fallen knight, a mutant warrior. He thought it would bring him power.'

He paused, lost in thought. 'He was right about that. We've pursued him since Erengard, following his trail west. The trail ends here.'

'How would I recognise him?' Katarin asked.

Stefan reached across the table and pulled back his sleeve. 'First, look here,' he said, pointing at his own forearm. 'Zucharov's prize left a mark upon him. Small at first, like a tiny rune etched upon his flesh. But it soon grew, became impossible to hide. It's spreading over his flesh like a living tattoo.'

'Come to me and wash clean your sin' Katarin said, softly. 'It's an old saying about Tal Dur. That the waters can wash away the taint of evil.'

Stefan nodded. 'If Zucharov could be rid of the tattoo he could vanish anywhere within the Empire,' he said. 'Sigmar only knows what evil he might wreak.'

Bruno joined them at the table, his light-headed mood a sharp contrast with the sombre talk at the table. He looked at Stefan.

'You've told her?' Stefan nodded.

'Don't worry,' Bruno clasped Katarin's hand. 'If Zucharov's here, we'll find him.'

The inn was near closing. The last customers were draining glasses and drifting away into the night. Rhia finished stacking a pile of clean plates at the bar and emerged from behind the serving hatch. She paused by their table on her way and smiled at Bruno.

'Well' she said, 'I'm away home then.' She tucked a slip of paper beneath Bruno's hand. 'Don't forget.' She gave his hand a squeeze and walked to the door. Bruno closed his fist casually over the paper slip. 'Somebody here likes us, anyway,' he said.

Katarin laughed, softly. 'Likes you, I think that should be.'

The young healer stood and offered her hand towards Stefan and Bruno in turn. 'I should go too. You'll be comfortable enough here.'

'Are you sure it's going to be safe for you?' Bruno asked.

'For now, I think. You gave our friends a scare today. Maybe they'll leave us alone for a while.'

'Then go safely,' Stefan said, 'and sleep well.'

He raised his mug and fixed an eye on Bruno until the younger man's cheeks flushed the faintest pink. 'Well then?' Stefan asked.

'Well then,' Bruno replied. He open the crumpled slip of paper briefly, then folded it inside his pocket and drained the rest of his beer. 'It's getting late,' he said.



**R**HIA LAY ON her back, staring up into the darkness of her bedchamber. She reached out carefully, her fingers tracing the outline of the figure lying next to her. The flesh beneath her touch felt oddly cold. She gasped, momentarily panicked by unbidden thoughts.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Nothing, nothing at all,' she said. 'It's so dark in here. Can't I light the candle now?'

'No – I told you. I like it better like this.'

His voice, too, had grown cold. Rhia shivered involuntarily and drew the sheet tighter around her body.

Eventually he spoke again: 'No one is coming.'

Rhia wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement of fact. 'I did what you asked of me,' she said sharply. 'What's all the secrecy about anyway? Why won't you tell me?'

Silence. He lay quite still beside her now, as though asleep, yet Rhia had the odd sensation that his eyes were wide open and fastened upon her. After a while she decided that he must after all be sleeping. She could bear the silence and darkness no longer. Rhia rose from the bed and crept slowly to the window. It was stupid, here in her own room, but something had changed. He had begun to frighten her.

'Let's have a little light in here,' she whispered to herself. Rhia drew back the thick curtain masking the glass. The twin moons Morrslieb and Mannslieb were in full bloom in the cloudless sky above. A wash of silver light flooded the room.

She turned back towards the bed and gasped. In her confusion, she thought at first that she was looking at a picture. A picture of the kind of things that might raise her, screaming, from her sleep. Entwined amongst the scenes of death and mutilation was the image of a girl she recognised.

Rhia screamed. A voice – one she only dimly recognised – said quietly: 'Is this what you wanted to see?'

The vision moved. Towards her.



**A**FTER SEVERAL days' hard travelling Stefan had slept well. Now the vague sensation of something tickling beneath his chin roused him. He opened one bleary eye to the unwelcome sight of Graf Augustus standing over his bed. Flanking him were two of his guards, points of their swords tucked close against Stefan's throat.

'Dusk,' Stefan said, his voice still thick with sleep. 'You said we had until dusk.'

'That was my mistake.' Sierck had a nasty expression on his face, that spoke of savoured retribution to come. His tone was indignant but Stefan sensed that he'd been looking forward to this from the moment they'd met.

Stefan raised himself up as the swords would allow, resting on his elbows to get a better look around the room. His clothes and weapons were still in view, though not immediately within reach. 'What's all this about?' he demanded. Sierck gave him a thin, sarcastic smile.

'Your sort,' he sneered. 'I should have known. You can't rest five minutes without reverting to type. Getting down to your usual dirty business.'

It had crossed Stefan's mind that the Graf was entirely mad, but mad or not, right now they were in trouble.

'Bruno!' he yelled, hoping that his comrade along the passageway was already awake.

'No need to shout,' Sierck told him. 'Your friend's quite secure, and about to enjoy the particular hospitality of Mielstadt's jail.'

Any hope Stefan had that he was dreaming was gone now. 'Arrest?' he asked, incredulously. 'In the name of the goddess, man, what for? He's done nothing.'

'On the contrary,' Sierck said sourly. 'He was seen by witnesses last night, snaring his prey. Now he's had his sport and must pay the price.' He nodded curtly to the guards. 'Read it,' he said.

A guard unrolled a parchment. 'Warrant for the arrest of Bruno Hausmann, charged this day with the cruel and brutal murder of Rhia Malik.'

The Graf smiled sardonically at Stefan. 'Pledges for bail,' he said, 'will not be entertained.'

Stefan's mind was racing, trying to piece together what could have happened. 'You'll excuse me whilst I dress,' he said. 'Anything to buy a little time.'

'You'll get dressed,' Sierck agreed, 'but there won't be any excusing. You're not disappearing like your other accomplice.' Sierck took a sword from one of the guards and slipped the blade beneath the pile of Stefan's clothes. 'That's right,' he said, tossing the clothes in a heap onto the bed in front of Stefan. 'The witch you went to the trouble of saving has disappeared before we could take her. Back to the filthy warren in the woods where she was born, no doubt.' He smiled. 'Don't worry. We'll find her. There's room in our gilded cage for all three of you fine songbirds.'

Sierck gestured with the sword whilst Stefan dressed in silence. The first guard gazed out of the window, bored now that the thrill of capture had passed. His companion stood bolt to attention, barring the exit. But Sierck had his

sword. Stefan finished dressing, measuring the moment carefully. He might get only one chance at this.

'All right,' said Sierck at last. 'Time enough to finish beautifying yourself in the cells. Let's go.' The guard by the door stepped back to check that the exit was clear. The second, by the window, fought back a yawn and adjusted his helmet. As he did so Stefan hit him, hard, with both fists knotted together to form a club. The blow knocked the man sideways, helmet ringing as his head struck the wall.

The first guard reacted quickly, springing back into the room towards Stefan. Before he could reach him, Stefan had wrestled the weapon away from his stunned comrade.

Now the odds were better. Two guards, but no swords. The soldiers backed away. Sierck raised his weapon and held it out across his face. His arm was shaking.

'Drop that' the Graf demanded, a tremor in his voice matching that in his sword arm.

Stefan nodded. 'That's good advice,' he said. 'For you.'

Sierck looked round at the guards, his face a mixture of anger and desperation. 'Don't just stand there!' he shouted. 'What do I pay you for?'

Stefan took a step forward towards the Graf. The guards retreated further. 'Whatever it is, it's not enough,' Stefan observed. 'That's the trouble with hired hands, Sierck. You only get what you pay for.' The first guard had removed his helmet and was rubbing the side of his face, cursing Stefan, the Graf and life in general.

'You,' Stefan called out. 'My sword and harness over there. Hand it to me. And carefully.'

Still cursing, the guard obeyed. Sierck looked imploringly to the second guard. The man shrugged his shoulders as Stefan finished buckling his own sword around his waist. The Graf sucked in a deep breath and lunged, exhaling with a prolonged and desperate howl. Stefan side-stepped the attack and brought his borrowed sword to bear. With his upstroke he knocked the weapon from Sierck's hand. With the downstroke he cut a delicate line along the length of the Graf's face.

For a moment the scene inside the room froze. A single, red tear rolled down the Graf's cheek. Sierck reached up and touched the cut. He looked at the blood running through his fingers in disbelief. The Graf's physical bulk seemed to shrink. He stepped back from Stefan, his lip trembling.

'Don't kill me,' he pleaded. 'Spare my life!'

Stefan placed the tip of his sword beneath the ample folds of Sierck's chin. 'Not too comfortable, is it, Graf?' he asked. 'What a way to be woken, eh? Now, as you say, it's time we were going.' He started to manoeuvre his prisoner towards the door. 'First we're going to call your men off Bruno. Then the three of us are going on a journey.'



STEFAN WAS relishing the fresh air rushing through his lungs. It was good to be back on the road with the wind at his back. Yet he knew that the worst lay not behind them, but ahead. Every step along the way took him closer to that destiny.

Bruno cast a glance at the trail behind them. 'No sign of pursuit yet.'

'They'll come, in time,' Stefan told him. Time was becoming their most precious commodity. Progress was slower than he would have wished. The weight added by Stefan's unwilling guide more than doubled the horse's normal load and Sierck, whining and wriggling in the narrow confines of the saddle, made for an awkward and unwieldy passenger. For all that, the Graf was still their best hope of finding Tal Dur, Katarin and whatever else lay ahead.

Sierck yelped as another bump along the track jolted him from the saddle. His plump hands gripped the harness as though holding on for dear life. 'For the love of Sigmar, man,' he pleaded, 'can't you slow down?'

Stefan ignored the Graf's pleas. 'How much further to the falls?' he demanded.

'I don't know,' Sierck replied, his voice wheedling like a child's. 'I never come up here. No one sane ever does. Why don't we turn back? My men will guide you. Fetch a wagon. Get you and your friend there safely.'

Stefan spurred the horse on. 'How much further?' he repeated.

'A mile,' Sierck replied, sullenly. 'Maybe two.' He twisted round to face Stefan. 'What are you going to do with me?'

'Guide us to Tal Dur,' Stefan told him, 'and you'll find out.'

The way through the trees ended in a sudden sheer drop. The distant sound of falling water had become a roaring in their ears. Ahead of them, the mighty Reik poured down into the heart of the falls. Beneath them lay Tal Dur.

Stefan and Bruno surveyed the narrow path that now led down the lip of the valley to the bottom of the falls. It appeared to be navigable. Stefan dismounted and nodded curtly to the Graf. 'Get off,' he commanded.

The Graf peered fearfully into the storming heart of the waterfall. 'What now?' he asked.

'We've business to finish at Tal Dur,' Stefan replied. 'The creature that killed Rhia is down there somewhere.' He gestured towards the Graf again. 'I suggest you start walking. If you're lucky, you'll meet your men before you get home.'

Sierck dismounted, gingerly. He backed off slowly, as though half expecting to be thrown from the edge of the cliff. Once he had put a few paces between himself and Stefan he turned, and, fast as his bulk would allow, he fled.

'Do you think he believed you about Zucharov?' Bruno asked.

'Right now, it doesn't matter,' Stefan replied. 'This is in our hands now.' He remounted, and the two men began the steep descent to Tal Dur.

For the first hundred paces or so the sun beat down upon them. Stefan sweated as he struggled to control his horse, picking a way slowly through the loose stones on the narrow, twisting path. As they descended the sky grew steadily hazier until the sun was totally obscured. Soon the path beneath them and the muffled roar of the waters were their only reference points.

Stefan studied the path ahead carefully. The loose stones gave way to a slurry of black earth, slippery and treacherous underfoot. At last he found what he had been looking for – hoof prints on the trail ahead. One horse, and not too far in front. Further on, where the path narrowed to a crack passing between two boulders, a second sign. Bruno dabbed a finger upon a dark stain upon one of the rocks. Blood, still fresh. Stefan stroked the mane of his horse and urged him onwards. 'Steady but speedy, old friend,' he urged. 'Time's short.'

Finally the path levelled. They had reached the foot of the falls. The haze had thinned a little, allowing Stefan sight of the choices before him. Where there had been a single way leading down the side of the mountain, now there were six paths spreading amongst the streams and pools surrounding them. The trail of the other horseman, so clear on the muddy mountain path, now disappeared.

Precious moments were being eaten up with indecision. No one path looked any more – or less – likely than any other. The basin at the foot of the falls seemed to contain at least a dozen different pools linked by snaking streams and smaller waterfalls. Any one of them might be Tal Dur.

If they took a path at random the odds of making the right decision weren't good. And by the time they discovered his mistake it would almost certainly be too late.

Moments later they heard the sound, something between a cry of pain and a shout for help, echoing eerily above the tumult of the waters. A single call, then silence. Stefan couldn't be sure he recognised the voice as Katarin's, but the direction was clear. He spurred his mount on.

The path wound its through wide water basins, fed by fountains then emptying out again into further pools downstream. The path tracked through fissures in the rock, narrowing to little more than the width of a single man in places. The only way through was on foot, wading waist-deep in the icy waters.

A stray shaft of sunlight momentarily pierced the gloom. In that instant Stefan saw what lay ahead: the path dropped steeply again towards a pool far larger than all the others. It was darker and, Stefan guessed, much deeper than the tributaries. A narrow bridge spanned its width. Upon the bridge, two figures. Katarin's hands were tied behind her back, fastened by a rope to the rail running the length of the bridge. Stefan didn't recognise the other figure. Not immediately.

He ducked instinctively, but as he did so his foot dislodged a stone. The stone clattered, noisily. The second figure looked up.

Stefan recognised Zucharov now. He seemed to be wearing a mask, a mask that clung, skin tight, to cover his entire face. Then Stefan realised. Not a mask, but the living tattoo that had begun like a bruise on Zucharov's arm. Tiny figures, grotesque etchings of men and beasts, writhed upon Zucharov's face as he scanned the path for signs of pursuit. His eyes met Stefan's.

Stefan wasn't expecting Zucharov to smile. But smile he did, although the tattoo rendered the expression inhuman, and Stefan realised that this, after all, was what Zucharov had wanted. To face him here, at Tal Dur. To witness, perhaps, his mastery over the dark force that possessed him. And, without doubt, Stefan knew, to kill him.

Stefan exchanged the briefest of glances with Bruno before they drew their swords and advanced. Their destiny now was battle, pure and simple; the spoils – victory or death.

Zucharov's entire body appeared engorged. Muscle and sinew seemed to be growing beneath his flesh as quickly as the as the moving tapestry was covering it. The realisation set like ice in Stefan's stomach. Zucharov was growing stronger with every minute that passed. Every minute the odds of battle were tilting against them.

'Let the girl go free!' Stefan called. 'This quarrel is for you and I alone.' Zucharov laughter was mocking in response.

'Quarrel? With you? I've no more quarrel with you than I might have with a fly settling on my food.' He raised a knife to Katarin's throat. 'Perhaps if I finish with the meal, the fly will stop bothering me?'

'I don't think you'll do that.' Stefan motioned to Bruno to stay back, then took another step forwards. He paused, struggling with the gamble he was about to make. 'But if you want,' he said, 'go ahead – kill her. You'll have no excuse to hide behind then. You'll have to fight me.'

Veins bulged in the mutant's face. The patchwork picture that was now Zucharov's face buckled and stretched. A trickle of dark blood leaked from black, lidless eyes. Zucharov pulled himself up to his full height, towering now over both his captive and his opponents. 'You'll live just long enough to regret saying that,' he promised. He flicked his snake-like gaze onto Bruno. 'As for you,' he murmured, 'I don't think we need waste any more time.'

Stefan had a momentary glimpse of what looked like a silver blur, arcing through the air towards them. Bruno flung himself back, instinctively. His reactions saved his life, but the spinning blade of the dagger still embedded itself deep in his shoulder. Shocked, Stefan watched his comrade slump to the ground. Bruno's sword slipped from his hand and tumbled into the dark waters below.

Zucharov's face split into a hungry grin as he turned to face Stefan. 'Now,' he said, 'come and taste the fruits of Tzeentch.'

Stefan attacked. The speed of his opening thrust took his opponent off-guard, his sword slicing through Zucharov's tunic to expose the skin below. But the blade made as much impression as a fingernail grazing

leather. Zucharov muttered a dark oath and brushed the sword away, counter-attacking with a flurry of sword strokes that drove Stefan steadily backwards.

Zucharov drove in again and missed; the heavy steel went wide of Stefan's shoulder and sliced deep into the wooden bridge-rail. In the instant it took the mutant to free his blade Stefan had struck again, this time aiming a blow cleanly between Zucharov's shoulder and chest. The mutant's answering howl gave Stefan new hope; no longer human, perhaps, but perhaps not immortal, either. Not yet.

The wound sparked Zucharov into a frenzied rage, and soon Stefan was defending himself beneath another murderous storm of steel. He was drawing on his deepest reserves of strength and skill to parry the blows raining down on him, but still some of his opponent's strokes were finding their mark. Stefan bit back a scream of pain as his leg was sliced open beneath the knee, and soon fresh blood was flowing down his sword arm, too. Each new wound, however small, took its toll. With every passing moment, he knew, he was getting slightly weaker whilst Zucharov was growing stronger. He had to finish this soon, or he himself would be finished.

Stefan dodged to avoid another attack and found the space momentarily to strike at Zucharov's unprotected head. He connected only with the flat of his blade, but the blow, he knew, was sufficient to kill many men. Zucharov merely looked stunned. Before Stefan could position himself to consolidate his attack, the mutant had retaliated. Now it was Stefan who was off-guard. He looked in horror as Zucharov's sword darted beneath his ribs and, in the same instant, felt a white-hot pain erupt in his gut. He fell back, one hand clutching at his stomach, and slumped against the side of the bridge.

Through a red haze, Stefan watched the scene unfolding around him. His former comrade, walking towards him slowly, almost nonchalantly, to end his life. His sword, tarnished a deep red with Stefan's blood, angled ready to deliver the decisive blow. Behind Zucharov, Katarin was shackled to the rail of the bridge, struggling in vain to break free. And to his left, Stefan was aware of Bruno, lying on his side, arm outstretched towards his companion, mouthing silent words. The blood staining the deck of the bridge flowed from both men in common bond.

A weariness started to pour over Stefan. The wound to his stomach was no longer troubling him; all he felt was very, very tired. He wondered if this was how it was when one died. It wasn't right; there should be desperation, anger, a struggle to the end with the servant of Tzeentch. He looked up, his body filling with lead, his life spirit draining away. Zucharov gazed down on him quizzically; he seemed to be smiling again. The mutant raised his sword a final time.

A sea of thoughts was pouring through Stefan's mind. Out of the torrent, one image. His brother. He was supposed to be meeting his brother in Altdorf, exactly a week from today. For a moment he saw the picture clearly: he and Michael in their favourite corner of The Helmsman, full pots of good ale set in front of them. Michael's arm was round his shoulder. They were laughing.

This isn't how it's supposed to be, he realised; it isn't supposed to end like this. Suddenly the weariness was gone, and rage had taken its place. Rage against the dark force that was about to claim his life. This wasn't meant to be!

Stefan's sword was lost, knocked away well out of reach in the struggle. He had no weapon to defend himself with but his own body. Zucharov towered over him, savouring the anticipation of the kill. There was no equality, no hope left within the contest, but the rage would not let Stefan abandon the fight. He dug his fingernails into the decking beneath him and kicked out blindly, again and again. The target did not matter now, but the rage would not let him go, not yet.

The bridge shuddered. He heard Katarin's voice calling out, felt the bridge roll beneath him. Zucharov hesitated, momentarily distracted. He turned towards Katarin as if making sure that his prisoner was still secured before finishing the kill.

Stefan poured what was left of his strength into one, final kick. His booted foot missed Zucharov but connected squarely with the damaged bridge strut. The weakened structure gave way under the blow and the bridge lurched to one side.

Zucharov spun around, surprise and confusion visible beneath the grotesque markings on his face. The sudden shift in bulk and weight caused the bridge to lurch more violently. Zucharov toppled forward,

off-balance, towards Stefan prostrate on the deck.

One chance, the rage told him; this is it. Stefan lifted one arm and managed to grasp hold of Zucharov's belt. The mutant staggered, still struggling to regain balance on the listing bridge. Stefan shut his eyes and rolled sideways, pushing out with his foot against a second bridge strut. The strut collapsed and suddenly, briefly, Stefan sensed only a roaring in his ears and empty space beneath his body.

The water was dark, and very cold. There was an initial burst of sound as he hit the water and then everything was stillness. Stefan was suddenly aware that he was alone, falling seemingly deeper and deeper towards the heart of Tal Dur. He lost all sense of time or direction. Perhaps this, he thought, was how it is at the end. The rage had gone, but the image of his brother, and the corner table at their favourite inn was clear in his mind. No, he told himself, this is how it is when you regain life.

His head broke the surface of the water and sweet air flooded his lungs. He saw the sun, and water trickling into the pool from above. He saw Bruno at the water's edge, still living – and Katarin stepping from the shallows towards him, unfurling the sheared rope from her wrists as he went. Stefan's sword was tucked into the belt at her waist.

Stefan lifted an arm from the water. 'It's all right!' To his astonishment he realised that he felt no weariness, no pain. His body pulsed with life as though he had been reborn. He started to swim towards the shallows. He felt giddy, almost drunk, with new-found strength.

'Wait!' Katarin warned. 'Wait for me.' Stefan drew in another lungful of air and felt the energy flowing back through his limbs.

'It's all right,' he said 'I can make it.'

'No!' Katarin commanded. 'Respect the power of Tal Dur.' She shed the last of the rope and swam to meet Stefan halfway across the pool. 'Take my hands,' she said. 'Both hands.' She clasped Stefan's wrists securely in her own. 'Now,' she said, 'we go, slowly.'

They stepped from the water onto the rocks at the edge of the pool. 'How are your wounds?' she asked. Stefan looked down in wonder. The gash across his stomach had closed; the scar lining his flesh seemed

already to be fading. Other, smaller wounds had completely vanished.

'Tal Dur,' Katarin said, quietly.

Bruno stepped forward to embrace his comrade. The silver dagger was tucked inside his breast pocket, but of the wound to his shoulder there was barely a trace. 'Tal Dur,' he said.

Stefan looked back at the waters. 'And Zucharov?'

Katarin shook her head. 'Wait,' she said. 'And watch.'

They watched. For what seemed like minutes, nothing disturbed the glass-like sheen of the water. Then air bubbles broke the surface, one or two at first, then more. Stefan felt his body tense. 'Give me the sword,' he said quietly.

Zucharov rose like a ghost from the waters. Tal Dur had wrought its changes upon him, too. Zucharov seemed smaller, physically diminished. All trace of the tattoo, every mark upon his skin, had gone. He began to swim out from the centre of the pool, looking around him as if unaware of where he was. His eyes, when they met with Stefan's, were clear blue. Eyes of a comrade that Stefan had thought never to see again.

'Stefan...' he said, slowly. 'Stefan?' Zucharov edged forward then stopped, as though something unseen had suddenly taken hold of him. Stefan's grip on the sword eased, then tightened again. Another change was sweeping over Zucharov. His eyes dulled and shrank until only the darkness of the pupils remained visible. He looked at Stefan still, but no longer knew him. The half-smile, half-frown of recognition on his face froze. His body started to shake as if some unimagined force was starting to break through from within. The earth seemed to shudder.

