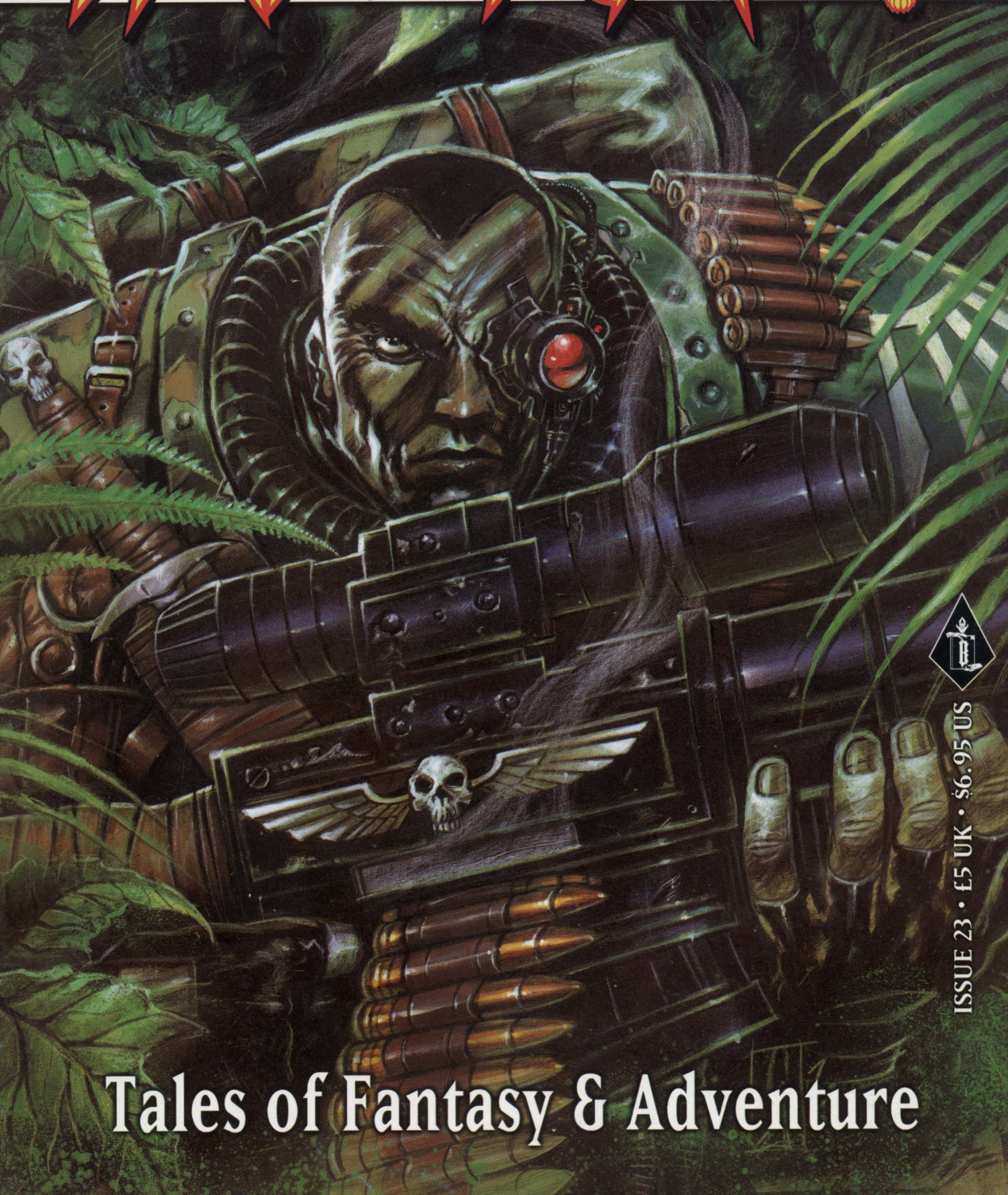


INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

AS WE charge on into this new century, it's sometimes tempting to sit down and take stock of all that the Black Library has achieved in its four year life so far. At the time of writing, with our monthly (soon to be twice monthly!) novel releases flying off the shelves, *Inferno!* and (the newly redesigned) *Warhammer Monthly* going from strength to strength, and a new range of art books and sketchbooks just starting to appear, I can definitely say that we think everything's going just great. And there's plenty more surprises yet to come.

At the risk of sounding sycophantic, though, we certainly couldn't have got anywhere without you. For sure, *Inferno!* was very much an experiment for Games Workshop, our first dallying with fiction for some time and also the first product for years prepared using (mostly brand new) freelance creators from outside of the legendary GW Design Studio. Over the years, as with most magazines, *Inferno!*'s success has been

down to the quality of the contributors it has attracted. There was a slight fear here at the Black Library that, as we encouraged writers like Dan Abnett, Bill King, Gordon Rennie and others to add to our burgeoning novel line, the pages of this magazine would become a little threadbare.