One chance, a voice told Stefan, one chance only. He stepped into the waters of Tal Dur towards Zucharov and lifted his sword high above his head.

'Goodbye, Alexei,' he said, softly.

The water surrounding Zucharov began to move, swirling around him like a vortex, a coiling snake of liquid black. Stefan drove forward, sword poised, but never delivered the blow. Zucharov started to thrash out wildly against the force pulling his body down. His mouth opened wide in a silent scream. The snaking waters wrapped themselves around him, dragging him back towards the depths. Stefan was near enough

to touch Zucharov now; he could have reached out and pulled him clear. Their eyes met for a final fleeting moment before Tal Dur sucked Zucharov down. The waters foamed, then settled like a shroud above him.



THE HORSES HAD been retrieved and saddled. At last they were ready to depart.

'Altdorf?' Stefan said, smiling at Bruno.

'Altdorf,' his companion affirmed, 'and may Sigmar speed us. I've had a bellyful of the Graf and his hospitality.' Stefan concurred with that. He, too, would be glad to be heading home. He gathered the reins and looked across at Katarin. He hesitated. He had to get the answer to his question before they began their journey. His heart demanded it of him.

'I could have saved him,' he said. 'Zucharov. I let him die. It was as though our comrade had been returned to us. Yet I let him die.'

Katarin met his gaze, steadily. 'Tal Dur claimed him,' she said. 'It washed away the visible taint of evil, but it could not cleanse what lay within. Your friend died many long days ago. Perhaps in Tal Dur his spirit was able to bid you farewell.'

Stefan nodded, and a silence fell between the three of them. 'Are you sure you won't ride with us?' he said, finally. 'We don't want to have to rescue you a third time!'

Katarin laughed. 'Thank you, but no,' she said. 'You are called to the sword, and I am called to healing. Our paths lie along different roads.' She leant across towards Stefan and kissed him lightly upon the lips. 'But I think perhaps those paths may cross again one day.'

Stefan smiled. 'I hope that's true,' he said.

Katarin took each of their hands in turn, and held them between her own. 'Farewell both,' she said. 'And may Shallya attend you through all your travels.'

Stefan turned his horse to face the setting sun and looked back towards Bruno.

'Altdorf?'

'Altdorf!' \*

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TALES FROM THE  
TEN-TAILED CAT

# The Ratcatcher's Tale

SCRIPT GORDON RENNIE • ART PAUL SEACOCK  
LETTERS FIONA STEPHENSON

...AND SOME JUST COME LOOKING FOR SYMPATHY AND A FEW FLAGONS OF FREE ALE FROM CHARITABLE STRANGERS.

...BEST JOB I EVER HAD - ONLY JOB I EVER HAD, MIND, UNLESS YOU COUNT THAT SPELL AS *CIRCUS FREAK* - BUT AS SIGMAR'S MY WITNESS, I SWEAR I WOULDN'T GO BACK DOWN THOSE SEWERS FOR ALL THE GOLD IN THE EMPIRE!

ON ABOUT HIS *GIANT RAT-MEN IN THE SEWERS*, IS HE? SAVE YOUR MONEY, FRIEND, YOU'LL GET NO SENSE OUT OF THIS MAD FOOL!

SEE? NONE OF THEM BELIEVE ME... *NO-ONE* BELIEVES ME...

PLEASE GO ON WITH STORY.

WELL, IT WAS ABOUT HALF A YEAR AGO, DOWN IN THE TUNNELS UNDER THE TEMPLE DISTRICT. ALWAYS A BIG RAT PROBLEM IN THEM TUNNELS, BUT LATELY IT HAD BEEN GETTING *WORSE*.

'IT WEREN'T MY SECTION OF THE TUNNELS, BUT I DIDN'T MIND LENDING A HAND, 'SPECIALLY AS OLD HELMUT SAID HE'D SEEN ONES THE *SIZE OF DOGS* RUNNING ABOUT DOWN THERE.'



'I RECKON OLD HELMUT'S EYES MUST HAVE BEEN PLAYING TRICKS, 'COS THE ONES THAT I SEEN WAS A *LOT BIGGER THAN THAT*.



'DIDN'T HAVE TO BE A FANCY ALTDORF SAGE-DETECTIVE TO KNOW POOR HELMUT WAS A GONER, OR THAT I'D BE ONE TOO IF I STOOD AROUND THERE VERY MUCH LONGER!



'SO I RAN, AND THAT'S WHEN I FORGOT THE *GOLDEN RULE OF RATCATCHING* WHAT OLD HELMUT HIMSELF TAUGHT ME ON MY FIRST DAY ON THE JOB-



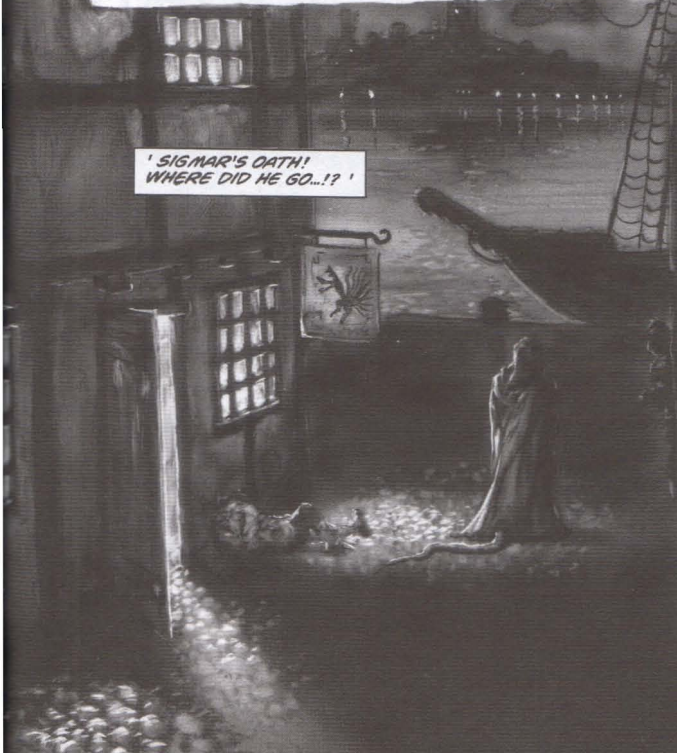
'NEVER NEVER RUN ALONG A SLIMY MUCK-COVERED SEWER TUNNEL.'



SPLUSH



BEST THING I EVER DID WAS FALL INTO THAT SLUICE FLOW, THOUGH CARRIED ME CLEAR OUT OF THE TUNNELS AND INTO THE-  
EH--?



'SIGMAR'S OATH!  
WHERE DID HE GO...!?'



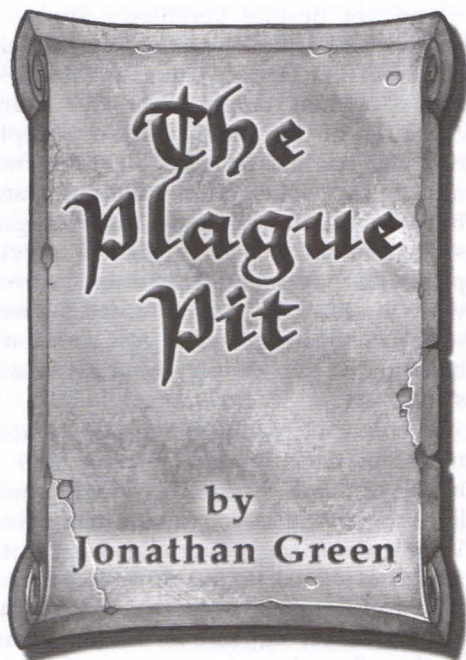
Your MISSION. A success, YES?

indeed, It- it is as we SUSPECTED. clanmaster.

BELIEVE NOT the man- feels our presence in their midst, No need-need send GUTTER RUNNERS to silence one who discovered our lair.

THE END





A CHILL GUST of wind whipped across the twilight landscape. It tore over the desolate moorland and rode the contours of two long-overgrown burial mounds, full of the promise of a harsh winter to come. It swirled around the age-weathered standing stone and buffeted the huddle of men crouched around the dancing flames of a small campfire. Leaving the mercenary band pulling their thick, Kislev cloaks even tighter about them, it continued on its way up the slow-rising slope until, at last, it reached the dilapidated windmill standing at the summit, tugging at the sails that groaned in protest at the wind's attentions.

Torben Badenov, raven-haired leader of the band, looked up at the building's black silhouette half a mile to the south on the crest of the hill. The windmill stood out stark against the darkening sky. To Torben it looked like some mysterious sentinel studying his party, as if they were invading its territory, and watching over the scholar's work at the monolith with dark interest. The builders of the windmill had chosen the spot well. The wind scoured these desolate moors relentlessly. And yet despite the ideal location, the wild unforgiving land had proved almost impossible to tame, man and nature instead living in an uneasy truce that could

be overturned at any moment. Time and the weather had taken its toll on the mill too. Here and there a sail baton was splintered or missing, the brickwork was crumbling and there were holes in the roof.

Here as much as anywhere, Torben was reminded of the fact that civilisation was only to be found in small pockets across the Old World. Karl Franz might claim this wild country as his Empire but in reality, it belonged to indomitable nature and the rough elements. It was in places such as this that it became apparent that the greatest battle the peoples of the Empire had ever fought was with their environment. The early winter chill cut him to the marrow, even through his bearskin cloak, and with the rising wind the air pressure was rising also.

A lean figure, crouching close to the fire, his cloak clenched tightly about him, broke the silence with a bitter request: 'Just remind me why we're here again.'

Torben straightened, rubbing the small of his back with one hand while running the other through his black hair. He swallowed hard, trying to relieve the pressure in his ears that was making them ache. 'The same as always,' the tall mercenary said bluntly, 'because of the money.'

'You really think he's going to pay up?' a slim, mop-haired young man asked, looking towards the rough-hewn monolith, fifty yards or so from the campfire. Hunched at the foot of the granite obelisk was Johannes Verfallen, scholar of Ostermark and currently the employer of Badenov's band.

'I do, Yuri,' Torben replied. 'He came up with the first half of our fee, didn't he?'

'That he did,' said the fourth member of the party. Stanislav was a huge bear of a man, deft at the use of a battleaxe. Strong as an ox and yet as gentle as a kitten when occasion allowed – that was Stanislav.

'But only half,' the weaselly, rat-faced Oran Scarfen pointed out. 'Half on hiring, the rest on finding the mound, just to ensure our loyalty. I mean, how desperate for money do we look?'

'Pretty desperate, by the looks of you,' Alexi, the old soldier, said with a grin, adjusting the jerkin of his leather armour.

Rubbing his neatly trimmed beard Torben cast his mind back to the smoke-filled bar of the Slaughtered Troll in Ostermark and remembered with a shiver the warmth of the alehouse compared to the bitter cold of the moorlands. Krakov, the last member of his mercenary band, had failed to show up after driving the Lady Isolde of Osterwald to petition the Lord Gunther, commander of the city's militia, for his aid in ridding her demesne of a deathless threat. No doubt Krakov, the debonair, style-conscious Kislevite, had found the attentions of one of Gunther's chambermaids more appealing than the prospect of meeting up with his companions. Either that or he was still too embarrassed at having lost the party's horses to show his face again for a while. He would be propping up the bar again by the time Torben and the others returned, with drink-fuelled tales of the escapades he had been involved in during their absence, the hearts he'd broken and the money he'd lost at the gaming-house. He wouldn't see any of the gold from this latest venture, however: if he couldn't be bothered to turn up for a job he certainly wasn't going to get paid for it!

But it was while waiting for the errant Krakov that Torben had been approached by the gaunt Verfallen. In Torben's considered opinion, Johannes Verfallen was a typical man of learning: nervous, pale-skinned, and with a sparrow's physique hidden under a black cowed robe two sizes too big for him. Before explaining the reasons he had for wanting to hire Badenov's band, the young scholar was at great pains to expound his credentials to Torben. The mercenary had to hear every last detail of how Verfallen had studied first at the University of Altdorf. How he had gained a degree in Ancient History with particular focus on the beliefs and practices of the tribes of the Old World, before making the move to Ostermark. There he continued his research under the supposedly renowned sage Heinrich the Grey. But then you'd want to mention every last qualification you had earned, Torben thought, if you had no scars or battle stories to testify to the achievements of your life.

And yet despite Verfallen's apparent youth there was something prematurely old about him. His face was gaunt, fleshless skin stretched taught over the sharp contours of his skull, and a sharply receding hairline revealed blemishes not unlike liver spots on his balding pate. Beady eyes, sunken into shadow-ringed sockets, twinkled from behind severe pince-nez glasses and Torben noticed that when he lifted his cup of watered-down wine to his thin, colourless lips, Verfallen's hand shook tremulously – and his breath stank.

Torben would be the first to admit that at times, particularly the morning after a heavy drinking session, his mouth smelt like something akin to a latrine, but Verfallen was something else. His breath reeked of dental decay, gum disease and the promise of an agonising visit to the nearest barber-surgeon for some serious tooth pulling. In fact, extreme as it might sound, Torben could only liken it to an odour he had smelt when his chosen career in life had caused him to break into charnel houses or exhume corpses from their graves – the stench of death.

Torben wasn't surprised that the scholar came to him with his somewhat peculiar request, for his band of mercenaries to accompany Verfallen as bodyguards onto the moors east of Ostermark, while he searched for the burial mound of some ancient king. He wasn't ashamed of what he did and saw no point in keeping it a secret in the presence of others. In fact, Badenov was rather proud of his career as a mercenary. Like so many others who sold their sword-arms to others for a living, he had cut his teeth in the art of killing as a soldier. In Torben's case, it had been in the army of old Tzar Bokha himself. That was where he had met Alexi and Yuri, having joined up with the weasely Oran Scarfen as the result of a foolish, beer-fuelled bet. Then circumstances had changed and they had decided to try their hand as mercenaries and the risk had been worth it.

In those days – how many years past was it? seven? eight? – Arnwolf, Lars, Manfred and Berrin the Dwarf had been part of the company. But they were gone now: the life of a sell-sword was not without its pitfalls. Manfred had been the first to leave the

band, an orc's arrow protruding from his stomach as he fell from the battlements at the Siege of Galein's Gate. Arnwolf had fallen victim to a troll's vile appetite – if only he hadn't gone to answer the call of nature alone! A skaven assassin's weeping blade had done for Lars the Norseman while Berrin had left alive, of his own choice, muttering something about now being the last of his line and the ancestral hall calling him home. The heavy-drinking Stanislav and eye-patched Krakov had joined them later – Alexi still felt a twinge on cold nights as a result of wrestling the gentle giant Stanislav on their first meeting.

Then there was the newest member of the party, Pieter Valburg. Torben looked at the well-dressed nobleman's son sitting with his back turned to the fire, staring out into the encroaching night. 'Everything all right with you, Pieter?' he asked.

'The wind's picking up. There's a storm brewing,' the glum young man replied, directing Torben's gaze towards the massing black billows to the south.

He could be right, Torben thought. Since dusk had fallen there had been a distinct rise pressure in the air. It could be the reason for Torben's earache. Slightly unnerved by Pieter's manner, Torben felt some sort of reply was needed to break the tension in the atmosphere. 'Hmm... looks like rain.'

Torben still hadn't worked Pieter out. The only son of the mayor of Schwertdorf, he had given up his former life to pursue a personal vendetta against the creature responsible for the death of his childhood sweetheart. But once vengeance had been claimed, his morbid air had remained. He was almost permanently quiet and sombre. At times his dark, sullen moods worried the others: that one man could carry such a sense of doom about him! It made their lives, and all the lives they had taken, seem so insignificant and futile in the scheme of things. In Torben's often-voiced opinion, the nobleman's son thought about things too much.

Yet Torben couldn't fault Pieter's courage, loyalty, ardour and skill as a swordsman – but then he had been trained by the best fencing coach his father could afford. Pieter Valburg had a purpose to his

actions like none of the rest of them. He wasn't in this business for the money. He was a man with a mission and at times, it seemed that his mission was to wipe out every evil thing and servant of the Dark Powers in the Empire and beyond.

A low chanting drew Torben's attention back to their client. Verfallen was muttering almost continually under his breath in a monotonous drone. Torben would never understand scholars and sages. They were weak specimens, more like women than men, and that was demeaning to a good number of the fairer sex he had encountered in his life. So what if Badenov's band were effectively no more than playing nursemaids to a scholar at present? They had seen the colour of Verfallen's money and he paid very well for such simple work. It was worth putting up with the cold, the wind and the rain for a night or two in return for another five hundred crowns. That would see them clear to replacing the steeds that preening fool Krakov had managed to lose for them.

Verfallen was hunched in front of the dark monolith, as he had been since long before dusk fell. The stone itself was ancient. The scholar had said it had been set in its place on the hillside by a tribe of primitives in times long past. The carvings that covered the surface of the ancient stone were weatherworn and pitted with age before the founding of the Empire. It was almost impossible to make out the strange runic script that wound over the granite in a serpent-like trail. Torben should know, he had tried for a full two minutes before giving up. Verfallen had been at it for hours. Rather than stop as the light began to fade, he insisted on continuing with his transcription. A lantern provided flickering illumination, while he peered through his spectacles at the impressions left by the chiselling tool of some prehistoric hand, the tip of his nose almost touching the lichen-covered stone.

*Learned men!* Torben had to admit that at times, knowledge could prove a valuable weapon against the dark but when it came to the conclusion of things, it was the sword, the axe, the dagger and the bow that won the day. He would trust his survival to strength of muscle and cold steel.

'What's he doing again?' Alexi enquired, pausing mid-way through sharpening his sword.

'He said he'd got to translate the carvings on that ages-old stone to find the site of some old burial mound,' Torben explained once again. 'Apparently, this whole area was once the territory of some ancient human tribe. The barrows around here are the resting-places of the tribe's chieftains.' Torben was quite getting into his role as historian and his opinion of scholars, for now, was forgotten. 'As I'm sure you know already, it was the practice in those days to bury the chieftain with all his worldly possessions. Most were looted long ago but Verfallen reckons the barrow of one ancient king – Verfallen calls him Morroot, or something like that – is still intact and you know what that means?'

'Ah, they're all the same, these so-called learned men,' Oran interrupted. 'They make out they're concerned with things on a higher plane, only interested in increasing the depth of their knowledge, but they're just like the rest of us. They're only in it for the money or the power! In this case, the money.'

Now it was Pieter's turn to speak up: 'You don't know that he isn't searching for forgotten wisdom!' Of all of the mercenary band, it was Pieter who held the greatest sway by the research of academics.

'Trust me,' Oran spat, scowling at the young nobleman, looking even more like a rat than usual in the flickering light of the fire. 'Money or power, simple as that! Bloody hypocrites!'

'What was that?' A hush fell over the party at Torben's interjection. Then they all heard it: the sound of someone being violently sick.

'Sounds like our scholar's not feeling so well,' Oran said with obvious delight.

The retching came again accompanied by the splatter of a half-digested meal regurgitated over the ancient monolith. It sounded as if Verfallen were throwing up his intestines.

'That doesn't sound good,' Torben said, surprised at the concern apparent in his voice. 'That doesn't sound good at all!'

**I**NSTINCTIVELY WITH one hand on the hilt of his sword, Torben moved at a jog towards the monolith and the hunched figure of Verfallen. As he neared the stone Torben could see the scholar picked out in the circle of light cast by the lantern. He was doubled up, leaning against the obelisk with one hand supporting his weight while his other hand clutched at his midriff. A convulsion passed through Verfallen's body and he vomited again. By the lantern's light, Torben could see that the scholar was throwing up great gouts of blood and black bile.

The mercenary captain was joined by the rest of the party, muttering and troubled. But Torben had noticed that something else had started to happen. At first he thought it was merely an effect caused by the bunched folds of the scholar's robe but now it was unmistakable – Verfallen's stomach was starting to swell. As the retching man struggled to stay on his feet, with the convulsions wracking his body, his belly was rapidly blowing up like an inflated pig's bladder.

'Shouldn't someone help him?' Yuri suggested feebly.

'Why, are you offering?' Oran threw back as a retort. The stomach continued in its seemingly inexorable swelling.

'I'm not touching him,' Alexi said. There was a ripping sound as the strained fibres of cloth covering Verfallen's expanding gut began to tear apart.

'Nor me,' Stanislav added. 'I'm not going anywhere near him.'

As one, the party turned their eyes away from the vomiting scholar and onto their raven-haired leader.

'Well don't look at me!' Torben exclaimed. There was a wet ripping sound. Turning back to the sickening scene before them Torben added in a horrified gasp, 'By all the gods!'

The others were too shocked to comment.

Verfallen collapsed in front of the monolith, blood pooling beside him and mingling with the puddle of vomit. It was too revolting a sight to behold but Torben found himself unable to tear his eyes from it. The man's distended stomach was split right across its middle. A mass of bloated,



yellow maggots spilled from the rent as worms writhed in the great open wound. Torben found himself mentally comparing the injury to a twisted red smile.

'Maybe it was something he ate,' Oran said darkly, Nobody laughed.

'It's like he was rotten to the core,' a stunned Yuri managed to utter.

'Is he dead?' asked Stanislav.

As the mercenaries watched, the body spasmed again. Torben noticed that the fingertips of Verfallen's hand were still just touching the snaking line of runes. A glittering shimmer passed through crystalline formations in the rock. It was as if they followed the line of runic script, culminating at the point where Verfallen's hand made contact with the granite obelisk. The impression only lasted for a second. Then, as they watched, the fingers twitched.

'What's going on?' Yuri asked, trying to suppress the quaver in his voice.

'I don't like this at all,' Stanislav stated firmly.

'We must destroy the body.' It was the first thing Pieter had said since leaving his place at the fire.

The party turned to look at the serious young man who had given them the order. He stared back at them from darkly hooded eyes.

'Why do you say that?' Alexi asked, disconcerted.

There was a terrible sucking, stretching sound as skin tore, muscles elongated and bones twisted themselves into new, unrecognisable shapes. Verfallen was transforming before their very eyes, growing as some embryonic life form might over several months, only at a grossly accelerated rate.

Impossibly rising from the hips, the thing that had been Verfallen rose to its hooved feet, adjusting the stance of its triple-jointed legs to get its balance. The scholar's distorted body was now over three yards tall. Verfallen's face was unrecognisable, the pallid skin and flesh having split and stretched to accommodate the equine qualities the scholar's skull had taken on. The thing looked down at them from black-pitted eyes.

'That's why!' Torben declared, his sword already out of its scabbard.

Illuminated by the tumbled lantern and distant campfire, with a glance Torben took in every detail of the foul creature's physique. Its elongated skull; the extended arms ending in three-clawed talons, Verfallen's finger bones having fused together; the beginnings of a bony tail; the multi-jointed hindquarters. The creature's body was covered in the stretched skin of the scholar and where it had torn under the pressure of the mutating body knots of wet, red muscle had been exposed.

Torben suddenly realised that they had all unwittingly taken several steps back.

Opening its malformed mouth, blunt teeth splitting the gums, the creature that only moments before had been Johannes Verfallen let out a neighing cry like that of a horse being slaughtered. It was like nothing that would come from a human throat. A guttural roar that issued from the creature's stomach echoed the howl. Where Verfallen's gut had torn open sharp teeth now lined the ragged, bleeding edges of a monstrous second mouth.

With a roar that was as much to boost his own resolve as to terrify the enemy, Torben charged at the aberrant beast. A great three-fingered talon lashed out, striking him fully across his chest and sending him flying. The mercenary captain had fallen into the trap of expecting the horror to move more slowly because of its increased size but it had struck like lightning, lashing out with the speed of a striking serpent.

Torben's fellows helped him to his feet but were in no rush to imitate their leader. He grunted, a look of angry disdain on his face.

'Come on! Attack! What are you afraid of?'

'What do you think?' Oran yelled back.

'What is it?' Yuri demanded, holding back.

'Chaos spawn,' Pieter hissed, half to himself under his breath. 'A creature formed from mortal flesh by the twisted powers of darkness and disorder that threaten to overwhelm us!'

Yuri hesitated still further, as if Pieter's explanation was almost more shocking than the gangling horror before them.

'It doesn't matter what it is!' Torben shouted incredulously. 'We're going to kill it anyway! We've fought worse than this. What about that beastman horde outside Tierdorf? By Queen Katarin's sword, we've even routed a whole nest of vampires! What are you waiting for? Are we dew-eyed milkmaids or Badenov's band?'

Their leader's rousing speech had the desired effect. 'Badenov's band!' the mercenaries cried as one, apart from the reticent Pieter. As one they rushed the horror.

The foul monstrosity kicked and struck, jerking its disproportionately long neck forward in an attempt to bite the mercenaries. Sword, axe and dagger made contact with pliable, newly rendered flesh. The second terrible mouth snarled and hissed uselessly as the men did their best to give the monster a wide berth between lungs. And yet for every wound laid against it, with the incline of the hill aiding it, the monstrosity still managed to advance on the mercenaries, driving them back towards the campfire.

As they fought the Chaos-spawned beast the wind whipped more fiercely about them. Howling in fury, the enraged fiend lurched forward. Stanislav's double-headed battle-axe bit deep into a shin-bone, splintering it and bringing the monster down on one knee with a baleful braying. As Alexi lunged at the beast, intending to plunge his sword deep into its chest where he supposed its dark heart to be, the mutant snaked its neck down sharply. Its hot, moist breath caught him full in the face, the noxious stench making him gag and lose the initiative. Only a swift up thrust from Pieter's sword into what had once been Verfallen's sternum saved Alexi from losing his head to the champing jaws.

Pushing down on the ground with its great knuckled hands the spawn hefted itself back into an almost upright position. In its determination to stand, it seemed to shrug off the continued attacks of the mercenaries. It soon became apparent, however, that each well-placed hit had taken its toll. The monster hobbled forward, Oran sidestepping out of the way to avoid having his foot crushed by a large, bony hoof. As it tried to support itself on

both legs again, its broken limb gave way and the horrific mutation crumpled into a heap on top of the campfire.

Not pausing for a second, Torben snatched up a burning brand and thrust it into a dark-pitted eye-socket. The creature screamed but this only made the mercenary captain push all the harder, driving the blazing branch into the monster's skull. His work finished, Torben stepped back from the blaze as the corrupted form of Johannes Verfallen began to burn.

For a few, long, panting seconds the only sound they were aware of was the hissing and sizzling of the creature's Chaos-mutated flesh cooking on the fire, orange-white coals melting its already warped bones. Then the roar of the gale broke into Torben's consciousness.

Throughout the battle with the monstrosity, the wind had continued to rise. What had started as an evening breeze had become a howling gale that showed no sign of abating. Black clouds scudded across the midnight blue of the sky, drawn into the swirling turmoil centred over the hilltop. The roiling storm clouds had blotted out the moon long ago. Beneath the centre of the tempest stood the dilapidated windmill, its ragged sails spinning freely in the racing air currents.

Torben looked around at the circle of faces lit by the flickering flames of Verfallen's funeral pyre. Beyond them the hillside was black, the stone was black, everything apart from the campfire, the deep blue of the distant horizon and their anxious faces was an amorphous mass of darkness. Over the keening of the wind around the monolith and the crackling of the fire there was a wet popping sound and the darkness moved.

Shadows, blacker even than the blasted, nighttime landscape, stirred and scampered at the foot of the standing stone. Above the roar of the gale the popping sound continued and was joined by a high-pitched, unintelligible gibbering which was getting louder. More shadows moved to either side of the mercenaries. Whatever was emerging from the night was increasing in number and very rapidly.

A distant rumble rolled across the moors towards the hill and then something came within range of the flickering firelight. Torben caught the gleam of a claw, the wicked grin of discoloured teeth and the glistening of mucus on green skin.

'What was that?' Yuri exclaimed, pushing the black tangle of his fringe from his eyes.

Then with one concerted movement the darkness advanced towards them. The forms at the vanguard of the scurrying mass broke from the shadows and Badenov's band took another step back.

The creatures were the colour of bruises. Haemorrhage purples, greens and yellows, dribbling strings of silver spittle and oozing night-soil brown fluid from pores and unnatural orifices on their small swollen bodies. They were all studying the soldiers with darting jaundice-yellow eyes.

'Ugly little bastards, aren't they?' Alexi stated unnecessarily.

Pointed ears pricked up at the words and several of the creatures snarled through curling lips.

'Oh, well done,' Oran muttered, 'now you've upset them.'

'I don't think they're that bothered about making friends,' Torben assured his companion as the mass of tiny green monsters waddled forward, clawed hands raised menacingly. There wasn't a single one of the creatures that was more than two feet tall and yet each one looked as if it was quite capable of taking a man down, having gone for the throat.

'So what do we do now?'

Torben hesitated, scouring the area around them. The discoloured, bloated bodies surged towards them like a rippling tide of corruption.

'We run,' Pieter stated simply. 'We can't fight them, there are too many of them. We would appear to be surrounded on all sides but to the south. The windmill will provide us with a better position. So we run.'

They didn't need telling twice: Oran was already a good fifty yards ahead of the rest of them. Torben didn't like it. He was a fighter but he knew when he was up against the odds and liked the idea of being eaten alive by these disgusting things even less. With a firm grip on his drawn sword, he sprinted after the fleeing mercenaries.

TORBEN WAS the first to burst through the unlocked door into the windmill. 'Anybody here?' he called out, half-expecting the startled face of the miller to greet him. There was no reply. There wasn't a sound. The mill was dark and empty. It stank of mildew. 'No? Good.'

Puffing and panting, the mercenary band staggered into the mill. The run through the night, fuelled by fear and adrenaline, had taken its toll. A lantern was found, lit, and hung from a beam in the centre of the room.

Alexi sat down heavily on a bulging sack of corn. 'I'm exhausted,' he managed to say between gasps.

'You can't sit down yet,' Torben said, closing the door and barring it. 'Now that we're in, we've got to make sure that nothing else can follow us in. Something tells me those things out there aren't going to give up too easily.'

'Did any of you see where they came from?' Yuri asked, a shocked expression on his face after witnessing one horror after another that night.

'It was dark,' Oran pointed out, 'and I was busy at the time, fighting a monster from children's nightmares!'

'It was like they came out of the night itself, I mean out of thin air, right in front of us,' Yuri continued, as if he hadn't heard a word Oran had uttered.

The chamber they found themselves in was effectively one storey of the mill. A thick wooden shaft emerged from a hole in the floor above and was connected to large cogs and other pieces of mill machinery, culminating in the grindstone at the centre of the room. On the other side of the building, a heavy-looking trapdoor covered the entrance to a cellar. Various pieces of furniture stood around the chamber, including a rough wooden pallet draped with a blanket. More curiously, what seemed like half a library was strewn about amongst the mill workings. Someone had been living here recently and it didn't look like it had been the miller.

Torben grabbed the end of a table covered in books and papers. As he dragged it in front of the doorway, with Stanislav's assistance, several scrolls and open tomes fell onto the floor. The rest of

the party began making the windmill as siege-proof as they could but Pieter was more interested in the clutter covering the table.

'Look at all this,' he said gesturing to the piles of papers.

'What about it?' Oran said, gruffly.

'Well it's hardly the sort of thing you'd expect to find in a mill is it?' He picked up a slim black volume and studied the gilt-embossed words on the spine. 'How many millers do you know who read Braustein's *Ancient Tribes of the Ostermark Region*? Or, Lempter's *Necrotic Diseases of the Body*. Most of them can't even write their own name, let alone read *La Lune d'Enfer* in the original Bretonnian.'

He exchanged the book in his hands for a battered bundle of pages held together with knotted string. The others listened to his almost unhealthily excited ranting, as they barricaded themselves into the tower.

'The *Albergoeren Almanac* has been declared a heretical text. I remember old Walter telling me about it. It contains a list of all the feast days observed within the Empire, including those of the Fell Powers. He had a copy until the Edict of Verbrenner decreed that copies of the book should be destroyed, after the razing of Krachzen.'

As well as the books, rolls of parchment had been spread out on the table, the corners held down with anything that had come to hand: a curious looking device of brass and mahogany, a pestle, a stoppered flask. There were maps here, of the heavens as well as the lands of the Ostermark Marches, and charts for calculating the movements of the moons.

'I shouldn't read that, if I were you,' Pieter said anxiously, eyeing Stanislav, who was holding a large grimoire that seemed to be bound in some kind of dark, scaly hide.

'Why, what is it?' the great bear asked suspiciously.

'I believe in the scholar's script it's called the *Liber Pestilentia*. It's said, if you're not an acolyte of the Dark Gods and you're not protected by various talismans and charms, that reading that will drive you insane and make you go blind.'

The heavy book fell with a thump onto the table.

'Ah, now what's this?' Pieter said, the excitement in his voice unmistakable and unnerving.

Despite themselves the more poorly read members of the band gathered around the erudite youth.

'Yes, I do believe it's Johannes Verfallen's journal!' he exclaimed. Pieter began intently scouring the slanting spider scrawl that covered page after page of the book open in his hands with closely packed notes. Not a square inch of paper had been wasted. There were diagrams and lines of runes, as well as a thickly inked, unreadable script that Torben didn't recognise and yet spoke to him of dark yearnings, bodily corruption and spiritual depravity. What was it about scholarly types that made them want to write down every little thing they did? Why couldn't they just be satisfied with living their lives rather than writing about them?

Beyond the walls of the windmill the wind whistled while the sails creaked and groaned. Inside all was silence as Pieter scanned page after page of the insane scholar's journal, gradually piecing together all the parts of the puzzle. At last he looked up at the huddle of expectant faces around him.

'So what's it say?' Torben voiced the question they were all thinking.

'In a nutshell?' Pieter looked grim. 'If you thought things were bad so far, they're about to get a whole lot worse. What happened at the standing stone was only the beginning. Apparently, from what I can make out from this,' he said, tapping the journal with a finger, 'the monolith was some sort of "keystone". It was set up centuries, probably even thousands of years ago, by a primitive marauder tribe, like those who dwell beyond the known world at the edge of the Chaos Wastes.'

'This particular tribe worshipped the Plague God in the aspect of a monstrous, skeletal carrion crow. Their greatest leader was a shaman who went by the name of Moruut. It was his desire to attain daemonhood and it seems he would have succeeded, had he not been traitorously murdered by his own son.'

'What is this,' an incredulous Oran challenged, 'a bedtime story?'

Taking a deep breath, Pieter ignored the ignorant heckle and continued. 'The monolith was erected to collect and store magical energy. The runes covering it were a spell to release Nurgle's power in this area. Casting the spell would have given Moruut the power he needed to become a Daemon Prince!'

Gasps passed around the group.

'Surely such things are just legends?' Torben pointed out.

'Well, let's hope so,' Pieter replied, 'because Verfallen wasn't translating those runes, he was casting the spell.'

'And Grandfather Nurgle got a foothold in this world,' an anxious Yuri added. 'I didn't think that storm was natural.'

'Exactly, hence the appearance of the nurglings - those monsters outside. It seems Verfallen expected to be turned into some kind of Chaos champion himself but the Dark Gods are fickle, as we witnessed.'

Torben pushed a callused hand through his mane of thick black hair. 'So what's next? Plagues of flies? Crops failing for miles around? The pox?'

'Worse than that. As was the custom of the tribe, Moruut was buried in a barrow, like those we saw on our way to this forsaken place.'

'Oh, let me guess. I think I know this one,' Oran mocked. 'The barrow's under this hill.'

'Yes,' Pieter said coldly. 'Right under this windmill, according to Verfallen's notes.'

'So if Nurgle's power has been released in this area, could Moruut's dream still be fulfilled?' Yuri asked, desperately hoping to be wrong.

'Verfallen thought so. But the effects of the spell would have only awakened the daemon from what's left of Moruut's physical remains. To restore it fully so it can exist beyond its tomb, the daemon needs potent human sacrifices.'

'Don't they always?' Stanislav said uncomfortably.

'By Sigmar, we're exactly where that bastard wanted us!' Torben suddenly exclaimed angrily. 'He didn't hire us for protection. He hired us to be the sacrifices!' The mercenary captain slammed his fist down on the table. A stunned silence reigned inside the windmill.

With an ear-splitting crash and perfect dramatic timing, the storm broke directly overhead. The thunderclap resounded around the mill and shook the building to its foundations. Gale-force winds howled around the windmill with cyclonic force, driving horizontal rain against the solitary building.

'I haven't witnessed a storm like this since the night the old Tzar died,' Alexi said.

'I told you, it's not natural,' Yuri repeated. 'It's not the weather that's causing this, it's the power of Chaos!'

Then they heard them. Over the crackling booms of the storm raging beyond their erstwhile sanctuary they heard gibbering cries and howls; the scraping of tiny, yet insistent, taloned hands on the stonework, shutters and door of the windmill. Despite their best efforts, with cold realisation the mercenaries were suddenly very aware of how poorly protected they were inside the crumbling structure. Although there was only the one door in or out, there were also the shuttered windows on this level and the next. Against a larger attacker their barricade would have been adequate, although they would have still been prisoners inside the windmill. Against a small, determined foe, however, one that could scale the pitted exterior of the building with ease and one in such large numbers, their defences seemed pitifully inadequate.

There were narrow spaces between the boards that made up the shutters and a draughty gap under the door. The neglected state of the building didn't help. All around them there were countless tiny access ways into the mill: knotholes in the wooden planks; gaps between the stones where the mortar holding them together had disintegrated. Such holes didn't need to be big, not when it was tiny claws and bodies that were trying to break into the mill. Yet with the press of hundreds of bodies, the nurglings' size proved to be no disadvantage in terms of the force they could exert on rotten boards that should have been replaced years ago.

'Every man to an opening!' Torben commanded. 'We can't let them get in!'

Instantly each of the mercenaries took up a position at a window or in front of the mill door. The shutters shook on their hinges as clawing green hands reached through the gaps between the planks, trying to pull them apart, while the doorbolts rattled in their fastenings.

Torben had fought ratmen, black-armoured warriors of Chaos and even the undead, in his time, but never had he encountered such an indomitable foe. It wasn't their strength or even their dogged determination: it was their numbers.

'Give me a mad axe-wielding minotaur any day!' he found himself blurting out aloud. 'Any thing but these little buggers!'

Torben and his companions did their best to fend off the nurglings' onslaught but where one grasping limb was removed, or one hole jammed with a sword blade, three more taloned hands tore through elsewhere. Besides, the mercenaries' weapons were proving unwieldy in such confined conditions. Their swords and Stanislav's axe were for use in open combat where a soldier could swing his weapon freely, thrust and parry. At the windows inside the mill, their weapons had to be used more like spears or polearms, in a stabbing motion, which was proving to be hard work. Not only that, it brought them in reach of the clutching claws of the besieging nurglings.

The only one who seemed to be having any luck was Oran, whose slim dagger slipped neatly between the boards of the window he was defending. Every well-aimed jab resulted in a high-pitched squeal from the other side of the shutter.

Alexi gave a pained shout, distracting the others for a moment. Glancing round Torben saw the old soldier hopping around on one leg. Hanging on to his other ankle by its teeth was one of the fat little daemons, while three more squeezed under the now undefended door, under the table and into the mill.

Then Stanislav was striding across the floor. In one fluid motion, which appeared incredible from a hulking bear of a man like him, he dropped his axe and picked up a long-handled scythe from its place against the wall. With his newly-appropriated weapon gripped firmly in his huge hands,

Stanislav was able to keep his distance as he swept the long, curved blade under the door. The rusted and notched blade cut through daemonic flesh and bone. Four swift strokes left a brace of dismembered bodies oozing dark green ichor in its wake.

Crushing the nurgling attached to his ankle against the mill's grindstone, Alexi finally managed to kick the struggling creature free of his leg, although its sharp teeth tore a chunk of flesh away with it. The nurgling tumbled through the air, landing in a gibbering heap in front of the barricaded door. Extending his stride, Stanislav brought his foot down on top of the foul creature. There was a squelching pop as the daemon was squashed under the great man's booted heel.

Following Stanislav's example, Torben, Pieter and Yuri exchanged their more familiar weapons for the pitchforks, sickles and rakes the original occupant of the windmill had left behind, defending their positions all the more effectively as a result. Suddenly light-headed, Alexi sat down heavily on the broad grindstone, tying a hastily prepared bandage around his bleeding ankle.

For half an hour, the six mercenaries battled against the onslaught of innumerable nurglings as wave after wave of the Plague God's children assailed the mill. The strain was beginning to show. They had been fighting for their lives since sunset. First Verfallen's Chaos spawn, then the flight up the hill and now the incessant attacks of the nurglings.

Where the nurglings were inevitably beginning to break through the rotten wood of one window, Yuri had begun piling sacks of mouldy grain into the window frame in an attempt to block the daemons' advance.

Putrid green ichor running from the sills and the rapidly decomposing remains of the nurglings that had infiltrated the tower had mixed with the flour and chaff-dust that covered the floor of the mill, creating a thick, foul-smelling sludge that was treacherously slippery underfoot. Pieter and the limping Alexi both lost their footing on the ooze-slicked planks.

There was a sudden, loud thud from the floor above them. In a second Stanislav had abandoned his position by the door and was up the ladder. Almost as quickly, he was leaping down it again.

'They're in!' he yelled, looking desperately to his captain. 'They've got in upstairs!'

Torben opened his mouth as if to issue an order, but no order came. When it mattered most, he was at a loss about what to do.

'Then we go into the cellar,' Pieter said, grimly.

Turning from the window he guarded, the steely-eyed young man crossed the room to the heavy trapdoor set into the floor. Taking the great iron ring in both hands he heaved on the trap, lifting it up and sending a shower of wheat-dust and chaff into the air around him. Taking the lantern from its hook Pieter took his first step into the cellar. The lantern cast a weak halo of light into the depths as if unwilling to enter the subterranean chamber itself. Pieter peered ahead into the gloom beyond the lantern's circle of illumination.

'Are you mad?' Yuri yelled.

Scores of scabbling green creatures were pouring down the ladder into the main chamber. Clawing, biting, howling nurglings surged towards the mill's defenders, a mass of bloated, suppurating bodies with snapping needle-like fangs and ripping talons. One of the creatures flung itself from the surge of daemons, latching onto Stanislav's unprotected face with its jaws. Ripping the nurgling from his cheek he cast it back into the mass of scabbling bodies.

The giant turned to Yuri, blood streaming down his face. 'They're going to overwhelm us!' he said with brutal finality.

'We have no choice!' Pieter shouted back over the gibbering cacophony of the daemonlings and then added to himself: 'So into the jaws of hell we go.'



**H**OLDING THE lantern at arm's length ahead of him, Pieter looked into the darkened cellar. After the clutter of the mill, the cellar was spartan by comparison.

As he crept down the stone steps into the space beneath the windmill, Pieter's lantern cast flickering shadows on the curved walls. The cellar was cold and damp. Slime and patches of pallid, strangely shaped fungi covered the walls. The underside of the mill floor was thick with mould. Pieter shivered, although whether it was from the cold or some deep-seated fear, he wasn't sure – or at least didn't like to admit.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, he steadied himself against the wall with one hand. It was clammy with condensation and cold to the touch. They were on bedrock here. The rough stone of the floor of the cellar was dangerously uneven. Pieter hung the lantern from a splintered beam above his head, trying not to disturb any of the fungi growing there and so release any toxic spores.

The rest of the party followed Pieter into the under-room, Yuri and Stanislav being the last, fighting back the nurglings as they came. With a final swipe of his reclaimed axe, Stanislav slammed the heavy trapdoor shut, crushing the skull of one of the tiny daemons and the grasping forelimbs of several others in the process. With a satisfying 'Shunk!' he slammed the bolts home. It wasn't until much later that Stanislav wondered why the trapdoor should have bolts on its underside – unless someone had wanted to be able to keep others out should matters so dictate.

The lantern-light reflected off gleaming yellow-white bone and Pieter found himself looking into the empty eye-sockets of what he took to be the former owner of the mill. The almost fleshless corpse lay slumped against the wall, a cluster of thin-stemmed toadstools growing through the exposed bones of his ribcage. Doubtless the miller had been the first sacrifice made by Verfallen to re-consecrate this place to Nurgle and to begin the process of awakening the dormant Moruut.

And yet, other than the algae and necrotic-loving fungi, there were none of the accompanying carrion-feeders that Pieter would have expected. Where were the beetles, the centipedes, even a lone rat? Where was the buzz of bluebottles; laying their eggs within the host corpse that would provide a feast for their larval

young? Perhaps they had departed long ago. Or perhaps they were down *there*.

Pieter took a step forward to get a better look at the round metal grille set into the centre of the cellar's stone floor. Three or four feet in diameter, and with widely spaced bars practically rusted through, the grille was sunk into a dressed stone rim. Beneath it, all Pieter could see was utter blackness. It was as if the hole swallowed up any light cast into it. The stink of the grave and the sewer assailed his nostrils, making him gag.

Then a sound rose up from the bottom of the pit: the splashing of water, the splatter of filth and a faint mewling moan, horribly as if of something newborn. Something was sloshing around in the slime at the bottom of the pit. Something large, by the sounds of it.

Stepping back again he noticed for the first time the filth-encrusted grooves in the floor, partially hidden by rotting straw and other muck. He followed the narrow channels filled with congealed blood and other unspeakable fluids, tracing the pattern they formed. Yes, there were the three connected circles and the three arrowheads emerging from between them: the symbol of the Plague God as recorded in Verfallen's journal. Nurgle's rune had been chiselled into the bedrock before being filled with putrescent material pleasing to the Lord of Decay. The blasphemous symbol covered most of the cellar floor with the grilled pit at its very centre.

'This isn't a cellar,' Stanislav said with a sense of unease.

'No, this is a shrine,' Pieter said, 'dedicated to Nurgle.'

'How does that saying go again?' Oran started with a tone of contempt in his voice. 'Out of the frying pan—'

'Into the plague pit,' Torben finished.

'At least up there,' Oran complained, indicating the floor above, 'we could have got out of this ruddy place!'

'Oh yes, and into what?' Torben snarled turning on him. 'An agonising death at the hands of the hordes of Nurgle? At least down here we're still alive, for the time being, and right now that's all that matters!'

'And this could be our way out,' Pieter said with something approaching excitement, an intense look in his glazed eyes. He hadn't taken his gaze from the rusted iron grille.

'You are insane!' Yuri exclaimed, his voice raised in fear and anger.

Torben hushed him with a gesture. 'What do you mean?' he asked, his commanding tone demanding an explanation from the nobleman and silence from the others.

'Inside this hill, Moruut is growing, awakened by the spell inscribed on the monolith. His body is reforming from the sludge and slime of his mortal remains that has lain in his burial chamber for countless centuries.'

'If you say so,' Oran muttered.