Far from it! As the last few issues have shown, we are more than proud to bring you stories and comic strips from a variety of brand new contributors – and we've even lured old favourites like Jonathan Green and Neil McIntosh back to delight and dazzle us once more. We started the *Tales from the Ten-Tailed Cat* strips specifically to give a platform to all those aspiring comic writers and artists who have been besieging us with their samples, desperate for a showcase to demonstrate their talents. Already some of those writers and artists have moved on to regular strips in *Warhammer Monthly* – look out for Jim (*The Scribe's Tale*) Brady's take on Inquisitor Ascendant early this summer – and there are some

way cool stories being prepared for *Inferno!* too.

And of course there's plenty more new talent waiting in the wings. Why, we can hardly contain our enthusiasm for what we've got coming in the next few issues! But of course there's always room for more, so if you also want to join the merry band who make *Inferno!* what it is, we'd love to have you along. To get a copy of our contributors' guides, contact us using one of the means listed in the box below: write to us, email us or check out the *Inferno!* submission guidelines on the new, improved Black Library website.

SO STUFF all that sitting around looking at what we've achieved so far. Let's have more of it, more hot new stories and strips from the best gaming worlds there are. Bring it on!

Marco

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

• ENTER THE INFERNO! •

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CONTENTS

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PUBLICATION

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Space Marine Scout

John Gravato

4 Loyalty's Reward

A smalltime hood on the up and up learns the true price of his unswerving faith in the God-Emperor.

Story *Simon Jowett* • Illustration *Paul Dainton*

20 Debt of Blood

Stefan Kumansky returns home to Altdorf for a bit of rest and relaxation but both Reinhardt Kessler, Provost to the Council of Elders, and the sinister assassin who has been stalking Stefan have very different ideas about that.

Story *Neil McIntosh* • Illustration *Paul Jeacock*

36 Boyz in the Hive

When a cargo bound for Lord Helmawr's private zoo ends up in the Underhive, Doc Haze sends the down and dirty bounty hunter, Nathan Creed, to retrieve it. But what is that strange green fungus he finds at the crash site..?

Story *Jonathan Green* • Illustration *Des Hanley*

50 Tales from the Ten-Tailed Cat

The Tale of the Musician. An enchanted night of music at Talabheim's most notorious haunt turns bitter for the pair of travelling musicians 'entertaining' the regulars.

Script *Nik Vincent* • Art *Paul Davidson*

53 Ancestral Honour

Grimli Skrundigor has lived with the burden of his family's shame all of his life but when a mysterious Slayer, Dammaz, leads him on a quest to the ancient dwarf fort of Karak Azgal, redemption appears to be within his grasp.

Story *Gav Thorpe*

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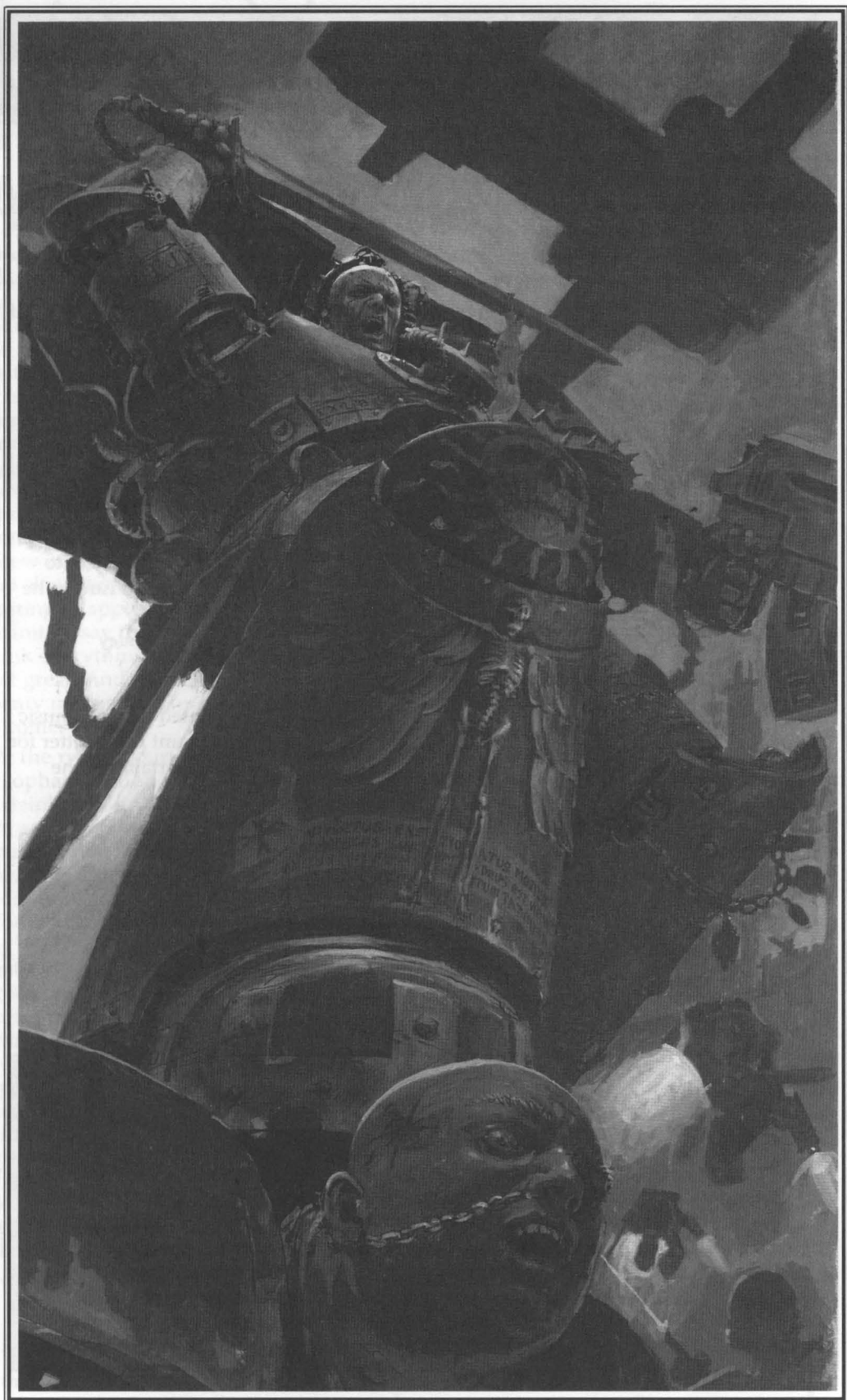
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LOYALTY'S REWARD