'As Verfallen recorded in his journal!' Pieter fumed.

'Go on,' Torben said.

'Anyway,' Pieter said, composing himself again, 'before he can return to full strength on this earthly plane Moruut has to consume the lot of us, body and soul.'

'Doesn't seem too unlikely from where I'm standing,' Yuri moaned, continuing in his despairing vein.

'Ignore him,' Alexi said, the old soldier encouraging the young noble.

'Well, if we could destroy Moruut before he's fully re-formed, while he's still comparatively weak, Nurgle's power in this area will be broken and the nurglings will be banished back to the Realm of Chaos. They won't be able to maintain their physical form with the source of the corruption gone.' It seemed there was no stopping Pieter now he had settled on this train of thought. 'Moruut's still a daemon, so he'll still be pretty strong, but we should be able to do it.'

'It sounds like it could work, in principle,' Alexi said, pondering the plan.

'Sounds like a good plan to me,' Stanislav agreed.

Oran grunted: 'It's the only plan we've got!'

'I hate to spoil things,' the mercenaries' leader said, interrupting their musings, 'but as you said yourself, this thing's a daemon – a Daemon Prince, no less! Something tells me that our weapons



aren't going to be enough. What are we going to fight it with?'

'This.' Pieter reached inside his jerkin and pulled out a small, leather-bound book. The cover was dark with age and the grease-stained pages well thumbed. A number of scraps of paper and strips of ribbon marked places in the book.

'What's that?' Yuri asked.

'You godless heathen!' the older Alexi suddenly bellowed. 'Don't you recognise a prayer book of Sigmar when you see one?'

'It was given to me by my old manservant, Walter,' Pieter explained, opening the book and turning the pages as if searching for a particular passage.

'Right, so how's that going to help?' Torben asked, his brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to fill in the gaps.

'It is known that the holy might of Sigmar can smite the creatures of Chaos, such as daemons. Walter told me tales of such horrors when I was a boy. They cannot stand against the purity and righteousness of the Heldenhammer. They are repelled by his cleansing zeal.'

Pieter stopped on a page, scanning the verses printed there before continuing. 'In this book, there is a ritual of purification. With the charms I have in my possession and a little time I think I can carry out the rite and purge this place of evil. All we need is to hold to our faith in blessed Sigmar.'

'Faith?' Oran scoffed. 'It's all very well talking about faith in the safety of your churches and surrounded by a city wall but I think you'll find there's precious little faith out here?'

'Really?' Pieter challenged. 'Verfallen had faith. His belief in his Dark God is what got us into this mess! I am strong in my faith. Will you be found wanting when your time comes?' The resolute noble fixed the rat-faced mercenary with his steely-blue eyes.

'If the scholar's journal was correct, this evil that you speak of has probably been here longer than the Empire. To have lasted that long it's got to be strong too,' Torben warned, 'and we're just a bunch of desperate swordsmen who know little of the ways of the priest.'

'Nurgle's power waxes and wanes like the moon, as outbreaks of plague and other epidemics rise and fall,' Pieter explained patiently. 'I am sure we can prevail here.'

'What, all of us?' The party turned to look at Alexi at the old soldier's words. Normally he was the last to speak of failure. The hard-bitten veteran of a hundred campaigns, defeat wasn't a concept Alexi seemed familiar with. But then they saw the reason for his change of heart.

Alexi was sitting on the steps, one leg of his britches rolled up to the knee to expose his bitten ankle. The teeth marks were clearly visible as angry red puncture wounds, apart from where the nurgling had torn off a mouthful. The flesh around the bite was discoloured purple and green. As Alexi pressed the flesh with his fingertips yellow pus dribbled from the wound. It was already infected. Alexi's face was a pallid grey and he was starting to sweat despite the cold.

'We end this now!' Torben determined. 'Pieter, do what you have to and tell us how we can best help.'

Hastily the devout young man instructed the rest of the party to take up positions around the pit. He knew the daemon would not go back into the void without a fight. As the mercenaries spaced out equidistantly around the chamber, Pieter placed a superstitious trinket or holy charm at each of the points where the carved lines of Nurgle's rune intersected.

Stanislav and Yuri stood at the bottom of the steps, half expecting the attack to come from the nurglings that had over-run the windmill. Torben and Oran flanked Pieter, who knelt down in the filth at the edge of the pit, while the weakened, hobbling Alexi marked the fifth point of the pentagram. He leant heavily on his sword for support while the others took up a fighting stance, weapons at the ready.

Kneeling on the cold, wet floor, Pieter began the ritual of purification. All eyes, other than his own, focused on the grille. The rabid gibbering from the nurglings above had died down, as if the tiny monsters knew that their lord was on his way.

LIKE A BLOATED purple-green slug at first, and then more like a sinuous snake, a tentacle emerged from between the bars of the grille. Slick with slime the lantern light caused oily rainbow spirals to swirl across its mucus-wet skin. Slowly it began to uncoil towards the kneeling Pieter.

'Careful,' the mercenaries' leader said in a forced whisper.

Raising his sword, ready to fight, the lame Alexi took a staggering step forward to balance himself. The tentacle suddenly froze and then just as quickly whipped backwards wrapping itself around the rotund old soldier's waist. A look of horror flashed across Alexi's face and then he was being pulled through the air. With a sickening crunch he hit the grille, arms and legs outstretched. The tentacle pulled tighter, forcing out what little air he had left in his lungs.

Gasping, Alexi somehow found his voice: 'By the gods! Help me! Help me!'

To Torben it seemed that his own movements suddenly slowed to a snail's pace. Tensed muscles released, he was running towards Alexi as Pieter slowly intoned the words of a prayer to Sigmar. But before he was even halfway across the cellar, the disgusting, boneless limb tightened still further, tugging at the rotund man. Alexi's screams were joined by a mournful moaning from the bottom of the pit, and another sound – the sound of twisting metal. Within two seconds the protesting bars, half-eaten through by rust, snapped.

Torben reached out his hand to the flailing, screaming Alexi only to see the old soldier fold impossibly in the middle as his spine snapped.

And suddenly Alexi was gone.

His screams of agony descended into the blackness of the pit only to be cut off abruptly a second later. As the mercenaries stood in stunned silence around the cellar a new sound came to their ears. At first it was almost inaudible, a bass growl that vibrated through the bedrock and then rose in pitch and volume until it became a daemonic roar of triumph that shook the ground and rung in their ears long after it had ceased.

Torben stood where he was, in stunned shock. There was nothing he had been able to do! He remembered Manfred, clutching at the arrow protruding from his stomach as he toppled from the battlements into the greenskin throng below. There had been nothing he could do then either, but this was different. Manfred's death had been in the midst of battle. Alexi had been lost in a cellar, under an isolated windmill on a bleak hilltop in the middle of the Ostermark Moors. This was no battle to be sung of later in mead halls!

Following the daemonic roar, Pieter's words became more urgent, the litanies and prayers of supplication tumbling from his lips as he desperately tried to complete the ritual. More tentacles emerged from the pit, lashing out at the mercenaries. The men dodged to avoid the muscular, rubbery flesh as they tried to lay their own blows with their keen-edged blades.

And then, rising from the pit amidst the mass of tentacles, Verfallen's face appeared. Torben caught sight of the grinning scholar and, momentarily distracted, only just managed to deflect a swipe from a squid-like limb with the flat of his sword blade. Only it wasn't Verfallen: it was a sickly-green facsimile of the Chaos acolyte's head, bony growths standing in for spectacles, bobbing on top of a scaly, serpentine neck.

The head spoke: 'I am Moruut the Festering, Daemon Prince of Nurgle, the Infector, the Corruptor, the Plague Lord's Chosen One.' Verfallen's image surveyed the warriors beneath it struggling against the constricting tentacles a malevolent smile on its thin purple lips. 'And you are all going to die!'



ONLY HALF-AWARE of what was going on around him, Pieter began reading the prayer of exorcism: 'Lord Sigmar, Defender of the Empire.' He spoke the words as boldly and confidently as he could but it suddenly seemed to him that his voice was like that of a feeble, pleading child. And then Moruut spoke to him, directly.

'Pieter Valburg,' it said, 'what do you hope to achieve?'

Pieter stumbled over the next line. He tried to focus on the book held open in his shaking, sweating palms and then repeated the invocation.

'You couldn't save your dead sweetheart from the Dark Kiss and you won't be able to save your pathetic friends now.'

Pieter struggled on but no matter how hard he tried to ignore the taunts spoken by Moruut's slimy, slug-like tongue, the incessant, blasphemous chatter of the daemon drowned out his own feeble pleas to Sigmar, distracting him from his vital task.

'It's no good, boy,' Verfallen's grotesquely grinning head seemed to be saying to him.

'...and let the glorious light of righteousness shine into the dark places...'

'Your god is dead. He cannot hear you.'

'...and let the corrupters turn from your beauteous face...'

'Stop this futile charade. Give in to the darkness.'

'...for as your arm is strong smite the daemons and creatures of Chaos with your hammer of truth...'

'You're exhausted, boy. We all go to the darkness in time. Go now and let your body rest.'

Verfallen's head glided down on its great neck until they were practically nose-to-nose. Pieter could feel the daemon's warm foetid breath on his sweat-cold skin and it pimpled at the contact.

'Let your body rest. You have fought enough.'

Pieter paused. The daemon's words sounded so reasonable. It even sounded human. There was no gurgling voice as though spoken by decayed vocal chords choked with sewer-slime. Just a clear, persuasive human voice, dripping with honey, sickly-sweet like the sickly-sweet smell of decay that lingered in the cellar.

Slowly Pieter looked up from the open page before him and was just in time to see Torben's sword connect with the sinuous neck. The force of the mercenary captain's cutting stroke was powerful enough to slice through the unnatural flesh, severing the neck from Verfallen's grotesquely grinning head. Foul fluid spurted from the stump and the neck lolled. The simulacrum

of the scholar's head landed at Torben's feet with a wet thud and an unearthly howl echoed around the cellar. With one strong kick he sent the monstrosity flying into the pit.

'Come on, lad,' he said turning to Pieter. 'We need you now, more than ever, you're the only one who can get us out of this!' Taking a deep breath, Pieter resumed the ceremony.

Writhing tentacles emerged from the hole in the floor, snaking across the chamber towards the kneeling nobleman. Before any of the others could react, the squid-like limbs were coiling around his arms and legs, and even trying to tear the prayer book from his grasp. But this only had the effect of making Pieter even more determined to complete the ritual. He had almost given in once. The daemon was becoming desperate, scared. If it feared him, he must be winning. He wouldn't give in again.

Over Pieter's frenzied invocations yet another sound rose to the party's ears from within the pit. The buzzing rapidly increased in volume until the swarm burst into the cellar. Flies filled the air. There were so many of them that Pieter could hardly see the words of the page in front of him as the tightening tentacles tried to pull him and the holy book apart. And still they came, bloated, hairy black bodies bombarding the warriors incessantly. Their weapons were useless against such a foe. Cutting through the swarm had about as much effect as cutting through the air itself. All the while the buzzing bluebottles found their irritating way into the mercenaries' clothes, hair, ears, noses and mouths, distracting them as they desperately fought against the daemon!

'Bloody hell!' Oran spat through a mash of black bodies.

Pieter kept reading. Only a few more verses, a final prayer of benediction and the ritual would be complete. With each line, each word, Pieter fancied he could sense the daemon flinch and recoil as if his words themselves were like the touch of acid on its festering flesh.

'Don't give up now!' Torben was yelling over the infernal buzzing. Pieter wasn't going to. They were winning, he knew it,

and he was going to see this thing through to the finish.

'Hold fast!' Torben barked as the battering tentacles assailed his beleaguered band once again. It was all the harder now. With Alexi gone there were only three of them left to hold off the daemon long enough for Pieter to complete the ritual of purification. Yuri had fallen back to the steps and the trapdoor where the nurglings had renewed their attack and were beginning to break in to the cellar.

Despite their best efforts Pieter was now ensnared in the tentacles but still he read on as his companions fought to break the daemon's hold on him. Oran darted in between the slimy pseudopods, stabbing his dagger into their thickest parts and twisting before withdrawing his blade, ready for another strike. Ducking a swipe from a tentacle, Stanislav swung his axe in a figure-of-eight, chopping more of the limbs into pieces. Seizing the initiative Torben flung himself into the gap created by Stanislav's attack. Skewering another tentacle with his sword, he managed to get a hand on Pieter's shoulder.

'That was always your problem, Torben Badenov,' a familiar voice said behind the captain, 'you never did know when you'd lost.'

Torben looked round into Alexi's anxious face. He froze, shocked by what he was seeing. He knew it wasn't Alexi: they had seen their friend pulled into the pit; they had all heard his death-cry. Yet here he was again, ever the wise old soldier, Torben's mentor from years before, offering him words of gentle advice like a father. How could this be?

Alexi's face winced and a tremor shook the hill.

'You always were too stubborn and stupid to realise you hadn't a hope!' Alexi reiterated, the snake-like neck it was attached to recoiling suddenly. The ritual was nearing its end. Pieter had faltered once but now he would not be stopped: he had been duped himself in such a way before by his vampire lover, Rosamund. But Torben's moment of doubt was enough.

A tentacle twisted around the mercenary's arm, yanking his hand from Pieter's shoulder as the coils around the nobleman constricted and pulled. The last lines of the ritual became a scream as the daemon dragged the vainly struggling Pieter, along with his prayer book, into the hole. Then he too was gone.

In an instant Stanislav was next to Torben, his face red with anger. The first blow from the big man's axe opened the side of Alexi's head. The second removed it from the daemon's body and sent it flying across the cellar. The foul parody of their dead companion landed next to the skeletal remains of the miller with a splat. It started to scream.

The near-deafening blood-curdling howling tore through all of them, pounding at their eardrums, ripping through their minds and churning their stomachs. A bellowing roar from deep inside the hill joined the scream. In response to the daemon's death-howl the cellar began to shake. Dust rained down from between the boards above their heads. The shaking worsened as a deep rumbling rose through the rock beneath their feet. Torben and the others found themselves stumbling to keep their balance as the stone floor buckled and split. But the screaming didn't stop.

'He did it!' Yuri shouted. 'The daemon's dying!'

The lad was right, Torben thought as the tentacles thrashed uncontrollably and began to retract into the pit. Pieter had succeeded! His death had not been in vain. The buzzing cloud of flies dissipated, escaping from the collapsing cellar through holes in the floor above. With a sickening sound, the joists holding up the floor of the windmill splintered and began to give way.

'Go! Get out of here!' Torben yelled above the noise.

The four remaining members of the band staggered across the chamber, trying to stay on their feet and avoid the rifts appearing in the floor. Part of the cellar wall subsided as the party reached the steps, climbing up them on their hands and knees as earth and stones showered down around them. Stanislav hurled the

trapdoor open and burst into the tower of the windmill. All around him, mewling nurlings writhed in torment, their bodies dissolving into slime before his eyes. With the Plague Lord's power broken in this place, the daemonlings were unable to maintain their physical form.

As Torben reached the top of the steps, the last to escape the cellar, he glanced back at the pit, set at the heart of the rune of Nurgle. The tentacles had gone: Moruut had returned to his burial chamber to die. Moruut, Daemon Prince of Nurgle, the Corrupter, killed by Badenov's band, but not before it had claimed two of their number.

The fingers of a filth-covered hand grabbed the dressed stone lip of the pit. Then a second hand reached over the rim. Knuckles whitening the fingers pulled and a filth-splattered face emerged from the hole. Torben leapt down the steps and, half-falling, half-running, reached the pit in a matter of strides. Grasping Pieter's wrist, Torben pulled the struggling nobleman from the pit. A fractured beam crashed down next to them as Pieter's feet found purchase on the edge.

Then the two of them were fleeing from the cellar, following the others out of the building. Either the earthquake or the nurlings had destroyed their makeshift barricade in front of the door that now hung open, the rest of the mercenaries having fled into the night beyond. Torben skidded across the room and, hearing a dreadful groaning, looked up in time to see the mill machinery shake free of its settings. The great cogwheels and drive shafts smashed through the floor into the cellar and into the walls. Masonry crashing down around them, the air thick with dust, Torben and Pieter made it through the doorway and out of the crumbling mill.

Adrenaline driving their exhausted bodies on, the two men found the strength to make their weary legs run. Torben was suddenly aware of pale moonlight bathing the view before him, the moon visible once again through the clouds. The storm had abated. Ahead of

them he could see Oran, Stanislav and Yuri pelting down the shaking hillside but Torben couldn't help glancing back over his shoulder. Behind them great rents emanating from the base of the windmill at the summit split the ground open. He hurtled on, a fissure zigzagging its way down the slope to his right. He could hear the windmill collapsing behind them. With a whirling crash the mill's sails cartwheeled past him, bouncing off down the hillside.

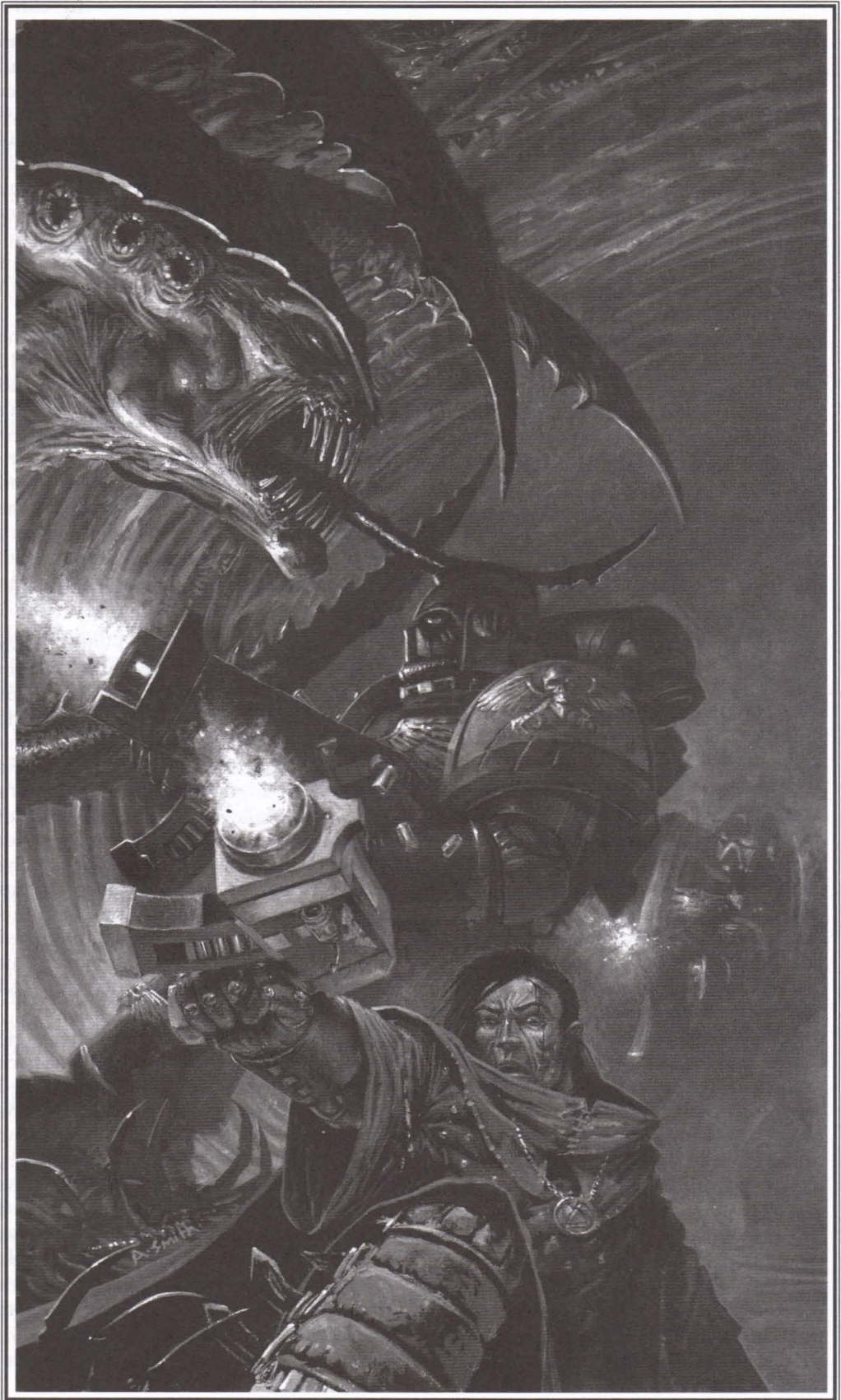
Past the fallen standing stone, past the smoking remains of their campfire, right at the foot of the hill, Badenov's band gathered, hands on knees, protesting lungs heaving, and watched the windmill's demise. Its sails gone, its drive shaft broken, the whole structure toppled in on itself and was swallowed up by the earth, as the summit of the hill caved in.



**M**ORNING CAME and with it clear skies, the unnatural storm Verfallen had raised with his blasphemous spell having dissipated. The hill had a distinctly different outline against the horizon, the summit and the windmill both gone. Amongst Badenov's band there followed the usual ritual of dressing wounds. However, whereas after a victory there would normally be the cheerful banter of the mercenaries celebrating a job well done, on this morning they were silent as all mourned the loss of Alexi of Nuln and honoured his memory in their own private way – all except Pieter Valburg.

Pieter's thoughts were elsewhere. He stood away from the group. With his back turned to the others he removed something from inside his jerkin. The cover of the grimoire was as black as the heart of the scholar who had owned it. Daemon faces leered at Pieter from the sculpted leather, if leather it was, and a spiked ring rune, picked out in crimson, left no doubt as to the nature of the book.

As Pieter traced the pattern with his fingertips an old adage of his late manservant came to mind: *know thine enemy.* ☛



# HIDE FLEET HOARD

By Barrington J. Bayley

'WILL THE PAIN go, apothecary?' 'It is nothing but a skin rash, young man,' Jako Jaxabarm said. 'This balm will speed its healing. But I wonder as to its cause. What is your occupation?'

'I work in the chemics factory outside the town.'

Jaxabarm nodded. He knew the factory. It produced industrial acids and materials used in the manufacture of high explosives. Having dealt with his patient's right arm, he began applying a thin layer of the soothing blue unguent to his left arm, murmuring a prayer as he did so. The rash was indeed angry, and if left untreated might have rotted away the flesh and left the sufferer in a parlous state. He looked sternly into the young man's pale face.

'What did you say your name is?'

'Drenthan Drews.'

'Well, Drenthan, you must tell your employer to supply you with protective sleeves, or else find work elsewhere.'

Drenthan Drews looked alarmed. 'I can't go demanding safety gear from the factory managers, apothecary. I would be dismissed instantly. Work is hard to find, and I have an ageing mother to support.'

Jako Jaxabarm's mind went hazy as he listened to the all-too-familiar litany, looking out of the window to the increasingly busy street. He plied his apothecary's trade at a corner table in a cheap cafe, where the owner tolerated him because he brought in extra customers. The planet, a semi-industrial world in the Ultima Segmentum, lay somewhere near the Kreel Nebula. The factory workers here were poor and downtrodden, though not as downtrodden and poverty-stricken as on some of the more fully industrialised worlds he had visited.

Jaxabarm had wandered much in recent years, never staying in one place very long, always fearing the clap of an arbitrator's – or worse, an inquisitor's hand on his shoulder.

'Your work has caused this painful rash, young man,' he said pitilessly. 'It will heal now, but if you continue to work unprotected it will return, and eventually you will lose your arms.'