BY SIMON JOWETT

THE VOX-ENHANCED bells of the nearby Ecclesiarchy chapel were sounding vespers when Kleist spotted them. They had only just stepped into the bar. There were three of them – well-dressed, but not ostentatiously so. They wouldn't have looked out of place among the crowds in one of the uptown bars or restaurants, but here, close to the landing fields, they stood out among the off-duty loaders and packers who made up the regular clientele at the Split Pig.

Several heads turned as the newcomers made their way slowly towards the bar – then turned quickly back to stare into drinks or strike up conversations with companions. The strangers' expensive suits couldn't hide the heavy muscles beneath their fabric or the air of suppressed violence that hung around them like a dark cloud. Even Ernst, the bar's permanently-stewed mascot, didn't try to tap the newcomers for a free drink.

The walls shook and a dull roar filled the bar as a heavy cargo shuttle passed overhead, drowning out the sound of the call to worship as it made its way from the landing fields to the Merchants' Guild transport barge that waited for it in low orbit. The fields were busy day and night; Equus III was the most ore-rich world in this edge of the segmentum and Praxis its most prosperous city. The Split Pig was not a place to go if you wanted peace and quiet.

From his booth at the rear of the room, Leon Kleist scanned the bar's dimly-lit interior, hoping to spot a group of Imperial Guard troopers on shore leave from their orbiting transport. The Split Pig was a favourite among guardsmen in transit with only a few hours of furlough before their next journey through the warp. No luck.

Kleist looked back towards the bar and saw one of the newcomers beckon to the bartender. The young man stopped stacking glasses and sauntered towards the stranger, wiping his hands on his apron, ready to take his order. Kleist knew that the stranger didn't want a

drink; he and his companions wanted information.

While he talked to the bartender, the stranger's companions surveyed the room. Kleist slid as far back into his booth as possible, while still keeping the three of them just in view. He felt the beginnings of panic swirl in his gut. What had he been thinking? He should have kept his mouth shut! His eyes darted nervously towards the rest room door. All he needed was a chance to...

The ascending shuttle's sonic boom rattled the glasses on their shelves. None of the regulars took any notice. The bartender continued talking; Kleist saw him point towards his booth. But all three strangers glanced upwards, surprised by the aerial concussion. One of them slid a hand inside his jacket, unconsciously reaching for a concealed weapon.

Kleist ran for the door.

From behind him came the sound of chairs being overturned, shouts and the sound of glasses breaking. He slammed through the door and raced down the short, poorly-lit passageway towards the rest room. The door swung shut behind him, cutting off the noise.

Before it reached the latrines, the passageway branched right. Kleist took the turn and sprinted towards the door that led to the alley behind the bar. He knew that it would be a matter of seconds before the three strangers were on his tail – there wasn't enough of a crowd in the bar to slow them down for very long – but, once he was outside, he stood a better chance of losing them.

Kleist cursed himself as he ran. If he hadn't stayed for that last drink. If the drunken conversation hadn't turned to old man Gaudi's death.

And if he hadn't started shooting his mouth off.