Drenthan Drews's shoulders slumped but Jaxabarm was not looking at him. He could not take his eyes off the street. Adeptus Arbites patrols had increased dramatically, and the city – indeed the whole planet – was filling up more and more with the Imperial Guard. There were naval ships in orbit, and it was even rumoured that Space Marines were on their way. The legendary Adeptus Astartes!

An attack was coming. But where from? And by whom?

The populace had not been told.

His young patient noticed his interest and seemed to cheer up. His eyes brightened. 'Don't worry, apothecary! The Emperor's forces are here. They'll soon see the enemy off, whoever they are!'

'Yes, no doubt.'

Few had come to see him today. People had left the city in droves, feeling they would be safer in the countryside and many who remained stayed indoors. He snapped shut his apothecary's bag, rose from the table and left the cafe with a casual wave to the proprietor.

Drenthan Drews followed only a few steps behind him. He had gone but a short distance along the pavement when a hulking arbitrator stopped them both.

'Your papers,' he said gruffly.

Jaxabarm avoiding looking at the dark visor which all but covered the face of the arbitrator, or judge to use the popular term. He and Drews both fumbled for their shiny pass books. The judge carefully examined them both, then applied his scanner to the electrostatic text. He studied the results for a long moment, then returned his hidden gaze to the apothecary.

'You are Jako Jaxabarm?'

Jaxabarm nodded, clutching his bag. 'Yes, arbitrator.'

'I believe you to be Genetor van Leedrix, of the Adeptus Mechanicus, wanted for escape from lawful custody. You are under arrest.'

'There is surely some mistake...'

Jaxabarm's words trailed off, as he realised that the dreaded hour had come. The arbitrator muttered into his throat mic. A grinding, bulky, black holding vehicle emerged from a nearby corner and drew up.

'This is a wanted criminal,' the Arbites said to his colleagues who piled out. He gestured to Drenthan Drews. 'Take his accomplice too.'

'He is nothing to do with it,' Jaxabarm protested. 'I am an apothecary. He is only a patient.'

'That's right!' Drews cried out in panic. 'I don't even know him! Please let me go!'

The officer ignored his words. He and Jaxabarm were thrown together into the holding vehicle's dark interior.



**T**HEY EMERGED into daylight outside the florid frontage of Adeptus Arbites city headquarters. Armoured tracked shapes were roaring by, their clanking treads tearing up the road surface, vast turrets reversed to leave stubby cannon barrels trailing as they raced towards the city limits. Jaxabarm recognised them as Baneblade battle tanks.

Evidently Arbitrator headquarters now doubled as Imperial Guard headquarters too. The building bustled with unfamiliar uniforms. But Jaxabarm and his young patient glimpsed these only briefly as they were hustled through the throng, quickly searched, and Jaxabarm's apothecary's bag taken from him. Then they were pushed hastily down cast iron stairs and flung into a prisoner cage.

A barred door clanged shut behind them. The faint pleasant aroma of blue balm on Drenthan Drews's arms slowly filled the dim cell. There was already one occupant. To Jaxabarm's surprise it was an Imperial Guard soldier, uniform rumpled, headgear missing, hair tousled, who huddled in the corner, head down.

Drenthan Drews rounded on the man who had unwittingly caused his imprisonment 'What's happening? You aren't an apothecary at all! What are you? An engineer?'

'Better you shouldn't know,' Jaxabarm told him.

Drews looked blank. Jaxabarm took a step towards the guardsman.

'With what crime are you charged?'

The soldier peered up at him. His face was slack and despairing.

'Cowardice,' he muttered sullenly.

Arbitrators and the Imperial Guard were also using the same holding cells, it seemed. The guardsman appeared to be in state of shock. Was it possible he did not realise that the smartly dressed Jaxabarm was a prisoner too?

'This planet is being readied for an attack,' he said in commanding tones. 'Who is the enemy?'

'Not allowed to say.'

Jaxabarm drew himself up. 'I am Genetor Leedrix of the Adeptus Mechanicus. You may tell me. You must tell me. That is an order.'

The guardsman rolled on his side and turned his face away as he replied. Jaxabarm had to lean close to catch the words.

'Hive Fleet Kraken.'

Jaxabarm went stiff. Now it was he who was in shock.



**H**E HAD NEVER heard of Hive Fleet Kraken. But he knew of Hive Fleet Behemoth!

Two hundred and fifty years previously, the tyranids had come, from out of the darkness between the galaxies, in their huge fleet of organically engineered snail-ships. They had demolished world after inhabited world, leaving nothing but bare rock. If unopposed it would have done the same to the whole galaxy. It was the greatest threat the Imperium had ever faced, and it had



taken so much of the Imperium's resources to defeat it.

As a young genetor, or adept of the Arcanum Genetica, van Leedrix had once been part of a team that was still studying preserved tyranid cadavers a hundred and fifty years after Hive Fleet Behemoth had been defeated. A tyranid warrior was a fearsome thing to behold. It was perhaps best described as resembling the warrior caste of a social insect such as a termite or an ant, except that it was by far more vicious-looking and about twice the size of a horse. Despite being highly intelligent, its behaviour was controlled in a way similar to that of social insects, by means of chemical pheromones released by the hive mind. All tyranid engineering was biological in character. It was known that the hive fleet had come to the galaxy looking for genetic material, but it was not really understood why.

That had been a hundred years ago. 'Jaxabarm' was older than he looked. He was one hundred and twenty-eight, in an Imperium where average life expectancy was perhaps about forty. His longevity was solely due to his membership of the Arcanum Genetica, for genetors were the great experts in extending human life. It was a privilege ostensibly granted only to the high priests of the Adeptus, the technomagi. But those who bestowed this gift quietly availed themselves of it too, a fact which the magi wisely ignored.

No wonder the Planetary Governor had made no announcement concerning the emergency. Few in the Imperium's million worlds knew that the tyranid invasion had even taken place two and a half centuries ago. The Imperium worked on the principle of secrecy – no one was told anything he did not absolutely need to know. Just to learn one of these secrets by accident could mean speedy death at the hands of one of the countless arms of the Administratum.

Thus, had Jaxabarm told Drenthan Drews why he was a renegade from the Arcanum Genetica, why he was on the run from the Adeptus Mechanicus, he would likely have sealed the young factory worker's fate. The existence of the tyranids was a secret he was entitled to know. But there was another secret, to which he had no entitlement.

Years ago his colleagues in the Arcanum had begun to wonder why his prayers and incantations were so much more efficacious than theirs, when it came to assembling DNA into useful biological inventions. Under examination, it was found that he was a

latent psyker whose powers were only now beginning to develop. It was deemed that he was at risk of daemonic possession, and he was sentenced to speedy execution. Up until then he had had no inkling of the daemonic realm. To hear of it came as a huge surprise to him, and he had a feeling of resentment against his accusers – which they, of course, interpreted as yet more evidence of daemonic intervention. Scant hours before his sentence was due to be carried out, he had contrived to escape. With luck, and with cunning born of desperation, he had survived until now.

For long it had been thought that the Imperium had seen the last of the tyranids. Now they were back, it seemed – a terrifying prospect! – in the form of a second hive fleet, given another name. This explained something else to Jaxabarm. His psychic talent was still developing. Occasionally he could hear people's thoughts. If he relaxed and opened his mind, he heard a background of whispering. But lately the whispering had turned into a deathly silence, as if an advancing wall had obliterated psychic space.

The wall of Hive Fleet Kraken? Jaxabarm turned his attention back to the huddling guardsman. 'Describe this enemy, this Hive Fleet Kraken,' he ordered, in the same peremptory tone as before. 'What are their warriors like?'

'They are monsters!' the guardsman replied in a strangled voice. 'Nothing can withstand them! Their claws can tear a tank apart!'

His voice fell. 'They don't just conquer planets, they dismantle them! I am one of the few survivors from the defence of Moloch. Moloch is gone! Every man, woman, child and animal was taken up into the hive fleet. It was the same with Devlan – Devlan is gone! And Salem, and Sotha – homeworld of the Emperor's Scythes! I tell you there is nothing you can do here.'

Jaxabarm sensed fear and despair from the man. But inside that, he sensed also a guardsman's discipline and courage. He suspected the prisoner had been incarcerated not so much for cowardice but to stop him from telling others yet to encounter the tyranids how bad the situation was.

He and Drew tilted their faces as a loudspeaker voice came echoing down the stairwell from the ground floor. He just managed to make out the words.

'Hormagaunt horde advancing from the south. Break out all arms and distribute to city population. Release and arm prisoners.'

Hormagaunts... Quite likely whoever had sent the message from the front knew only this one term to describe the terrors that were coming. But there would also be carnifexes, lictors and termagants, not to speak of the tyranid warriors themselves, and all the rest of the multiformed nightmare war biology that had so amazed the magi biologists of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The city was about to be overrun. And when that happened...

They heard footsteps and the clang of cell doors opening. An arbitrator appeared and flung open the gridiron gate.

'You are free. Leave the building. Join the defences.'

He tossed three lasguns into the cell and passed on.

This truly was a measure of desperation: a general levy to try to hold off the tyranid swarm. Jaxabarm picked up the lasguns, passed one to Drews and another to the Imperial Guardsman, who also had been listening intently to the booming voice. The guardsman gave Jaxabarm a stricken look, but accepted the weapon with apparent gratitude.

Then he turned the emitter muzzle to his own head and immediately pressed the firing stud. His body jerked, then went limp and slumped, a neat hole burned through his skull.

A wise choice, Jaxabarm thought, if all he had been told about Hive Fleet Behemoth was true. He nudged the shocked Drenthan.

'Come on.'

The building was emptying rapidly. Outside, a great deal had changed in a very short time. It had gone gloomy; the sky seemed overcast but glimmered with faint flashes, while stronger shafts of light speared up from somewhere nearby. They were laser beams from the land silos and from warships in orbit.

Jaxabarm peered, slitting his eyes, and began to see why the sky had darkened. The air was filled with spots or specks as the hive fleet disgorged its rain of death upon the planet, each spot a pod bearing some monstrous invader.

Clumsily Drew waved his lasgun. 'I don't know how to use this thing!'

'You point it and press that stud there,' Jaxabarm informed him. A screaming noise, inhuman and terrifying, like an insane siren, caught his attention. Beyond the Arbiters

building was a broad prospect. Up this, half a dozen Baneblade tanks were reversing at full speed, firing as they retreated. Pursuing them were carnifexes, a hundred at least, living engines of destruction running on pairs of jointed legs, four huge scythe-blades of limbs carried by each massive, rounded, chitinous body. It was from these monsters that the eerie screams came. The Baneblades' shells blew a few apart, but most came inexorably on. The very sight of them caused an almost uncontrollable fear in Jaxabarm, and even more so in Drews. Then, from one of the monstrosities, a crackling fireball issued and surged forward to engulf a Baneblade in a glowing nimbus. The tank juddered and came to a sudden halt. In seconds carnifexes were all around it. The two men watched appalled as scythe-limbs carved through the Baneblade's armour, taking it apart. Briefly they glimpsed the doomed crew within, in the moments before there was nothing but splashes of blood.

Drenthan Drews whimpered. 'I've got to go to my mother! I must help her!'

Jaxabarm said nothing to stop him, useless though the young man's sentiment was. There was no help for anyone now. He fondled the unfamiliar lasgun, wondering if it would be possible to take one of the tyranid scum with him.

Drews did not get any distance. It was as if the air above the city gave birth to an evil harvest. Husky pods by the thousand were tumbling down and cracking open as they hit streets or buildings. From them billowed white floss which expanded until, within seconds, it had covered the city in foam to a height of fifty feet.

Jaxabarm and Drews, together with anyone else still within the conurbation – everyone in the countryside too, perhaps – were now trapped inside a mesh of sticky threads which made movement impossible. Jaxabarm could see little: all around him was nothing but a suffuse white glow. He heard Drenthan calling out to him in a muffled voice. 'Apothecary! Where are you?'

He heard other muffled voices, too, seemingly far away. Finding he could still move his fingers, he pressed the lasgun stud. The beam shot through the enveloping floss, frizzling it but achieving nothing else. When he lifted his finger the floss instantly closed in again to fill the narrow pipe he had drilled.

After a while he became dimly aware that, immobilised though he might be, other things were able to move through the mesh. Tiny spider-like creatures crawled and

skittered along the threads which made it up. Hulking shadow-shapes, visible as vague blots, were blundering through it.

Tyranids.

Then he could feel the whole mass moving, piling up, rolling along. At the same time his psyker sense started to open up again. He could sense human beings all around him, all stuck in the gloop – tough, cynical judges, battle-eager Imperial Guard, men, women and children, all overwhelmed with dismay, bewilderment and terror.

He felt something near him. A large wet tongue licked his face. It belonged to a small animal of the sort commonly kept as a pet on this planet. Somehow it had ended up next to him. He turned his face away.

More time passed. Then eerie ululations sounded, penetrating the mesh. Jaxabarm felt a tugging or a pushing, he could not tell which. He heard a dragging noise. Then it went dark. He heard a loud hissing, and felt a savage force pressing him down towards the ground.

Except that it was not the ground. It was a floor of some kind. He knew what that pressing down meant: acceleration, G-force.

They had been transferred to the innards of another type of tyranid beast. One that served as a shuttlecraft. He wondered if he would get a chance to turn the lasgun on himself, as the guardsman had.

They were being taken aboard the hive fleet.



**W**HEN THE acceleration ceased a peculiar cloying smell invaded Jaxabarm's nostrils and he lost consciousness. When he came to, the floss was melting into thin air all around him. The lasgun was gone from his hand. He flailed desperately to find it, but to no avail.

The worst of all nightmares was about to begin.



**W**HEN HIS head cleared he went nearly mad with horror. He was but one of a tangle of people who lay on the floor of a round, crimson-walled tunnel which pulsed like a living thing – as, indeed, it was. The

light, too, was reddish and murky, issuing from nodules dotted randomly about the walls, made hazy by a drifting mist. A distant but steady thudding or booming, as of a giant heartbeat, accompanied the tunnel's writhing pulse. An acid stench filled the air. Jaxabarm guessed it was the smell of the pheromones by which the hive mind controlled its creatures.

Drenthan Drews tugged at his sleeve.

'Where are we?' he hissed fearfully.

Jaxabarm did not answer. His heart was in his throat. Approaching down the tunnel from both ends came tyranid creatures. The dreadful sight caused a wailing and a sobbing and a screeching with terror of children among the humans. Uniformed arbitrators and guardsmen came to all fours, defenceless now and stripped of all the certainty of the human Imperium, staring paralysed at the pure bestial alienness into which they were now plunged.

The creatures were lictors, a mutation of the standard tyranid warrior which, though a vicious killing machine like all tyranid progeny, was highly intelligent and had feeder tentacles for consuming a victim's brain, thereby absorbing and analysing his memories and genetic data. Cold, expressionless eyes, as blank as a spider's, were set above chitinous mandibles filled with huge curved teeth. The lictors moved in, seized the nearest soft-bodied humans in barbed flesh hooks and inserted tentacles through eyes, temples or beneath the jaw. Those seized went limp almost instantly as the transfer of brain tissue began.

Drenthan Drews and Jaxabarm had both come to their feet, but Drews seemed about to faint. Holding him up, his heart pounding with terror, he glanced behind him to see that the lictors were not alone. Picking their way among them were four monstrosities unlike any he had seen or heard described during his days in the Arcanum Genetica. They were large, but moved delicately as if physically puny, and sported huge bloated heads decorated with chitinous patterns and surrounded by bony antler-like structures. Behind them moved an even larger monstrosity, so huge that it barely found room for itself in the tunnel. Twice the size of a normal tyranid warrior, this was a type of monster which Jaxabarm did recognise. It was a hive tyrant, believed by some magi biologists to be individual embodiments of the hive mind.

There was no place to run. Delicately, but with more than human strength, the unnamed creatures bent their moiré-patterned heads and used their forelimbs to select and pick up squirming humans, among them Jaxabarm and Drews. Helpless in the pincer-like grip, the screeching of the captured and soon-to-be-decorticated men, women and children ringing in their ears, they were carried down the tunnel and emerged into a more bulbous chamber.

The pheromonic smell here was different from in the tunnel, less acid, but nonetheless just as revolting. The hive tyrant stood in the entrance, swaying slightly. A grotesque scene was then enacted. Under the bloody light, a middle-aged man was laid down and stripped of his clothing. Two large-headed tyranids bent over him, pinning him down as he tried to crawl away, looking desperately towards his fellow humans as though appealing for help.

Then the dissection began. The tyranid creatures, white slime dripping from glands in their underbellies, seemed oblivious of the screams of utmost agony from their experimental subject as he was laid open without anaesthetic and his intestines were torn out and tossed here and there. Drews gagged and even Jaxabarm staggered.

And then he became aware of the psychic presence of the tyranids. It was weird, like nothing else he had ever experienced: an implacable, ferocious sentience which was ancient beyond imagining. It stood alone; no one would ever be able to speak to it.

Suddenly he felt as though his psyche had been torn apart like the human body on the floor of the chamber. The scene before his eyes vanished.

He was somewhere else. Somewhere dark, but filled with a seething and a rustling. He had entered the hive mind.

And now he understood what the tyranids were.



**T**HE TYRANIDS were what ants and termites would be if they could evolve further and become intelligent. What made such intelligence incomprehensible was that the tyranids had never evolved emotions. They were aware that concepts such as sympathy and honour existed in the species they harvested, but they viewed them only in

the abstract and dismissed them as evolutionary mistakes. Gene coding for emotion was never made use of by the hive fleets.

Yes, the tyranids were intelligent, but intelligence was not a quality particularly prized by the hive mind. A tyranid creature could reason, but it never did so out of self-interest. Intelligence, like everything else, served only tyranid hive instincts – or rather, it served the single great tyranid instinct, the one overwhelming, compulsive urge.

**SURVIVE! AND SURVIVE FOREVER!**

When the tyranids invaded a galaxy they took aboard vast amounts of foodstuffs and raw materials, but those were not what they came looking for. They knew that every system, whether mechanical or biological, eventually runs down. Most species lasted only a few million years. A few – like some Earth ants – managed to survive for up to a hundred million years. But sooner or later they perished as their DNA either failed to adapt or simply deteriorated through natural wear.

The tyranids had found the only possible remedy for this. They moved from galaxy to galaxy, harvesting fresh, newly evolved DNA with which to renew and reinvigorate their own. They were the universe's ultimate life form. Quite possibly they had existed forever, and would continue to exist forever. Quite possibly the universe contained an infinite number of hive fleets.

The Imperium of Man had beaten off one hive fleet. Perhaps it could beat off others. It would be a rare reversal for the tyranids, but that did not matter at all. In a few million years the Imperium would be gone, the human race would be gone, and some other hive fleet would arrive, meeting weaker resistance, and would leave the galaxy lifeless and desolate.

Then, a few billion years later, life would evolve all over again, on millions of planets.

And again a hive fleet would move in....

Jaxabarm did not think the hive tyrant was at all aware that he was eavesdropping on the hive mind. He was not worthy of notice. The tyranid did not respect human intelligence – they did not respect any intelligence, not even their own. All they saw in the human race was a species possessing young, vigorous DNA.



**A** VIOLENT barking noise snatched him abruptly out of the unholy contact. He saw three of the large-headed tyranids blown apart, then the fourth. A ragged hole had been blown in the wall of the chamber, too. Shreds of rubbery flesh, the substance of the snail-ship, flapped and trailed, oozing pink ichor. Crowding through the hole came armoured man-shapes with pointed visors, seemingly grotesquely hunchbacked, the all-enclosing armour itself hulking over the back of the helmet. Their red and purple colouring seemed to merge into the blood-hued innards of the snail-ship.

Space Marines! The rumour was true! And they were using their favourite hand weapon – the bolter! Explosive bolts rained against the chitinous hide of the hive tyrant, which being weaponless itself, backed away up the tunnel. The lictors, however, launched themselves immediately at the Marines, shooting off flesh hooks which scraped and scored the Marines' armour, trying to get to grips with them with their claws and teeth. Against these creatures, the explosive bolts were more effective. The Marines had a strategy: they aimed for the lictors' gaping mouths, exploding the bolts within the tyranid skull.

Jaxabarm knew what the response would be to an intrusion into the organic tyranid ship, itself but a genetically modified tyranid. tyranid monsters in all their forms would be rushing to the spot from all over the snail-ship. A single squad of Spaces Marines would stand no chance.

As it was there were too many lictors for them. Two had already been overcome, borne down by the weight of the creatures, their armour ripped open. The others, making no attempt to help their comrades, prepared to retreat. Jaxabarm's hope that this was a rescue mission was quickly dashed. One of the Marines carried a chest or box which he placed on the floor of the chamber. Bolters still barking, the Marines backed through the hole they had made, ignoring the human captives and leaving them to their grisly fate.

A lictor now turned its attention to Jaxabarm, its acidic stench almost overpowering him. Shivering, he tried to evade its reaching claws.

Again came a bolter bark, so close it nearly deafened him. The lictor took the bolt in the jaw, shuddered and slumped. Looking round, Jaxabarm was startled to see Drews awkwardly holding a bolter he had taken from a dead Space Marine.

'This way, apothecary!'

Drews grabbed him by the arm and dragged him towards the hole through which the Marines had already disappeared, firing off the bolt gun in all directions. Jaxabarm's last glimpse of the murky chamber was of a lictor picking up the discarded chest in its forelimbs and inspecting it.

The path of the Marines was easy to follow. Rather than try to find their way through the maze of tunnels and passages, where they would be prey to ambush, they had chosen to blast their way through the tunnel walls. There was very little light in these tunnels. They met no tyranid warriors of any kind, only small, spider-like creatures which scuttled everywhere, taking no notice of them. In minutes they had come in sight of the departing Marines, who were about to embark – again through a hole blasted in the skin of the ship-creature – in a spacecraft of some kind.

'Help us! Help us!' Jaxabarm cried out.

For a moment he thought they would be abandoned. Then the last Marine to embark gestured to them hastily. They went through a circular metal port and found themselves in a cramped hold among the hulking Astartes adepts. The Marines began removing their headgear as the craft shot away from the tyranid ships. They were watching a small screen set like a porthole in the side of the hold.

There, the snail-ship suddenly exploded, reddened chunks of it flying into space. Yet, in the distance, other glints could be seen, many of them. The hive fleet consisted of thousands of such ships.

What now? Jaxabarm began to think of the future. He was no longer the condemned Genetor van Dreelix. He was Jako Jaxabarm, apothecary, once again. The discovery of his alias had been made on a planet shortly to be reduced to rubble.

He would try to persuade Drenthan Drews to join the Imperial Guard and help defend the Imperium. Hive Fleet Kraken had to be repelled or humanity was doomed.

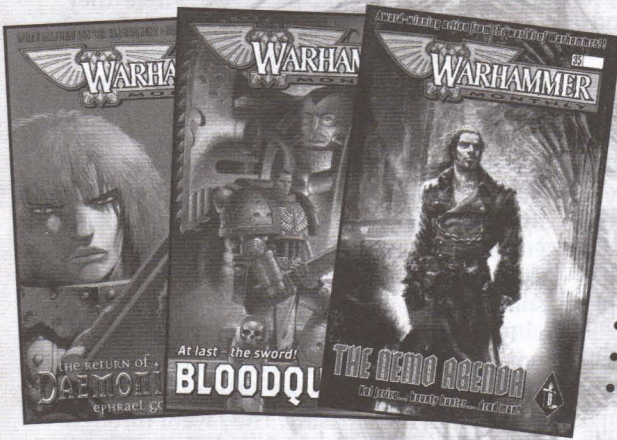
Not that the outcome was of any importance to the tyranids. To them, species evolved and perished like blades of grass. Galaxies condensed, blazed, then guttered out. The supposedly immortal Chaos gods would not even last that long. They would perish when the psyches which sustained them died out.