He straight-armed the door at the end of the passage and found himself in the garbage-strewn alley. From here he could

go left, across the main street and head home – though only the Emperor knew what he would tell his wife – or right and take the back way towards the landing fields. There was a local Arbites sub-station at the field gates, but Kleist couldn't risk the planetary representatives of Imperial law probing too deeply into his business dealings. Right now the idea of being on some distant world felt very appealing. Unfortunately, he was not alone.

'Hey, Leon, I've been looking all over for you.'

The man was tall, well dressed in the same unobtrusive style as the strangers in the bar and carried himself with the confidence of someone who knew that, in this case, a one-on-one confrontation meant the odds were already stacked in his favour. A thin scar ran the length of the right side of his face, from the hairline of his slicked-back, sandy-coloured hair, almost to the point of his narrow chin. He was not a stranger.

'Mister... Mister Kravi...' Kleist managed to stammer. And then his world exploded.



HE DIDN'T remember landing in the filth at the foot of the wall. He rolled painfully onto his front and pushed himself up onto all fours. His mouth was full – it felt as if he had swallowed as much of the muck as now covered his clothes. He spat. A large goblet of blood hit the back of his left hand. As he stared at it, blinking away the tears that had inexplicably appeared, fogging his vision, another joined it, this time falling from his nose. He raised an unsteady hand to the centre of his face, pressed gently and felt the grinding of cartilage against bone. Fresh tears welled up in his eyes.

'That hurt, Leon?' Someone was standing over him. A pair of expensive-looking shoes stood in the muck a short way from him. Kleist craned his neck to look up at the man who spoke.

The fist slammed into the side of his face. Stars exploded behind his eyes and his supporting arm gave way. Gasping

with pain and surprise, he inhaled a mouthful of filth.

A hand reached for his shoulder, turned him onto his back. Coughing, fighting down the urge to vomit, he stared up at Mikhail Kravi, right arm of Aldo Graumann, the Protektor, or local boss, for the Haus Gaudi, which had run this part of the hive for as long as anyone could remember.

'I... I'm sorry!' Kleist stuttered. Feet sliding in the slime that coated the alley's flagstones, he began to push himself away from Kravi, towards the rear wall of the bar, expecting every heartbeat to be his last.

'Sorry for what, Leon? Sorry for shooting your mouth off to your buddies in the Transport Confederation, or sorry for making me come down here and bruise my knuckles on your face?'

Kravi seemed amused to watch him slide along the ground, then push himself up into a half-seated position against the wall. Only now did Kleist dare to shift his gaze from Kravi's face. He noticed that the three strangers from the bar now stood a short way behind their leader, hands clasped, mute witnesses to his humiliation.

Kravi dropped to his haunches in front of Kleist, locked eyes with him.

'You see, Leon, word reached Mister Graumann that you'd been telling your pals that, now Graf Gaudi was dead, Emperor bless his departed soul, you didn't see why you should keep on paying tribute to... what did you call him?... "his whore-hopping whelp". Was that it?'

Kleist started shaking his head in a feeble, pointless attempt at denial. Kravi reached out, caught his chin in one large hand and held his head still.

'That's the Graf's grandson you were calling a whelp, Leon. The new Graf. You think that, just because he's young and likes to have a good time, that he's not going to be interested in taking care of business?'

'N-no,' Kleist spluttered. A mixture of blood and alley-filth dribbled down his chin. He wanted to say something, anything that would prevent Kravi from hitting him again. 'It... it was the drink.'

'You know, that's what I thought, when Mister Graumann told me what he'd heard. You meet up with some friends and colleagues, you eat, drink a little too much wine, it goes to your head and you say some crazy things.' Kravi's voice was soft, reasonable. 'I knew you wouldn't have forgotten all the help the old Graf had given you, all the contracts he put your way, the competitors he persuaded not to bid for runs along your routes. He gave you the route from the refineries to the landing fields and I knew you respected him for that.'

Kleist tried to nod, but Kravi's hand was like a iron glove clamped around his jaw.

'And I knew, once you'd had time to think about it, you'd respect the new Graf in just the same way. More, even. I guess that's why you came to this toilet, instead of one of the nicer places near your home: to think things through. Am I right?' He released his grip on Kleist's jaw and the older, fatter man nodded like a chastened child.

'That's good.' Kravi stood, smoothed back some strands of hair that had fallen about his face. 'Now there's going to be a gathering in honour of the new Graf's accession. Everyone's going to be there, paying tribute. And I know whose tribute is going to be the biggest of all, don't I, Leon?'

Kleist nodded again. He had noticed a clammy sensation between his legs and realised that, at some point, he had wet himself like a newborn. Hot tears – not of pain but of humiliation – rolled down his cheeks.

'I'm glad we had this little talk.' Kravi beckoned to his men and they moved forward, passing Kravi as he stepped away from Kleist. 'My associates here are going to tidy you up and get you home safely to your lovely wife and that very pretty daughter of yours. The gathering is the day after tomorrow at the compound. That gives you time to organize your tribute in the proper manner. If you look out your window before then and happen to see one of my men outside your home, don't worry. He'll be there to make sure nothing interferes with your preparations.'

'After all,' Kravi added as two of his men hauled Kleist to his feet, 'you know we only have your best interests at heart.'

THE LAYOUT OF the Haus Gaudi compound had changed little since its construction at the end of the First Age of Vendetta, the blood-soaked decades that followed the founding of Equus III's first industrial colonies. This was a rich world; the opportunities for profit – legitimate or otherwise – were boundless. The houses that would one day control the black economy of Equus III grew out of loose-knit gangs of street thugs, entrepreneurs who had failed to prosper in legitimate trade, crewmen who had grown tired of life aboard the Merchant Guild's ships, and discharged members of the Imperial Guard regiments which had accompanied the first settlers.

The First Age of Vendetta saw allegiances harden into blood loyalty as the gangs jockeyed for position and power. The weaker houses were absorbed by the more powerful, the better organised, or else they were eliminated. An observer who looked only at the spires and towers of Equus III's rapidly expanding cities, or at the vast wealth generated by the burgeoning trade in refined ores, would be unaware of the war being fought in the shadows.

Franz Gaudi, the first Graf, had seen his house come close to extinction during this time. He was determined that it should not happen again. The compound, set on the banks of a lake on the outskirts of Praxis, beyond the curtain wall that marked the boundary of the hive proper, most of it constructed below ground level and surrounded by a high, hexagonal wall, was the result.

The Second Age of Vendetta was a quieter, less blood-soaked affair, marked by assassinations and the occasional skirmish over territory. Like the players of some abstruse intellectual game, the Graf of the remaining houses directed their street-soldiers against their rivals, gaining control of the illegal interests in one territory, only to lose control of another. Where the First Age had lasted decades, the Second lasted centuries.

Bruno Gaudi had been young and ambitious when he became Graf. Over time, he saw both his sons die – one by an assassin's blade, the other gunned down

on a street corner – and came to the conclusion that, during the whole of the Second Age of Vendetta, there had been only one real casualty: profit.

From its unpromising position at the end of the First Age of Vendetta, Haus Gaudi had grown to become one of the most influential criminal entities in Praxis. When its Graf spoke, people listened. For Bruno, the only real surprise was how readily the other Graf's agreed with him. Endless vendettas had got in the way of doing business, had depleted the houses' funds and wasted their manpower. Peace, they agreed, was the only answer. Ritual and respect should replace the blade and the gun. Each house could then concentrate on exacting tribute from those who operated within their agreed territories; violence would be directed only against those who refused to pay. After lengthy negotiations, the Second Age of Vendetta came to an end around the long table in the subterranean sanctum of the Gaudi compound.



'GRAF GAUDI, in honour of your grandfather's memory – may the Emperor bless his soul – and of your accession, I offer this in tribute.'

With a trembling hand, Leon Kleist placed the data slate on the polished surface of the long table. Viktor Gaudi, pale-skinned and sharp-featured, clad in a high-collared suit of crimson velvet, reached forward, picked up the slate in one slim, elegantly-manicured hand and thumbed its screen into life. The room was panelled with dark wood and discreetly lit; the back-lit screen cast a pale green glow over his face. Gaudi raised an eyebrow as he read the display, then passed it back to the slightly older man who stood at his left shoulder – Filip Brek, formerly a minor member of the dead Graf's inner circle and Viktor's companion on his visits to the fleshpots of Praxis, now elevated to the major role of Graf's advisor, the Graf's most valued advisor.

'You have been most generous,' Gaudi said quietly. 'Exceptionally so. In memory of my beloved grandfather, I thank you.'

'The honour is mine,' Kleist replied, more loudly than was necessary, in an attempt to disguise his nerves. Kravi and his boss, Graumann, stood behind him, flanking the door, overseeing the tributes from their part of the hive. Kleist was the last; he could feel their gaze burning into his back. Before ushering Kleist and the others down the long corridor to the sanctum, Kravi had checked the slate, then shown it to Graumann. The older man had whistled appreciatively – and so he should. Kleist had liquidated over a third of his assets to ensure that this tribute was sufficiently extravagant for him to escape another beating.

'The Haus Gaudi does not forget its friends.' Gaudi nodded towards the door, ending the interview. 'Aldo, stay a while,' he added as Kleist took an unsteady step backwards, then turned. Ahead of him, Kravi stepped forward to open the door. As Kleist passed, Kravi nodded and smiled a self-satisfied, predator's smile before following him into the corridor and closing the door behind them.