Only the tyranids lasted forever. ☉



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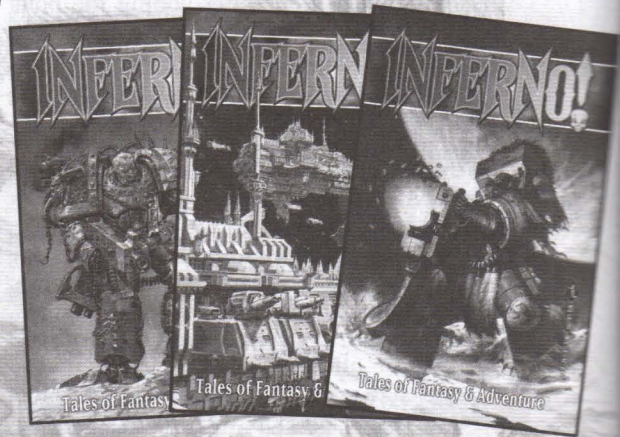
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# Wanted

Mercenaries to accompany a citizen  
in the lawful recovery of a family heirloom.  
Best rates paid.  
Knowledge of Nordheim's Siegelmund  
District essential.



Contact Sigmund Don Horst  
at  
The Spread Eagle Inn

The wanted poster was of a most unusual kind, but Herr Klenau-Schrader decided that we could accomplish the task, and no doubt find some shards of wyrdstone along the way. He also thought that J. Scheller too, should keep a record of our route. He feels that this map may have inestimable value in the future.

We entered the rotting carcass of Muraheim through the southwestern gate. It is lesser used, and in this Sigmur-forsaken ruin it is always wise to draw as little attention to oneself as possible.

The gateway itself was drenched with prayers, curses, tokens, and memorials.

Chief amongst these grisly adornments, and freshest, were a set of severed heads, whose features had been mutilated by means of having had their noses sliced off.

We all knew this to be the choice of Heimreich's Heavers' in marking their alleged territory.

Herzog recognised the victim as being from some intricate hole in the far reaches of Ostland.

ruined remains of the templars rest.

collapsed buildings block the street.

Found a giant rat-shaped skull.

No other remains (Axel muttered to himself a prayer - a bad sign.)

A pile of mutilated corpses was found in a ruin. Their noses had been removed.

Knowing chances exchanged!

A wall stands in the centre of this square.

A hand lay stiff and protruding by a discarded mail.

Ignaz swore he saw something glinting in the water's depth.

He was about to clamber down when the Kurgian flung him back into line.

Warning Herzog to expressed his fears to me as he saw this unfinished warning scrawled in blood. (What could I say except 'Muraheim!')

Sigmur's Blades.

Declawing

Kapitan Karl Klenau-Schrader

Sigmur

Ignaz

Johann

Franz Dedowicz

J. Scheller

Friedrich Fürst

Herzog Buresch

Gunther Kallowrat

Axel Klugensfurt

Kapitan Karl Klenau-Schrader

Declawing

We've just lost Wutz (Sigmur) have mercy on him! His greedy curiosity by the gett-witzig to an obnoxious trap.

Herr Kapitän said that it was a salutary lesson and should remind the rest of us to stay alert!

Further mutilated bodies block a road (somebody's employing me in this construction work, aren't they?)

Barricades

Magnum party

Magnum

Warning Herzog to expressed his fears to me as he saw this unfinished warning scrawled in blood. (What could I say except 'Muraheim!')

Declawing

Sigmur's Blades.

Declawing

Kapitan Karl Klenau-Schrader

Sigmur

Ignaz

Johann

Franz Dedowicz



Naturally we  
erected to search  
the Wyrastone boulder  
had caused this  
damage

Strange fungal plants spring from the  
ground around the now empty impact crater.  
Their unearthly colours were both alluring  
and repellent.

Ignaz stooped  
to pick one of the blooms.

The bulbous head  
instantly exploded!  
A fine mist of spores  
coated his exposed skin.  
Even as he frantically tried to brush it off  
the grains seemed to 'burrow' into his flesh.  
Foul spores erupted rapidly all over his body.  
We hurried him in the crater.

ounding a corner we  
saw signs of massive damage  
the rubble of numerous houses  
surrounded a crater caused by a  
moment of the mighty  
iron-tailed comet that  
sealed the cities fate.

As we cautiously  
advanced through  
the ruined streets  
a firm avenue of  
alleyway awaited us.

noticed my  
companion's look  
about for familiar  
faces.

The site of a  
Sigmund temple which  
someone had clearly started  
to rebuild, raised our  
stomped for it.

Noticing the  
remains of other  
offerings we left  
our own humble  
contributions  
and prayers.

Back on  
the streets we  
noticed dried splattered  
bloodstains. There were  
also signs of partially  
constructed barricades.

Entering a plaza  
our suspicions were  
confirmed as a  
building toppled  
into rubble behind  
us. Crude barri-  
cades already blocked  
all other routes out.

Hunching down  
behind the only  
available cover we  
were agitated from all  
sides, why? Sibes and  
taunts were also to feel  
at us from our ambush.

Then Suther noticed a sewer cover - a  
possible escape route. Unblinking Friedrich  
announced that he would divert their fire. 'I'll  
see you soon.' He declared, before charging  
across the cobbles towards the hulking figure  
of Heinrich himself. 'The Brothers.

The arrow strikes  
distinct pattern was  
that of the 'Heinrich's  
Heaven'. We appeared  
elated!

With heavy, but  
grateful hearts, we  
hurried for  
the  
main

leaves.



Ignaz

Lutz

Heinrich

Jordis

& Klebek Eren

Bur Patron  
Sigmund  
Vanhurst

We found a curious damaged weapon in our path. Its design was that of a double dagger, but too small for use by human hand.

The Captain gave a knowing nod, but no explanation. Maybe he sought not to alarm us further, after all the skittering noises that echoed to us from afar were alarm enough.

The chamber was nearly over-  
downfall.

Then we noticed that one of the drainage tunnels had been widened sufficiently for a stooped man to access it.

A sump-hole filled with excrement seemed to indicate a dead-end especially for the poor fellow whose blooded corpse floated there.

The passage-ways we were forced to explore were roughly hewn and irregular. Any pattern in this maze was impossible to discern.

A net spun from the floor to share the way and take.

We quickly cut them free and fled for alarm bells attached to the trap began to ring out. Their cacophonous alarm.

Badly our pursuers were fast. A pack of demented, terror-sized rats leapt upon us. We were very nearly over-  
the left hemisphere of the

whose was reinforced by a strange symbol on the wall.

I am sure that the Captain knew its meaning, but he simply warned us to be especially alert. But one always in this air-waged state? Many more strange scrawlings were subsequently seen.

A series of grisly trophies soon confirmed our suspicions. Especially as the bones all showed signs of having been gnawed.

Despite stumbling back upon grotesque, original sewer air tribulations were far from easy.

This tunnel had collapsed, whether by accident or design we could only guess.

A crude plank bridge gave us the first indication of habitation.

The sewers were foul. Their waters were turbid and thick with effluent. We all hoped that our sojourn here would be brief.

But this was not a maze of some kind. It was a maze of some kind. But these were not of any kind. It was the entire tunnel.

None ensued when we saw the size of its creator. A simple sting from these wasps quickly swelled to the size of a quail's egg.

Fleeing into the sewers gave us a brief respite, and fortuitously none of the injuries received during our mad dash were serious.

Franz has already lost one finger, and as he said "What difference does one loss make!"

Then Klaus Schröder instructed us to throw out lit lanterns upon the structure. The ensuing conflagration, and resultant heavy smoke seemed to enrage, but also befuddle the tagging beasts.

In the confusion we squeezed past their residence, though at the cost of some terrible swollen stings.



Just beyond the tracks crossed our path once more. In one of the depressions left by a clawed foot rested an axe-head. The keen edge and elaborate decoration marked it out as being of Muurvish origin.

Just as I found a stone that from its hole it had a strange lustre and was as hard as forged steel.

In our march the great treasure of some four times the size of even Kistek's hoard, and clearly no less huge than the wealth it had torn through the surrounding ruins.

Running we passed through a square archway and broke out of the fog bank that had so heavily shrouded us. A cold shiver traversed through our bones, as we heard a whistling scream. Johann was no longer with us.

When once more leaden skies, rather than stone, lay above our heads we knew ourselves to be hopelessly lost in the vast sprawl of the Empire's largest city.

Our only good fortune came when we found our path strewn with fragments of the mighty comet.



Our route led us across a low bridge. I found thought it was the Bridge of Weeping Somn. If so it would place us west of the Heigelunda district.

Breathless that I have we returned to the same old landmarks as the strikingly new ones we found. My recognizable landmark

The source of the light was a crumbling family crypt. Axel muttered a continuous stream of prayers, as discretion guided our feet rapidly onwards.

This illusion was quickly shattered when we stumbled across the first headstone. Even in that 'new summer' it was clear that this was a graveyard.

Low mists, and foggy silhouettes of some stumbling, shambling figures quickened our pace, as we were drawn towards a light that shone faintly through the gloom.

Just beyond our search area we passed through a gravel archway, whereupon a thick mist began to envelop us. We thought at first that we were in one of Mannheim's grand parks.

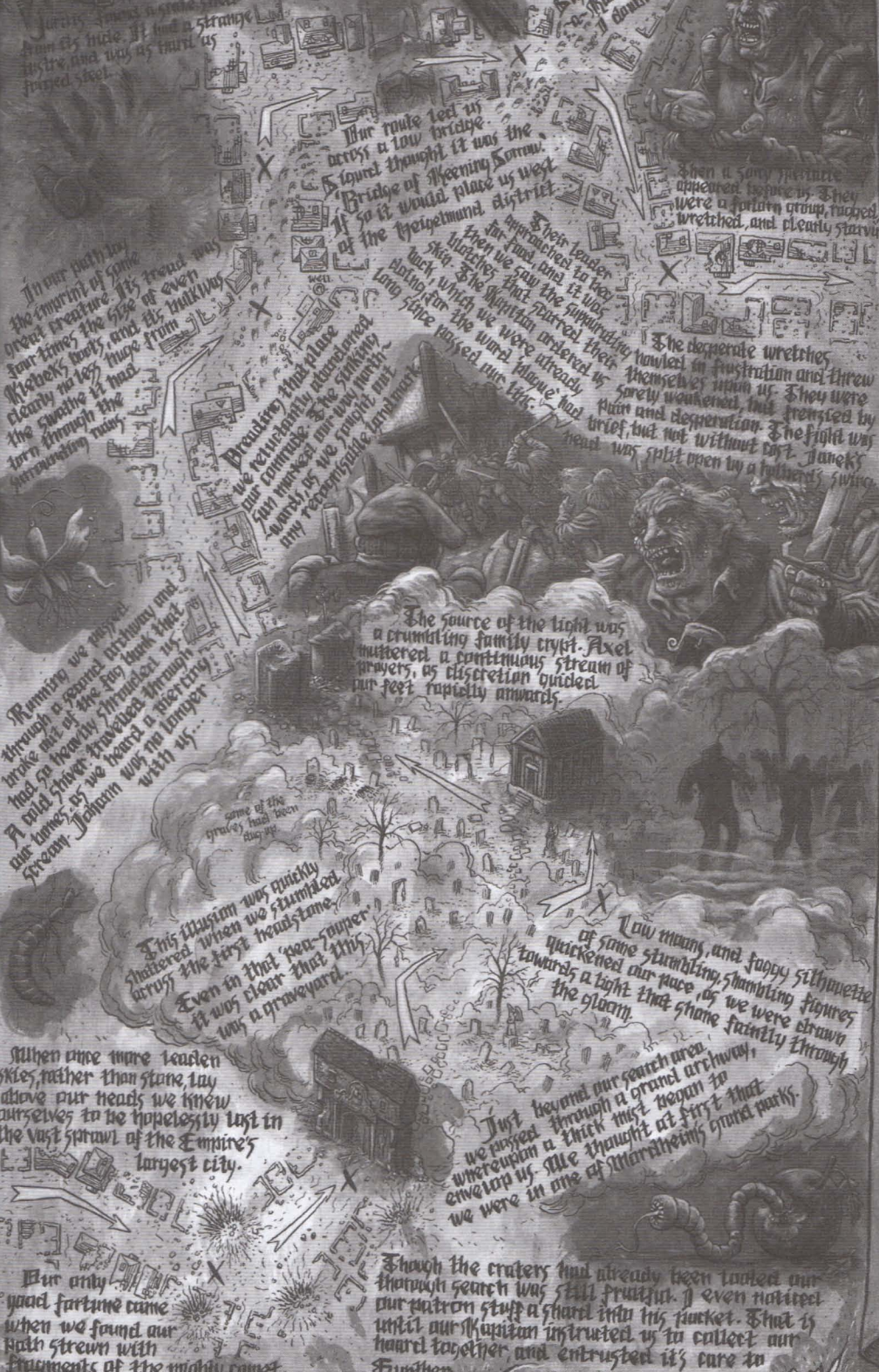
Though the craters had already been looted our thorough search was still fruitful. I even noticed our patron stuff a shard into his pocket. That is what our Shupitan instructed us to collect our haul together and entrusted its care to Sunther.

From gradually taught to make a sound by striking Kankak's head, but what does he know? I doubt the place even exists!

When a song first appeared to rise as they were a faint group, ragged, wretched and clearly starving.

The desperate wretches hauled in frustration and threw themselves upon us. They were sorely weakened, but frenzied by pain and desperation. The fight was brief, but not without cost. Janek's head was split open by a ballist's strike.

Some of the graves had been dug up.



The Karitan knew that this lay in Reichmunda and Reichmunda northeast of there.

The sun ray through the doorway... another Koromyskale tower.

A wall of black smoke hung low before us as flames licked skywards from shattered buildings. We would be forced along narrow alleyways in order to circumvent this obstacle.

A partially molten arm found in the street. It was connected to the armoire.

were the armoire deliriously empty as if in an ambush?

A cluttering upon the surrounding roof... I did not allow myself to be drawn about us!

They were still alive and flopped around us if just plucked from the sea. We had already conquered many terrors, but when the very laws of nature become inverted can any survive?

What more would this despicable city throw at us...

...we soon found out a couple of alleys onwards when the ground collapsed here. Jared's. The spikes of the pit quickly curtailed his yell. A fragile canvas floor towering had concealed the trap.

The horror of Mannheim appears relentless.

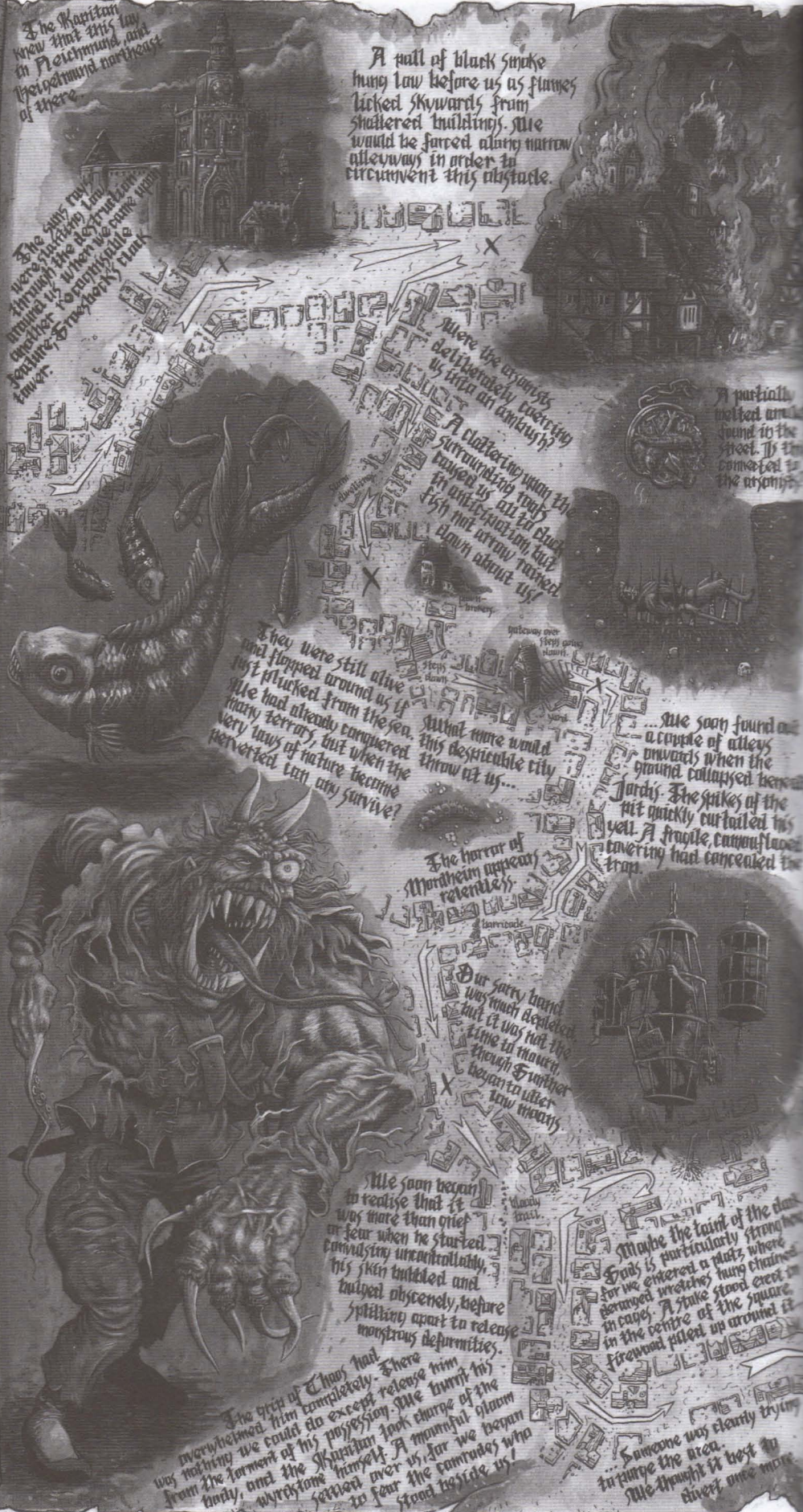
Our sorry band was much depleted but it was not the time to mourn though I rather began to utter low moans.

We soon began to realise that it was more than one in fear when he started convulsing uncontrollably, his skin bulged and bulged obscenely, before splitting apart to release monstrous deformities.

The grip of Chaos had overwhelmed him completely. There was nothing we could do except release him from the torment of his possession. We turned his body, and the Karitan took charge of the session himself. A mournful clamour over us, for we began to fear the comrades who stood beside us!

Maybe the faint of the dark Gods is particularly strong here for we entered a plaza where damaged wretches hung chained in cages. A stake stood erect in the centre of the square. Firewood piled up around it.

Someone was clearly trying to purge the area. We thought it best to divert once more.



Further abominations greeted us with the sight of mutilated and crucified men. Strange symbols had been etched into their once living flesh.

Monks left by those who seek to bring eternal darkness to this land. May Kumar watch over us.

As we passed in through a narrow pass I thought me to my knees. A figure had leapt from the gathering gloom and struck me from behind. Axel promptly evaded the score.

Then the shadows began to take on solidity. Tortured faces grew out of the very stones protruding for us with flawed, twisted hands. We ran on as a chill passed through my very soul.

Despite the anti-demon we were promptly reminded that we could not relax. Flying into many strange the home of the Holy Land. In the market with the Academy of Mystical Studies.

Excitement began to overtake us.

And beyond it the true spirit was forth of mysterious entrance to the cathedral.

Shortly we were stood in a ruin peering out upon Beckaplat. Sigmund indicated the Van Hoyt family home, where a grisly spectacle was unfolding.

Wiping his eyes to clear the tears, Van Hoyt began to reveal our true quest. Woefully he began to explain that the family heirloom was in fact his wretched daughter who had survived the tragedy that befell Maratheim, but had become unhinged.

How she believed that Sigmund is the true evil and has forsaken us. He had interned her at a convent of Holy Sisters, but she had fled. His search for her had finally led him back to the old family home.

A wild figure leant from a window exhorting the wretched coterie gathered before her. My stomach churned involuntarily with fear at the form I saw there.

I made them good fortune as they lay me hiding here with the pack. My injury precludes my running. I dare my probability to help. I can hear shouts and screams. I bet Franz is causing some damage.

Sally haven't they returned? I can hear voices, but none are recognisable. My handages are I am too weak to move. My handages are smothered through. Sigmund please do not forsake me.

All we knew our quest was near its end when we walked into Beckaplat.

The Kaptain drew upon plan of action which would take advantage of the dark night. We would pack off the swim in one side to with my hand away from the building. Under this diversion the rest of the team should be able to rush in and seize her.

# DEUS EX MECHANICUS

by Andy Chambers

**T**HE SCREAM OF the engines fought against the howling winds in a terrifying crescendo of doom. Hyper-velocity mica particles skittered across the hull of the ship like skeletal fingers as it wallowed in the storm, shuddering and dropping by steps as the pilot struggled for control. In the midst of the tumult, Lakius Danzager, tech-priest engineer, Votaris Laudare, illuminant of Mars, adept of the Cult Mechanicus was struggling to open up the skull of that failing pilot, and cursing in a distinctly un-priestly fashion as he struggled to find the right tools for the job.

'Dammit! Osil, find me a hydro coupling, my boy. We'll need one if I can free these accursed fasteners. Look in the vestibule.' He tried to keep his voice calm so as not to frighten his acolyte, but Osil's face was pallid in his cowl as he nodded and hurried out through the rusty bulkhead hatch.

The ship's rattling, brassbound altimeter showed them at a height of nearly seven kilometres above the planet. They had already been dropping out of control for twelve. As Lakius turned back to the rune-etched panel enclosing the ship's pilot, another violent lurch smashed his shaven skull against it, triggering an emgram patch he had only recently divined from his auto-shrine. It was about their too-rapidly approaching destination, and ran in confusing counterpoint through his right optic viewer as he tried to focus on repairing the nav-spirit.

## NAOGEDDON IS A DEAD WORLD

The ringing impact of Lakius's metal-shod head had partially freed the rusting key-bolts. With a whispered prayer for forgiveness from the already distraught machine-spirit, he bent to the task. He carefully unscrewed the panel, murmuring the rite of unbinding and ensuring that he removed the keys in the correct cardinal directions. The ghostly image of a dun-coloured sphere hovered in his right eye. Red text scrolled past it.

*Orbital distance: 0.78 AU*

*Equatorial Diameter: 9,749 km*

*Rotation: 34.6 hours*

*Axial Tilt: 0.00*

As he'd feared, the coupling between the augur spike and the pilot-stone had ruptured, blinding the pilot to its landing beacon. He checked the altimeter as he began the ritual of dislocation to remove the charred remnants. Less than two kilometres of howling winds now lay beneath their rocking hull.

*Weather: See storms\**

'Osil! Where's that coupling, boy?'

'Here, father. The first one was faulty and I had to go back for another.'