'You did well in there, Leon,' Kravi said as they walked along the corridor. Panelled with the same warm, dark wood as the sanctum, it was lined with niches, in which busts of long-dead Graf's stood atop stone plinths. Kravi kept pace with Kleist, one or two steps behind him, a menacing voice at his shoulder. 'There's just one more thing I wanted to ask you.'

'Your daughter – what does she like to do?'



'THE GRAF'S PLEASED with you, boy,' Graumann blinked as his eyes adjusted to the afternoon sunlight. The second of Equus III's twin suns was dipping towards the tops of the trees that ringed the lake. He had found Kravi standing at the battlements atop the hexagonal wall that surrounded the compound. In all the years since its

construction, no one had ever tried to breach the wall, but its rock-and-plas-steel bulk, metres thick, looked capable of withstanding any assault short of orbital bombardment.

'Yeah?' Kravi might sound relaxed, unconcerned, but Graumann knew that was an act. He remembered the hot-tempered young street hustler who had been caught boosting liquor from a vehicle owned by a trader under Haus Gaudi protection. He had already been given a working-over by Graumann's men, but he still stared defiantly out at Graumann from a swollen, bruised face. Normally, his men wouldn't bother their boss with such an incident, but Kravi was the son of another trader under Gaudi protection. Apparently, the kid had seen Graumann's men, their expensive clothes and cars, and decided that their line of business was more appealing. Graumann had found himself admiring the boy's guts and decided to give him a chance to learn the business from the inside.

'You won't regret it,' Kravi had slurred through split lips. Graumann had laughed out loud at that – even then, when most people would simply be grateful to still be alive, this kid was trying to hustle him! But Kravi had made good on his promise; Graumann did not regret taking him on.

'The Graf asked about Kleist's tribute,' Graumann said. Taking a silk kerchief from his pocket, he dabbed at the sweat that beaded his forehead after the climb to the battlements. He was getting old, older than he liked to admit, even to himself. 'I told him that you'd prevailed upon Leon's better nature. He liked that. He's got something in mind, I can tell. Now the old Graf's gone – Emperor bless him – he's looking to stir things up.'

'Stir things up how?' This time, there was no mistaking the interest in Kravi's voice.

'He didn't say. But, as I was leaving, someone came into the sanctum through another door. Not a Haus man. Seemed pretty friendly with Brek.' He patted the broad expanse of jacket that covered his midriff.

'Something in here tells me things are going to get interesting.'

THERE WAS NO recoil when he triggered the alien weapon. For a moment, Kravi feared that the firing mechanism had malfunctioned. If this was so, and if all of the weapons the Graf had delivered to the Graumann crew were defective, then he and his men would die here, in a storage depot under the protection of Haus Reisiger.

And then his target – a heavily-built Reisiger enforcer – dropped suddenly to his knees, his features pulped, the top third of his skull sheared-off. The las-pistol he had been in the process of drawing from a shoulder holster concealed inside his jacket clattered to the floor from nerveless fingers, then the corpse pitched forward and lay still.

The corpse's companions – four of them, foot-soldiers making their regular circuit of Reisiger turf, collecting tribute from the businesses under their Haus's control – reacted with shouts of anger and surprise as they reached for their own concealed weapons. Kravi and the three men who flanked him cut them down with short, silent bursts from the elegantly-crafted rifles they each held. Their smooth curving lines and long tapering barrels made them look more like pieces of sculpture than weapons; their pistol grips, set behind curved magazines that jutted forward like the teeth of some huge sea-beast, had been designed for slimmer hands, possessed of longer, more delicate fingers. This, combined with their weight – much less than an autogun or bolter – gave Kravi the impression that he might be holding a child's toy, rather than a firearm, but the bloody chunks that now lay scattered across the depot floor bore mute witness to their deadly capabilities.

Kravi poked the air with a finger, directing his men to take up positions on either side of the open doorway, then ran forward, weapon held at hip-height. As he had expected, two of the Reisiger crew had remained outside the covered warehouse section of the depot, guarding their vehicle. The first appeared in the doorway, pistol drawn, coming to investigate the cries from within. Kravi fired and the thug fell back, his chest a ruin. The second, seeing his comrade fall,

ducked to one side, away from the doorway.

'The wall – there!' Kravi pointed to the metal wall to one side of the door. His men stared at him for a moment, puzzled. 'Shoot the damn wall!' he repeated. According to Graumann, Brek claimed these fragile-looking things could punch through light armour plate.

Kravi's men each fired a sustained burst at the wall. By the time they released their triggers, the metal hung in shreds and the man behind it lay in pieces. Two of Kravi's men – Gregor and Rudy – stared down at their rifles, wearing comical expressions of almost religious awe.

The squeal of protesting vulcanite came from outside the warehouse. Kravi ran through the door in time to see the Reisiger crew's vehicle tearing away from them, on a swerving, barely-controlled course towards the depot gates. Depot workers in the auto's path scattered to avoid being run down. Those in the clear had turned from the wagons and tractors they were working on to stare at the carnage.