*0% Precipitation. Wind speed: Constant 24 kts, Variance 76 kts*

Lakius took the twist of hydro-plastic without comment but silently gave praise to the Omnissiah that the lad had been attentive enough to spot the difference. Under current circumstances, a normally forgivable sin of oversight could prove fatal. Lakius took a breath to steady himself before beginning the ritual of insertion.

*Lifeforms: Autochthonic: None*

*Introduced: None*

Less than a league of free air remained before they would hurtle into solid rock. His servo-hand shook as he tried to apply the proscribed number of half-turns to the coupling mounts. He yearned to simply call the rite finished and resurrect the pilot. But years of discipline and doctrine drove him on as he completed the benediction against failure, applied the sacred unguents and retrieved the panel so he could begin the final rites of protection and sealing.

*Archaeotech Resource: Limited/Xeno artifacts\*/@ 600,000,000 yrs (pre.GA) Class: Omega*

'Father, I can see dust dunes below us. I think we're going to crash.'

*Notes:*

*First Catalogued: 7/243.751.M32, Rogue trader Xiatal Parnevve. Orbital Augury Only\*. Annexus Imperialus.*

'Mechanism, I restore thy spirit! Let the God-Machine breathe half-life unto thy veins and render thee functional.' Lakius firmly depressed the activation rune on the pilot's casing and prayed.

*Landed: 6/832.021.M35. Explorator Magos Dural Lavank. Expedition Lost.*

*Landed: 7/362.238.M37. Explorator Magos Prime Holisen Zi. Expedition Lost.*

The ship's engines rose in a triumphant scream to drown out the rushing winds and skittering dust. Lakius and Osil felt the heavy weight of high-G deceleration as the ungainly craft steadied itself and slowed. Lakius could see dust dunes too now, through the curving port in the ship's prow, but the dunes with their trailing streamers of blowing dust were dwarfed by the serried ranks of sharp-angled black monoliths which rose up around the ship as it dipped between them. Osil let out an involuntary gasp as the scale of the structures became apparent. The monoliths were mountain-sized edifices of harsh, alien rock cutting the horizon into sawtooth edge, or a predator's maw.

*Landed: 6/839.641.M41. Explorator magos Prime Reston Egal. Surface Survey\*. Xeno Structures Catalogued\**

The ship changed course, angling towards a vast dark triangle which blotted out half the sky. The pilot-spirit was faithfully following the beacon now, bringing them in towards a tiny ring of light in the shadows below it. There lay the Explorators' camp.



**G**RITTY SAND crunched underfoot and a cold, stinging wind blew more of it into their faces as they stepped down to the landing ground. Patchwork figures of steel and flesh were rolling towards them on armoured treads; Lakius and Osil waited by the ship and made no sudden moves.

'See there, Osil: the Explorators have invoked a laser mesh for the protection of the camp. How powerful would you say it is?'

'I see three transformation engines on this side of camp. Assuming the same number on the far side I would estimate 10 to 20 gigawatts, father.'

The figures came closer. They were Praetorians, bionically reconstructed warrior-servitors of the Machine God. Their cadaverous faces gazed stonily from a nest of targeting scopes and data-wires, gun barrels and energy tubes tracked Lakius and Osil

until they halted. A chest-mounted speaker on one crackled into life.

'Two lifeforms identified. Classified non-hostile. Please follow, Father Lakius, Acolyte Osil.'

They followed a pair of the heavy servitors between low buildings of pre-fabricated armourplated panelling towards a central command sphere. Osil pointed to one of the smaller structures which had its panels folded back to create a workshop lit from within by welding arcs and showers of sparks.

'What works are being undertaken there, father?'

Lakius repressed a chill sensation of foreboding 'They are re-initiating servitors, Osil. Evidently there has been some accident or mishap which has rendered the units non-functional.' He forbore to comment on the row of ready caskets outside the workshop, containers for tech-priests whose biological components were fit only for incorporation into new servitors. Several priests must have died here already.

The Praetorians motioned them into the command-sphere and remained on guard outside. Inside was a scene of barely organised chaos. Wiring cascaded from panels and conduits, devices of a hundred types thrummed, buzzed and sparked, screenplates flickered and scrolled through endless lines of scripture. A robed priest detached himself from a group clustering around the central dais and addressed Lakius.

'Adept Danzager, your arrival has been greatly anticipated. I am Adept Noam, Lexmechanic Magos Tertius. I have the honour of analysing and compiling data on this expedition.' Noam was gaunt and emotionless, only his lack of bionic enhancement and priestly robes marking him apart from the servitors. Two other priests gathered behind him. Noam pointed to each in turn and pronounced their roles with toneless efficiency.

'Adept Santos, artisan, responsible for camp construction and maintenance.' A rotund man nodded. He was heavily rebuilt with a subsidiary lifting arm at his shoulder and a mass of diagnostic probes in place of his left hand and eye.

'Adept Borr, rune priest, extrapolation and theory.' Borr was slight and nervous-looking, and seemed to be on the edge of speaking when Noam cut him off. Noam and Borr evidently didn't get along. Noam gestured to the other robed figures within the chamber.

'Adepts Renallaird, Kostas and Adso are engineers like yourself, their areas of expertise covering the mysteries of generation, augury and metriculation. Adept Virtinnian is absentia, attending to the servitors at present.' Renallard, Kostas and Adso looked up briefly as their names were mentioned and gave a perfunctory nod before bending back to their work.

'Blessings of the Ommissiah be upon you all,' Lakius said. 'Am I to assume that you are the leader of this expedition, Adept Noam?'

'No, Explorator Magos Prime Reston Egal has that blessing. He will be joining us shortly.'

'Can you tell me why I have been summoned here then? I know that this is an important undertaking; after all, it has already made me late for my own funeral.'

If Noam understood the joke he made no sign, but Borr grinned behind his hand. Noam replied, 'Yes, you were scheduled for dissemination at the termination of your last assignment. A post with the Officio Assassinorum, I understand. You must be disappointed that your emgrams cannot yet be joined with the Machine-God.'

'In truth, it is my belief that I serve better as a living being than a collection of memories and servitor wetware.'

'Understandable, and very biological.' Something close to disdain was passed across Noam's features when he said biological. 'I see that you have never considered undertaking the unction of clear thought.'

'The unction of clear thought? What is that, father?' blurted Osil, forgetting that he should be seen and not heard amongst such adepts.

Noam replied smoothly, apparently not troubled by the acolyte's gaucheness. 'The full utilisation of cerebral mass is a simple matter of isolating our thoughts from the rigours and distractions of emotion – hunger, fear, joy, boredom and so forth. This we know as the unction of clear thought.'

'A common surgical practice among lexmechanics,' Lakius told Osil, 'whose renowned cognitive abilities are enhanced thereby.' At the price of becoming an emotionless automaton he thought to himself, before adding more diplomatically, 'In my own role as engineer I have always found crude emotions such as "fear" and "pain" to be useful motivators under the right circumstances.'

'Indeed?' Noam said, warming to his subject matter. 'Studies of stress—'

'Splendid! This must be our new expert in cryo-stasis!'

Noam was cut off by a newcomer who had lurched into the chamber like an animated scarecrow, all gangling arms and legs. His narrow, vulpine head, scrawny neck and thin body conspired to complete the illusion. He grinned voraciously at Lakius. 'Now you're finally here, we can get on with it! Splendid!'

Lakius bowed deeply. 'Magos Egal, I presume.'

'That's right. I see you've met the others and Noam's about to treat you to a sermon!' Magos Egal winked conspiratorially at Lakius, bouncing up and down on his heels as if he couldn't contain his delight. Lakius was astonished. He was used to a certain amount of... eccentricity among senior members of the Mechanicus, Explorators in particular, but Egal seemed to be verging on the edge of lunacy. 'You come highly commended, you know! Highly commended! Two centuries of experience!'

'Almost fifty aboard a single craft, servicing a single sarcophagus, magos. Admittedly, that was of alien design and its failure would have brought about my immediate dissemination – but I cannot imagine how I may be of service here.' In truth, Lakius had a strong and unpleasant suspicion exactly why cryo-stasis was of interest to this famed Explorator, but he wished to hear it said out loud.

'You can't guess? I bet you can, but you want to hear it anyway! You're a sharp one! I like that.' Egal grinned lopsidedly, 'Do you know what this place is?' Egal thrust his arms outwards to encompass the whole world.

'Naogeddon... a dead world.'

'No!' Egal thrust up a finger to make his point. 'Not dead, sleeping! Sleeping these six hundred million years!' Lakius's stomach underwent a queasy lurch.

Egal composed himself a little and went on. 'Let me begin at the beginning. Over six hundred million years, ago a race we know as the necrontyr arose and spread across the galaxy. What little we know of these giants of prehistory has been learned from a handful of so-called dead worlds, like this one, scattered at the very fringes of the galaxy. On each world stand vast, monolithic structures which have remained all but impenetrable to every device at the hand of Man. The level of technology evident in their construction is almost incomprehensible to us and many Explorators have been lost winning the fragmentary knowledge we do have.'



'On my first expedition to Naogeddon, we gained certain measurements and calibrations which are singular to the dead worlds of the outer rim, these ancient seats of the necrontyr. These have enabled myself and Adept Borr to fashion a device... a key, if you will, which can unlock these structures without awakening their occupants.'

Adept Borr had grown increasingly agitated as Magos Egal spoke and now he interjected, 'Magos, the last attempt caused an exponential jump in attacks—'

Noam cut him off smoothly. 'Adept Borr, those projections have not been verified. Adept Santos has confirmed the current threat is well within the capacity of our defences to contain.'

'The current threat, yes, but if things go wrong—'

Adept Santos seemed affronted by Borr's implied criticism. 'We have a fifteen gigawatt laser mesh, twenty armed servitors and storm-bunkers built out of cubit thick, Titan grade armourplasm panels. What could possibly go wrong?'

Egal had passively watched the exchange with fatherly humour and a slight grin, but now he became animated again. 'Ah yes! Speaking of which, I believe they're due to attack any time now. Stations, everyone!'

Lakius's queasy stomach lurched up towards his mouth. Sirens wailed a second later.

'You mean they attack at the same time every day?'

'Well, every dusk. Strictly speaking.'

Lakius, Osil and Borr were in an observation gallery at the top of the command sphere. As a rune priest adept, Borr was trained to piece together fragmentary information and make speculative theorem, something akin to black magic to most tech-priests. As such, Borr had explained, he was detailed to make observations of their attackers, try to understand their tactics, strengths and weaknesses and then feed effective protocols to the Praetorians.

'I thought it was already night,' Osil said.

'No, Osil, it's always this dark because of the dust in the atmosphere, most of the suns' light is reflected back into the void,' Lakius replied. 'Adept Borr, what are these attackers? Despite Adept Santos's reassurances, I note a number of casualties have already been incurred.'

'They appear to be mechanisms: humanoid, skeletal, most assuredly armed. We have not been able to secure one for study, despite strenuous efforts.'

'And I did not note an astropath adept among those spoken of so far.'

Hesitantly, Borr looked up at Lakius. His tattooed face was underlit by the greenly glowing glass of the augurs before him, but to Lakius the sickly pallour was underwritten by a deeper fear. 'Adept Arraius... disappeared prior to the very first attack. I—I fear Magos Egal has not fully thought through the implications of this site. There are machine spirits here which have functioned continuously for six hundred million years.'

Borr would have continued but an alarm began chiming, quietly but insistently.

The augur screen flashed and displayed a grid with moving icons, Borr glanced down and said, 'The Praetorians have spotted something. We should have it at any moment. There, eight energy sources six hundred metres out on the west side. We'll have visual soon.' Another glass flashed and displayed icons. Borr was all business now, his fears forgotten in his devotion to his work. 'Eight more, at six hundred and closing from the southeast. They're tempting us to split our fire, I expect... yes here it is, a third group at six hundred metres north waiting to see which way we go.'

Outside, the dark skies had deepened to an impenetrable, inky blackness which the powerful arc lights of the camp barely kept at bay. Borr fed attack vectors and co-ordinates to the Praetorians while Lakius and Osil clustered around an augur glass. The laser mesh was shown as a ragged line of X's representing the ground based refraction spines. Red triangles approached in serried lines from two directions and held back on another angle. The Praetorians were represented by cog-shapes, in respect for their selfless devotion to the Machine-God. The Praetorians were moving southwest and an exchange of fire soon took place across the laser mesh. The tiny bolts flying back and forth on the glass was eerily echoed by the flashes visible through the observation ports. More frightening were the snaps and booms like distant lightning that came rolling across the compound.

The massed fire of the Praetorians was overwhelming the south west group, the red triangles dimmed in quick succession, some disappearing altogether. Only two of the Praetorian-cogs showed the solid black of non-function, but even as Lakius watched one of the red triangles brightened momentarily and its shot turned another icon solid black. On the west the enemy was at the laser mesh, advancing through it in a tight

wedge and destroying the spines with tightly controlled salvos. Red lines flickered across the interloper's progress as detection beams were broken and the continuous energy flow of the mesh jumped to full output, searing through the ranks. Time and again the icons dimmed but recovered, they would soon break through. The northern group began to move.

'The north group are coming,' Lakius said. 'I see them.'

Most of the Praetorians turned west, leaving a small group to finish off the tattered southern group.

The artificial lightning-storm was getting closer. Osil was not paying attention the glass any more. The scenes unfolding outside in plain sight froze him. Stray shots flashed into the camp, exploding in sparks or gouging glittering welts in Santos's storm-bunkers. Several Praetorians were in view, driving parallel with the laser mesh and firing at something out of view. More came into view from the camp, closing in around the spectral alien cohort forcing its way in from the west. The foe was terrible to see, their shining metal skulls and skeletons too symbolic to be missed. *Here is Death*, they had been built to communicate, in any language, across any gulf of time and to any race.

That was not the worst of them. These harbingers seemed in some horrible sense to live. Each was a mechanism, to be sure, but one with a fierce anime, like the idol of some ferocious, primitive god. Not only were they death, but they manifested a horrible sense of passion, even joy in their work. As machine spirits they were the most obscene perversions Lakius had ever seen, and inwardly part of him wept to see such things could still exist.

'Father,' Osil said, 'the northern group...'

Lakius couldn't tear his eyes away from the battle between the Praetorians and death machines below. The energy weapons of the aliens were frightening in their potency, their actinic bolts visibly flaying through whatever they struck layer by layer like some obscene medical scan compressed into a heart beat. The warrior-servitors fought back with plasma fire and armour piercing missiles, cutting down the skeletal apparitions one by one, but four more servitors had been cut down by the enemies' deadly accurate fire.

Borr used the same tactic again, the bulk of Praetorians broke off and wheeled north. A small group was left to finish off the alien machines which kept stubbornly rising after hits that would have stopped a dreadnought. Lakius was grateful for Borr's obvious tactical

skill. If either the western or southern groups were not completely eliminated the foe would undoubtedly get a foothold inside the camp. The trouble was the Praetorians moving north to parry the third thrust numbered only six; for the first time they would not outnumber the enemy.

'Borr, set the northern face of the mesh to maximum sensitivity,' Lakius said.

'But the spines will fire continuously, dissipate into the windblown dust!'

'Mica dust,' Lakius corrected.

Borr grinned and began a rite of supplication.



**T**HE PRAETORIANS fought well on the northern side. They used a storm bunker to narrow the angles so they only fought part of the enemy at once. Clattering forward on armoured treads, a salvo of missiles scorched across the void-black sky and cut down two enemy machines as they emerged from the las-mesh. Lightning-crack discharges of plasma burned another, but a critical overheat damaged one of the servitors as his shoulder-mounted plasma cannon suffered meltdown. Five faced five. The storm bunker was being torn to pieces, its adamantium sheath impossibly burning with metal-fires. With a groan it collapsed in on itself, revealing more of the foe at the inner edge of the mesh. The Praetorians lost two of their number for only one of the enemy. Three armoured servitors were left against four skull-faced killers. The aliens grinned their hideous, fixed grins as they stepped forward.

Without warning the laser mesh crackled into frenzy of discharges. Gigawatts of energy were dissipated into the swirling dust particles, pointlessly scattering their power in flashes of heat and light.

The flashes were harmless, but powerful enough to temporarily blind the optics of the nearby skeleto-machines. Their fire slackened momentarily and the Praetorians used the opportunity to halt and let rip with every weapon in their arsenals; bolter shells, missiles and plasma carved through the silhouetted enemy.

Osil gaped at the scopes. A moment ago he had thought he was going to be killed, but instead they had won.

They had won.

LAKIUS STOOD looking at Magos Egal's 'key', a fifteen metre-long phase field generator, poised like some giant, complex syringe of steel and brass over the unyielding black stone of the alien structure. The smooth, blank wall sloped away to giddy heights, making an artificial horizon of solid black against the grey sky. Adept Renaillard was connecting power couplings at the nether region of the key-machine, quietly reciting catechisms as he anointed each socket and clamped the cables in place. Noam stood nearby, arguing with Borr about something. Four paces further along the key the magos himself was making fine adjustments to the key's controls. Four Praetorians were arrayed nearby, their torsos swivelling back and forth as they scanned for danger.

Lakius had just completed a long shift restoring what Praetorians and servitors they could from the casualties sustained in the attack. The unseen Adept Virtinnian, whose duty it was to undertake such blessings, had been crushed to death along with Adept Adso and six servitors in one of Santos's Titan grade storm bunkers. Adept Santos himself had lost an arm when he attempted to secure an alien machine which had reactivated. If the alien machine-spirits kept to their rigid timetable the next attack was due in six hours. The thought of it crawled at the back of Lakius's mind constantly, a nagging fear which grew minute by minute, hour by hour. He wished he could find some reason to dissuade the magos, stop him pursuing this patently dangerous study, but his authority was beyond question on an expedition like this. The doctrine of the Mechanicus was clear – entire planetary populations of tech-priests could be sacrificed in pursuit of sacred knowledge; the individual weighed nothing against the Cult Mechanicus. But was this sacred knowledge or something ancient and tainted?

'All set?' Magos Egal trilled to Renaillard, who nodded his assent. 'Places everyone! Lakius, you stand with me and we can all chant the liturgy of activation together.'

Chanting in choral tones, Egal made a series of connections and static started to jump from the generator, accompanied by a rising humming noise and the reek of ozone. The black stone shimmered, glittering like quicksilver as it started to deform away from the spiralled needle of the generator. An arch was appearing, tall and tapering, of perfect dimensions and straightness. Within its angles the stone writhed and coiled like a living thing before fading away like mist to

reveal the mouth of a corridor. The perfect alien symmetry of it was marred only by the head and shoulder of a praetorian which appeared to be sunk into the wall on the left hand side – mute testimony to the previously failed attempt to penetrate the structure.

Unperturbed by its silent brother, the first Praetorian moved into the corridor, its powerful floodlights piercing the darkness within. Osil gasped, the outer shell of the structure had made him imagine the inside to be the same, unadorned stone. But the lights picked out complex traceries of silvery metal set into every surface; walls, floor and ceiling twinkled with captured starlight. A murmur of wonder rose from the gathered tech-priests. Magos Egal grinned with delight.

'You see! A simple adjustment of three degrees was all it took! Quite, quite fascinating! I haven't seen anything quite like this since the moons of Proxima Hydratica!' he chuckled. Lakius felt relieved; the Magos was evidently more accomplished than he appeared. One by one, trailing sensor cables and power threads behind, the techno-magi entered the alien structure.

The corridor with its rich silver filigrees sloped down and away. After a dozen metres it dropped down in knee-high steps for another hundred. The Praetorians struggled to negotiate the giant steps, laboriously lowering themselves over each one. The slow progress gave Lakius ample time to examine the silver-traced corridor walls. They were undoubtedly depicting script in a language of some form. Spines and whorls marched in lines apparently formed from continuous individual strands. The lines and strands of script crossed and re-crossed up and down the walls, across the floor and on high in frozen sine waves, creating the sensation that the alien language was somehow conveyed by the totality of what was before him, rather than its individual elements.

Adept Noam was taking input from a cadaverous-looking scanning servitor, a long umbilical connecting its oversized eye-lenses to a socket in the lexmechanic's chest. Borr was nearby, puzzling over a hand-held auspex.

'Can you make anything of it, Adept Borr?' Lakius whispered to the rune priest. The sepulchral quiet of the necrontyr monolith seemed to demand silence, as if noise would manifest all of its invisible, crushing weight to punish the impudent interlopers. By unspoken agreement none of the party had broken that brooding silence with more than a harsh whisper since they had entered.

'No, I'm not sure that it's supposed to be read in the human optic range. Set your view-piece to read magnetic resonance and you'll see what I mean.'

Lakius fumbled with the focussing knob on the rim of his artificial eye, tuning it to scan electromagnetic frequencies. The corridor was bathed in it, every whorl and spine was a tiny energy source which glowed with magnetic force. The overall effect was dizzying, like walking through a glass corridor over an infinite gulf full of stars. After a time Lakius had to reset his vision to blank it out.

After an hour of descent the corridor flattened out and then twisted sharply to the right before being blocked by a portal of black metal. The two lead Praetorians halted before it, their floodlights darkly reflected in the glossy metal of the obstacle. Three geometric symbols were marked on it at knee, waist and shoulder height.

'Should we use weapons fire, magos?' One of the Praetorians asked, its plasma cannon eagerly swivelling into the ready position. Magos Egal shook his head, stepping up to the door with Noam faithfully shadowing him with his trailing servitor.

'No, no,' Egal muttered 'I'm sure it's a simple matter of...'. He touched the metal of the portal. Lakius flinched slightly, fearing some ancient necrontyr death trap. Nothing happened. '...understanding how to trigger these symbols.'

A pregnant silence fell behind Egal's words. Noam began analysing the symbols, cross-referencing with all the data he stored in his machine-enhanced brain.

Lakius softly let out a breath he been holding until he heard a new sound, a low buzz which rose quickly to a high pitched whine. It sounded horribly like a weapon charging up, its capacitors being filled to maximum before it unleashed an atomising blast. Hairs rose on Lakius's neck. The sigils were flickering with their own light now; their ghostly fingers of energy could be felt tangibly. The Praetorians sensed it too and went to a threat response, readying and charging their own weapons with a hiss of servos and whine of capacitors.

Lakius felt a surge of panic, as if he stood beneath a giant hammer which would smash down at any second. He wanted to run back up the corridor but his way was blocked by the two rearmost Praetorians. They were agitatedly swivelling back and forth with their baleful targeting eyes lit as they searched for enemies. One of them turned far enough to spot its companion and its ruby eye irised

down into a pinpoint as it locked on target. The Praetorian's plasma cannon crackled up to a full charge, a compressed lightning bolt which would annihilate anything within metres of its impact point.

Osil was gibbering with fear.

Lakius was shouting out command dogma: 'Praetorians! Audio primus command! Deus ex Terminus est.'

The cannon fired, a searing flash and thunderclap which tore through the other Praetorian and sent white-hot shrapnel scything down the corridor. Osil bravely shouldered Lakius to one side, saving the old engineer from a fiery demise. Shouts and another roar echoed from near the portal, a wave front of scorching heat washed back up the corridor. The nearby Praetorian swivelled round and trained its plasma cannon on Lakius and Osil, its eye glowed with single-minded determination to destroy as it narrowed at them.

'Ergos Veriat excommen!' Lakius shouted hoarsely 'Shut down!'