Gregor had followed Kravi through the door. He raised his rifle, sighting after the speeding vehicle. Kravi put out a hand, pressing the barrel down.

'Let him go,' Kravi said. 'He'll be our messenger. He's seen what we can do with these.' Kravi hefted his rifle. In the sunlight, an iridescent sheen swirled just beneath the surface of the weapon's carapace. The metal of which it was composed – if indeed it was metal – had not been mined on Equus III, or any other world in the Imperium. Looking down at the shifting pattern, Kravi felt a thrill run through him – a mixture of fear and elation.

'He'll tell his Protektor and his Protektor will tell Reisiger: Haus Gaudi is taking over.'



IN THE SANCTUM beneath the family compound, Viktor Gaudi listened to the reports. Haus Volpone was losing its hold on the docks as Protektor Seynitz's

men moved in. Graf Malenko's men had taken a beating in the smelting districts – it remained to be seen whether they would attempt a reprisal on Gaudi territory. Viktor doubted it – word would already have reached them of the death of Graf Reisiger, gunned down while presiding over a council-of-war in his favourite restaurant. According to that report, there was barely enough left of Reisiger, his closest advisors and their bodyguards to make one of the stews the old Graf loved so much. Since then, large numbers of Reisiger men, protektors as well as foot-soldiers, had been defecting to Haus Gaudi.

An audacious move, the assassination had been planned and led by Graumann's protege, Mikhail Kravi. Kravi's hand-picked crew hijacked a pantechnicon on its way to make a delivery to the restaurant and, disguised in the coveralls of the delivery firm, had strode unopposed through the kitchens and into Reisiger's private dining room. By the time the Graf's bodyguards realised anything was amiss, the air was thick with high-velocity monomolecular disks. At a stroke, Graumann's young lieutenant had torn the heart from Haus Reisiger. Grown soft during the years of the truce, none of Reisiger's remaining heirs had the experience or the will to rally their house against Haus Gaudi's annexation of their territory. Viktor had already sent word that Kravi was to be acknowledged as a Protektor in his own right and given control of the depot district that had formerly been under Haus Reisiger protection.

'I take it that our merchandise has met with your approval, Graf.' The merchant stood before the long table, looking down at Viktor with dark, heavy-lidded eyes. He wore the same bland, neutral expression as he had when Filip had introduced him to Viktor in the salon of the Leather Venus, one of the more salubrious establishments in Praxis's pleasure district. Using the most polite, convoluted form of High Gothic, he had requested an audience. Viktor, tired from the night's exertions and more than a little drunk, had agreed and left Filip to make the arrangements. He had arrived on the

day of the gathering, alone, carrying a long, slim case made from what appeared to be some kind of wood, inlaid with ornate icons. It had reminded Viktor of the case in which his grandfather stored his favourite antique hunting rifle. Its contents, however, could not have been more different.

'We'd be happier if we knew where those unholy relics came from,' growled Friedrik Engel, before Viktor had a chance to speak. From his seat on Viktor's left, Brek shot a look along the table at the old man who sat on the Graf's right. He opened his mouth to speak, but Viktor held up a hand to quiet him. His grandfather's Graftsberator, Viktor only kept Engel by his side to appease the old Graf's retainers – and to make it easier to dispose of him when Viktor's position was secure. Engel didn't approve of Viktor's plans, or the means by which he had set about achieving them, but his sense of loyalty to the family had kept him in line thus far.

'As I explained to your new Graf,' the merchant replied smoothly, as if unaware of the sudden tension in the room, 'I am merely a representative of a larger concern, one that specialises in supplying – shall we say unusual – material to those who might make best use of it.' Though he was addressing Engel, he was still looking at Viktor. His tone was polite, emollient, but the implication was clear: his business was with the new Graf, not an ageing subordinate. Viktor felt the old man bristle and smiled.

'Our ships came upon a drifting hulk. Its exact location is of no concern. Within its hold were certain artefacts. When the news reached us of Graf Gaudi's accession, it occurred to us that others might seek to take advantage of the situation – to move against the family before the new leader had settled into his position – and so we offered our services. From what I have heard, things are going well for Haus Gaudi.'

'They are indeed,' Viktor agreed. 'Though the words of the Divine Emperor rightly teach us to be wary of the work of alien hands, the fact is that a gun is a gun, nothing more. Better that such weapons should be in the hands of our men, rather

than those of our rivals.' Viktor directed his words at Engel and now it was Brek's turn to smile. The younger man had just repeated, almost verbatim, the reasoning Brek had used to quell Viktor's misgivings at the sight of the curved, shimmering surface of the shuriken catapult nestling within the merchant's case.

'When you contacted me to request this audience, you said that you had more merchandise that would be of use to us?' Brek addressed the merchant, who nodded.

'Oh yes,' the merchant replied. Viktor thought that, for the first time, the flicker of a smile played across his thin lips. 'There is so much more that we can show you.'