The Praetorian sagged down on its chassis like a puppet with its strings cut and the crisis was over as suddenly as it had begun. The eerie silence fell like a curtain which was broken by the crackle of tiny fires, the plink of cooling metal and the groans of Osil as he writhed on the blood slick slabs. Metal splinters had struck him in his side when he saved Lakius. By the blessings of the Omnissiah, the wounds were not too deep and Adept Borr shived them with a somatic welder.

Adept Renillard had not been so lucky and a shard of smouldering casing had struck him in the throat, almost shearing his head off. Smoke rose from the smouldering remains of the two Praetorians nearest the portal. Noam's servitor had been destroyed in the exchange of fire as the two destroyed each other but Magos Egal and the Lexmechanic were unharmed.

'A sophisticated form of faeran field,' Noam explained dispassionately. 'It was cut off when I completed decryption of the portal locks.' A faeran field interfered with brain functions, inducing, among other things, extreme fear responses and seizures. Lakius couldn't help but think the lexmechanic sounded a little smug. Clear thought indeed.

Beyond the portal the corridor appeared to continue as before. Osil was sorely hurt in spite of Borr's ministrations, and Lakius undertook the rituals to reboot the solitary remaining Praetorian so that it could carry him back to the surface. Osil protested weakly, but Lakius spoke a few quiet words to

him before sending him on his way. The young acolyte looked very much like a child clinging to the Praetorian's wide back and Lakius prayed that nothing was waiting back there in the darkness for them. With only four tech-priests left in the expedition it seemed dangerous to Lakius to push on, but the Magos insisted, convinced they were at the verge of a breakthrough.



**E** GAL'S BREAKTHROUGH proved to be a labyrinth. The corridor split and then split again and again to become many. The different ways sloped sharply up and down, some narrowing to slits too small for even a servomat to enter. Within three turns Lakius felt thoroughly disorientated. The marching hieroglyphs on the walls seemed to hint at other corridors lying just out of sight, showing outlines of other labyrinths, turnings, dead ends which were just out of phase with themselves. In the Mechanicus doctrine the faeran portal alone would have been the subject of months of careful study before further advance was made. The twistings of this alien maze would constitute a lifetimes work with studies of geometry and numerology.

Magos Egal was in no mood to linger, though, and he set Noam and Borr to calculating a path through. Adept Noam's vast analytic power was directed entirely onto building an accurate map of the interweaving passages they moved through using direct observation, phasic scanning, micropressure evaluation and tactile interrogation. Adept Borr used his carefully learned arts conjecture and intuition to understand the underlying structure of the maze, and to determine what kind of xenomorphic logic would guide them through it.

Lakius was reduced to doing the work of a servitor, spooling out power thread and invoking marker-points at each junction so that Noam could tick them off on his mental plan. The spool's metriculator showed less than a thousand metres left of its five kilometre length when they found another portal, though the term seemed inappropriate for the gargantuan metal slabs confronting them.

The gleaming, baroquely etched metal stretched up into the darkness further than their hand lights could reach. The corridor angled away in either direction, following

some inner wall but leaving a sizeable vestibule that the four Explorators now occupied. They were dwarfed by the new barrier, rendered so insignificant that the opening of those titanic gates could only foretell their doom at the hand of something ancient and monstrous. Adept Noam did not even flinch as he stepped forward to begin deciphering the locking-glyphs.

Lakius's mouth was dry with fear as the adept began tracing the first glyph. He looked back along the corridor, sure he had heard some scuttling noise. The twinkling silver trceries hurt his eyes, mechanical and organic. It took him a moment to realise that shapes were moving across them. Silvery, glittering shapes.

'Watch the rear!' Lakius shouted and hefted his personal weapon, an ancient and beautifully crafted laser made by Ortisian of Arkeness, whose spirit he had long tended to. Its angry red lash was sharp and true: it caught a shape, which blew apart in a blinding flash which spoke of minor atomics. The others crouched on their spindly legs and then leapt forward, buzzing down the corridor like a swarm of metallic insects.

Each was the size of a man's torso, flattened at the edges like scarabs and fringed with vicious looking hooks and claws. They were fast but so aggressive that they impeded each other's progress as they rattled and bounced over one another. Borr's bolt launcher joined its roaring song to the hiss of Lakius's laser. Their combined fire clawed down three more of the steely scarabs. Nonetheless, Lakius and Borr had to back towards the doors to keep their distance as more swarmed forward.

'Keep them back!' shouted Egal. 'Noam almost has it!'

Their backs were almost against the doors already. Lakius focussed all his attention on tracking and eliminating the machine-scarabs, his laser flickering from one to another in a deadly dance of destruction. But they were still getting closer. One scarab ducked between two of its fellows at the point of their destruction, and surged forward while the tech-priests were half-blinded by the explosions. The machine's scabbling claws ripped Borr's bolter from his hands before its momentum carried it over Lakius's head. It bounced off a wall and arrowed down amongst the priests. Lakius flinched away and saw it clamp on to Adept Noam's back even as he completed the last sigil. Surgical-sharp hooks ripped into the lexmechanic as the twin portals began to slowly separate.

'Could someone remove this?' Noam asked calmly, like a man being troubled by a wasp on a summer's day. 'I—'

The scarab exploded like a miniature nova and Adept Noam was gone, consumed in an actinic fireball which knocked Lakius flat. He rolled desperately, purple after-images flashing in his vision, ears filled with the roar of detonation. He expected to feel the dread weight of one of the machines landing on him at any second.



**O**SIL LAY GRIPPED to an operating table by steel bands, the arms of an auto surgeon delicately sliced at his skin, pulling forth steel splinters and suturing his torn flesh together. Pain blockers numbed his body but his mind was racing. Father Lakius had told him to prepare their sacred cargo for release. Such a dangerous undertaking was normally only made in response to a signal from the Adeptus Terra on distant Earth. To begin the investiture of the living weapon the ship carried in cryo-stasis without the initiation code was tantamount to suicide. If the assassin's crypt was opened without receiving the preparatory mnemonics and emgrams specifying its target it would kill everything it found until it was destroyed.

Father Lakius, he concluded, must privately believe things had gone very, very wrong indeed.



**L**AKIUS FLINCHED as something gripped his shoulder and started dragging him backwards. He realised someone was trying to pull him to safety and kicked his legs to scramble across the floor.

Moments later, Lakius's vision cleared enough to see that he was beyond the doors and that they were closing. The dark slit of the corridor outside narrowed rapidly as they smoothly swept together. He pointed the laser still gripped in his shaking hand but no scarab-machines came through the gap before it sealed.

'Splendid! They are without and we are within,' Magos Egal's voice said, close to Lakius's ear.

He scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could, fearfully looking around. Egal stood nearby and beyond him the chamber they had entered could be seen in its full majesty. Huge, angular buttresses marched away down either wall, the floor sloped gently downward. Frosty pillars of greenish light shone down from an unseen roof to reveal row upon row of tall blocks covered in angular alien script. The air held a chill and the silence of the labyrinth outside had given way to a gentle surruration like waves against distant shore.

'Where's Adept Borr?' Lakius demanded. Egal turned away from his accusing gaze, looking off down the cyclopean chamber.

'I'm sorry, I had to shut the portal or the scarabs would have killed all of us,' Egal seemed genuinely repentant. He could not even meet Lakius's gaze.

'You just left him outside!' Lakius's angry words rang hollow even to him. The young rune priest was dead and recriminations would not bring him back. They were trapped at the centre of the monolith now, the heart of the ancient structure. The Mechanicus-trained academic in him was already studying the chamber, too awed by the storehouse of alien archaeotech to give thought to the cost already incurred. The rows of man-high blocks seemed familiar, something about them... understanding blossomed with a now-familiar tang of fear.

'These are cryo-stasis machines,' he whispered. Metriculation memo-chips in his optic viewer calmly extrapolated that the chamber held over a million of them.

'It's what I brought you to see. They resemble the cryo-crypt of the Assassinorum vessel you arrived in, do they not? The best is at the centre, these are just... servants. Come and we may look upon a sight no living thing has seen in six hundred million years.'

Egal moved off down the slope and Lakius numbly followed. They passed block after block, each glittering with a rime of ancient frost. The floor got steeper until they had to crawl on hands and knees, gripping the blocks to lower themselves down to a flat circular section dominated by an immense stasis crypt. It was a sarcophagus in form, its top moulded into a representation of what lay within. Lakius expected to see a mask of death like the machine warriors, but instead found vivid life rendered in polished metal, beautiful but inhuman and cruel. Rows of sigils around the lid shone with an inner light, and it felt warm to the touch.

'Its already been opened,' said Lakius. 'Help me move the lid. I need to see inside.'

Between them they managed to turn the huge, heavy lid, swivelling it to reveal the interior. The sarcophagus was empty.

Egal seemed unsurprised; in fact, he was delighted. 'Splendid! Just as I had hoped.' He reached a gangling arm into the sarcophagus and brought out a silvery, metallic staff.

'Lakonius described an artefact like this in the Apocrypha of Skarros. He spoke of a symbol of mastery born by the lords of the necrontyr, called the "staff of light".' He hefted the ornate device in both hands. As he did so, an intense blue-white light flared in the symbol at the top of the staff. 'With this, we need fear no denizen of this edifice; with time they can even be tamed and made to serve.'

'But what of the occupant of the crypt?' Lakius asked, nervously noting the maniacal gleam in Egal's eye. 'The lord and master of this place that we're plundering from? I fear in our current circumstances we could scarcely fend off any kind of attack and that artefact is more likely to draw one to us, we should go while we still can.'

'Very well, but the staff of light could be our salvation. It would be madness to leave it behind.'



**O**SIL LIMPED towards the landing field where their ship lay. He had agonised greatly about whether to accede to his mentor's request. By Imperial and Mechanicus law, the activation of one of the lethal members of the *Officio Assassinorum* without proper authorisation was treason of the highest order. Death of the flesh would be a secondary consideration beside the terrible punishments that would entail.

But Osil had spent almost twenty Terran years in the company of Lakius Danzager, studying the tasks he would one day continue when the father was gathered to the *Librarium Ommissiah*. He had imagined he would spend the rest of his life aboard the ageing cutter, maintaining its systems and preparing its cargo of Imperial vengeance when it was required. That was not going to be the case now. Osil had learned enough of Lakius's clarity to understand that the *Explorator's* expedition was woefully inadequate in the face of the alien terrors of

Naogeddon. Father Lakius feared the worst, that they were about to unwittingly unleash something so terrible that he believed only an adept of the Eversor temple would have a chance of stopping it. And so the assassin must be prepared.



**M**AGOS EGAL strode ahead confidently through the labyrinth, thrusting out the staff like a torch, its fierce light burning back the shadows and setting the hieroglyphs aflame with blue-white flashes. Lakius scuttled along behind him, jumping at each new scraping, slithering noise, jabbing his pistol towards each new vagrant glitter of steel as it flicked out of sight behind a corner. The denizens of the labyrinth were dogging their heels, giving back before the circle of light from the staff and closing in behind.

After what seemed like an eternity they reached the first portal where they had fallen foul of the faeran field. The melted wreckage of the Praetorians and Renaillard's body were gone, the corridor clear except for the power threads trailing off into the darkness. Magos Egal wanted to stop and investigate but Lakius feared some assault would take place if they lingered, and urged him to press on. The soft scrapes and scratches of movement were behind them now, but following closely all the time. As they started to climb the steps Lakius looked back and caught sight of dozens of tiny lights floating in the gloom. They looked like blue fires, seemingly cold and distant, but drifting forward in pairs, the twin eye-lights of murder-machines on their trail.

The cool grey light of the outside seemed blinding after the blackness within. The edges of the phasic rift in the structure's outer sheath were wavering alarmingly and they ran past the entombed Praetorian to stumble out onto the gritty dust of the surface. It took Lakius a moment to gain his breath and he looked up to see Egal making adjustments to the phase generator.

'You're shutting it down, I trust,' said Lakius.

'Quite the contrary; I'm stabilising it so we can use the same entryway to go back in.'

'That's what I thought,' Lakius said, and fired his laser.

**O**SIL'S KNEES ALMOST failed him when he saw their ship. A living sheath of machines covered it, their silvery bodies shifting over one another as they sought a way inside. The ship carried a great many devices to prevent tampering, as Osil knew all too well. If the machines found a way in, or worse still tried to breach the hull, the results could be devastating. He turned and forced his torn legs to start back to the command sphere.



**E**GAL DARTED AWAY from Lakius's laser with inhuman quickness. But Lakius had been aiming at the phase generator's power couplings, and the hit was more spectacular than he had imagined. The key-machine detonated and then imploded, a halo of white-hot flame flashing outwards for a moment before it was dragged back. A ragged distortion-veil skated erratically over the machine, crushing it smaller and smaller as it tried to suck everything nearby into it. Egal had been blown clear, but was left wrestling to hold onto the alien staff of light as it was drawn inexorably towards the rift.

'Help me, Lakius. I can't hold it!' Egal shouted over the piercing shriek of air being annihilated in the void. Lakius levelled his laser at the magos and shot him in the head without replying. Egal fell back clutching his face. The staff plunged into the rift and exploded with a crack like lightning. Ozone hung heavy in the air as Lakius backed away through the laser mesh spines towards the camp. He spared a glance for his treasured weapon's indicator jewel, and saw it was dim. His last shot had been at full strength, enough to punch through plasteel. Magos Egal was still moving, standing up.

'Have you any idea how hard it was to get this texture right?' he demanded indignantly, indicating the side of his face that had been caressed by a steel-burning laser. Charred welts revealed glittering metal beneath, quicksilver curves that betrayed an inhuman, yet familiar, anatomy. Lakius kept moving back, the figure of the thing that had pretended to be Egal was getting reassuringly distant, dwarfed by the solid black base of the alien structure. A pair of Praetorians came rattling forward from amidst the stormbunkers, balefully scanning Lakius with their targeters.

'One life form identified. Classified non-hostile,' one concluded.

The magos-thing was at the laser mesh. It leapt suddenly, astoundingly covering the hundred metres to Lakius and the Praetorians in a single somersaulting bound.

'One life form identified. Classified non-hostile,' the other Praetorian stated.

'Surely you didn't believe these clattering toys would be able to identify me?' the Egal-thing smiled. 'I had thought you one of the more intelligent specimens.'

Lakius's mouth was dry with fear, but he managed a curt nod of acceptance before crying out 'Praetorians! Audio primus command! Overwatch!' The Praetorians locked their weapons onto the alien with eye-blurring speed, their simple brains entirely devoted to obliterating the first rapid movement they sensed.

'You forget that I spent time repairing servitors after the last battle. I took the liberty of updating their command protocols at the same time,' Lakius said with more courage than he felt.

The thing smiled more broadly still, and slowly cocked its head to one side. The Praetorians' weapons tracked the minute movement faithfully.

'Good for you, Lakius Danzager. You really are a clever one. How did you know I wasn't human?'

Lakius hesitated for a moment. The thing before him exuded an almost primal sense of power. It was at his mercy for the present, but his instincts told him it could pounce on him at any moment. The Mechanicus in him yearned to learn what he could about it while his humanity screamed out to destroy it. His curiosity overpowered his instincts for a moment.

'I wasn't sure, but either you were the thing from the crypt or an insane Explorer who was bent on unleashing something unspeakable upon the world. When I understood that, my choices became clear. How did you replace Egal? Did he wake you in there?' Icy daggers caressed Lakius's back as he talked to the thing. Its silver and flesh smile widened even further.

'What makes you think I replaced him at all? I have travelled a great distance since my first waking, walked in many places that have changed so very much since I saw them last.'

'What were you seeking?' whispered Lakius.

The thing's ferocious smile was spread almost ear to ear. 'Knowledge, mostly. I wanted to know how the galaxy had fared, who was left after the plague. You can't imagine my surprise on finding your kind and the krork scattered everywhere. I've seen you humans trying to forge an empire in the name of a



corpse; I have seen your churches to the machine. Racially, your fear and superstition are most gratifying. You make excellent subjects.'

'You are necrontyr, then. You went into stasis to escape a disease.'

'No, your language is inefficient. The plague was not a disease and it couldn't harm us, but...' The necrontyr tilted its head back as if dreaming of long lost times. 'It was killing everything else.' It looked back at Lakius. 'And no, I am not a necron. You mistake the slave for the master. You'll understand better when I take you back inside.'

It leapt. The Praetorians blazed into it with lasers and plasma, their bolts lashing at the thin form. Lakius was momentarily blinded by the orgy of destruction, and he fled towards the command centre in the hope of finding reinforcements. He looked back to see a silvery figure ripping pieces out of one of the Praetorians. The other battle-servitor was smouldering nearby. The figure waved a piece of carapace jauntily at Lakius.

'Sorry, Lakius, I couldn't resist it,' the thing called 'My race raised what you call "melodrama" to a high art form before you were even evolved.' It chuckled and returned to eviscerating the Praetorian.



**L**AKIUS WAS spinning the locks shut on the command center hatch when he sensed a presence behind him. He turned, too terrified and weary to fight but wanting to see his nemesis. He almost died of relief when he saw it was Osil.

'Osil, it's—'

'I know, father, I was watching on the monitor.'

'The assassin?' Lakius gasped as he sagged to the ground.

'I couldn't reach the ship, it was covered by a swarm of insectile machines. I'm afraid they'll trigger its anti-tampering protocols sooner or later. I searched for something we could use to protect ourselves but there's only components, nothing complete.'

'I fear the thing out there may survive the blast anyway. If so it would be better to—' A ringing blow sounded against the hatch, making both Osil and Lakius jump. Then another blow slammed into it, then a third. At the third blow a bulge appeared in the Titan-grade adamantium plate. Silence fell.

'I think we'd better look at those components, Osil.' Lakius said, struggling to his feet. Osil fussed around him, his fears assuaged by having someone else to think about. He showed Lakius the ready-caskets and crates he had brought.

'I've performed the rites of preparation on these pieces, and anointed the calibrators,' Osil said hopefully. A hissing, popping noise came from the hatch, and a bright heat-spot formed at its center.

Lakius looked at the mass of unconnected components and despaired.



**T**HE HEAT SPOT had made a complete orbit of the door, leaving a trail of molten fire behind it. As the circle was closed the metal fell inward of its own weight, clanging to the ground and sending up a cloud of reeking fumes. A tall, inhuman figure stepped through the gap.

'Mechanism, I restore thy spirit. Let the God-Machine breathe half-life unto thy veins and render thee functional,' muttered Lakius, scarcely looking up. Osil gaped at the apparition, sure that his life was over.

'Ah, splendid, both of you,' it grinned. 'Don't tell me you've been trying to make something to stop me? With all your chanting and bone-rattling it would take days, years!'


There was a flash outside, and seconds later a titanic roar. The blast wave from the assassinorum vessel's plasma reactor going critical was a second behind that.

'Don't worry, I can save you.' The thing grinned again.

'No need,' grated Lakius and closed the last connection.

A dome of shimmering, bluish light sprang into being. It filled the hatchway with the necron-master frozen at its centre. It was a charcoal-black silhouette in the glare of the plasma-flash beyond the field. The rest of the armoured command centre shook and rattled alarmingly but held, its vulnerable hatch protected by Lakius's improvised stasis bubble.

After the blast wave had passed there was a long moment of silence before Osil asked. 'Father, won't the Ommissiah be angry that you mistreated all those Machine Spirits making the field?'

'Let it be our secret, Osil. Deus Ex Mechanicus. The Emperor watches over us.' 

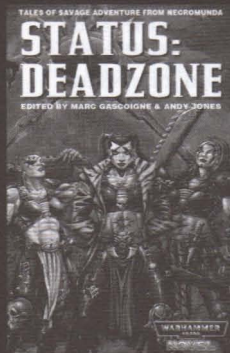
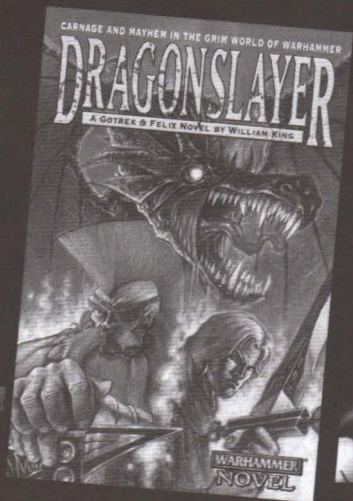


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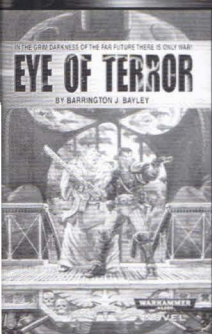
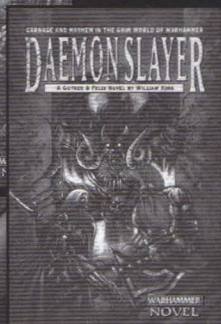
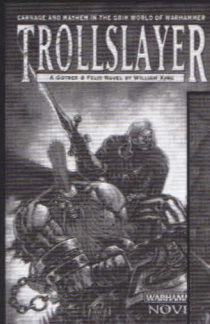
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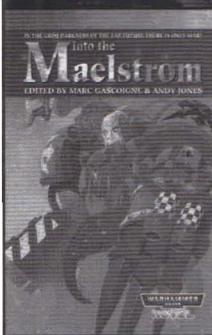
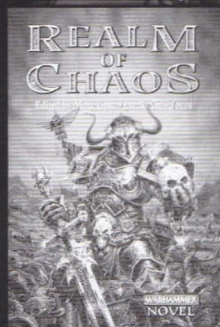
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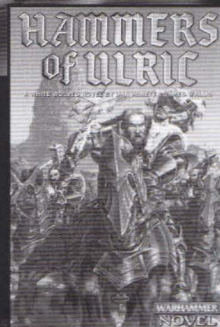
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The big man moved with surprising speed, twisting in towards Stefan to grasp the fabric of his tunic near the neck. Stefan was dragged forwards, fighting to stay in the saddle. He fastened onto Red Face's wrist with his right hand, and drew his sword with his left. Red Face was fast, but Stefan was faster. Unlike his opponent, his judgement wasn't clouded by drink. If he stayed on his horse to fight he'd have to kill the other man. He didn't want to do that, not yet.

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As they fought the Chaos-spawned beast the wind whipped more fiercely about them. Howling in fury, the enraged spawn lurched forward. Stanislav's double-headed battle-axe bit deep into a shin-bone, splintering it and bringing the monster down on one knee with a baleful braying. As Alexi lunged at the beast, intending to plunge his sword deep into its chest where he supposed its dark heart to be, the mutant snaked its neck down sharply. Its hot, moist breath caught him full in the face, the noxious stench making him gag and lose the initiative.

• **HIVE FLEET HORROR by Barrington J. Bayley**

*A violent barking noise snatched him abruptly out of the unholy contact. He saw three of the large-headed tyrannids blown apart, then the fourth. A ragged hole had been blown in the wall of the chamber, too. Shreds of rubbery flesh, the substance of the snail-ship, flapped and trailed, oozing pink ichor. Crowding through the hole came armoured man-shapes with pointed visors, seemingly grotesquely hunchbacked, the all-enclosing armour itself hulking over the back of the helmet.*

• **DEUS EX MECHANICUS by Andy Chambers**

That was not the worst of them. These harbingers seemed in some horrible sense to live. Each was a mechanism, to be sure, but one with a fierce anime, like the idol of some ferocious, primitive god. Not only were they death, but they manifested a horrible sense of passion, even joy in their work. As machine spirits they were the most obscene perversions Lakius had ever seen, and inwardly part of him wept to see such things could still exist.

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