KRAVI HAD BEEN at prayer when he received the summons. Kneeling in the dark, incense-heavy atmosphere of the Ecclesiarchy sub-chapel, he had been giving thanks for his recent elevation to Protektor of the first district he and his crew had wrested from Reisinger control. That it was the Emperor's will that he should have achieved this was beyond doubt. Was it not written in the Holy Books of Terra that the Emperor of Man would help those who helped themselves?

Any doubts he did have centred around the means by which he had achieved so much in so short a time. After Graf Reisinger's death, merely the sight of the shuriken catapults was enough to un-man the Reisinger crews Kravi and his men had faced. He smiled at the memory of the Protektor of a neighbouring district who, upon his first sight of the weapon in Kravi's hands, immediately pledged his stammering allegiance to the Haus Gaudi without a shot being fired.

Be not tempted by the works of the Alien, for they are abominations. Equus III was a loyal world and Praxis its most devout city. Like all of its inhabitants, Kravi knew large sections of the Books of the Emperor by heart. Regular chapel attendance was taken for granted by the members of every

Haus on the planet. It was not unusual for a Gaudi, Reisinger or Malenko foot-soldier to kneel in prayer beside a member of a rival family, or a judge from the Arbites. Whatever happened on the streets outside, the sacred ground on which Ecclesiarchy buildings stood was neutral territory.

There was no denying that the weapon he had used to carve Graf Reisinger into bloody slivers had been created by alien minds to be used by alien hands, perhaps against the loyal human servants of the Imperium. As he knelt in the chapel, Kravi had taken a breath before offering thanks for their delivery into the hands of Haus Gaudi. Then he waited, head bowed and heart hammering, for judgement, for some sign that he was damned.

Instead, he had felt a hand on his shoulder, followed by a familiar voice, whispering. 'You're wanted at the compound.'

As they walked briskly down the chapel steps in the fading evening light, Gregor had told him that every Protektor had been summoned to attend upon the Graf immediately. Gregor had driven to the chapel in Kravi's personal vehicle – a sleek, powerful two-seater which Kravi had accepted in lieu of tribute from a trader whose depots fell within his newly-acquired territory – so that he might drive out to the compound directly. Before slipping behind the wheel, Kravi had instructed his lieutenant to let Maria Kleist know that he would be late for tonight's assignment.

As he drove towards the compound, the canyons of the city's streets giving way to fields and woodland, he laughed at his earlier doubts. There had been no bolt from the chapel's rafters, sent by the Emperor in retribution for his daring to use the alien weapons. None of the chapel's priests had denounced him from the high altar as marked by abomination. For all their gleaming strangeness, these 'works of the Alien' were no different to a las-pistol or a bolter.

Equus III's second sun was setting as he approached the compound, casting a crimson glow across the high wall. Sentries stood atop the battlements; the

curving metal stocks and thin, tapering barrels of their weapons glittered in the fading light.

The compound beyond the wall resembled a vehicle bay at the landing fields. Kravi was one of the last of the Gaudi Protektors to arrive. Graumann was already below ground, a sentry informed him as he hurried towards the low, bunker-like structure that was the only part of the sanctum to protrude above ground. As he stepped between the bunker's heavy doors, Kravi felt – as he had in the frozen heartbeat that preceded the assassination of Reisinger – that he was taking another decisive step towards his destiny.



THE HIGH-PITCHED squealing threatened to burst his skull as he crashed into the bathroom. The side of his head connected with the door-frame and stars shot across his already-blurred vision as he groped his way towards the sink.

He made it just in time. His cramping guts contracted in a spasm that almost dropped him to his knees and shot a column of vomit into the metal bowl. Elbows locked, he supported himself against the sink and gagged for air. He managed a brief glimpse of his reflection in the ornately-engraved mirror set above the sink – long enough to take in blood-shot eyes set in a puffy, blotched face framed by hair that was dishevelled and lank with sweat – before his stomach clenched again and another yellow and green stream splashed into the bowl.

This time he was able to draw enough breath to let out a low, animal moan. The squealing had subsided, but his knees were trembling almost as violently as his guts. If he threw up for a third time, he feared that his arms would give way and he'd end up lying on the bathroom floor in a pool of his own waste.

He retched, then coughed and spat out a last goblet of bile. Nothing else left, it seemed. Kravi closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

That must have been some party, he told himself. Wish I could remember some of it.

There was a shape in the star-flecked darkness behind his eyelids. A darker shape against the darkness. Its outline was regular, many-sided. There was something written across its surface...

Kravi's knees felt strong enough to support him, so he eased himself upright and lifted an experimental hand to the side of his head that had collided with the door-frame. A bruise was already rising, but the skin hadn't been broken. He took another deep breath and opened his eyes.

The light was like slivers of glass pressed against his eyeballs. Kravi gasped, blinked rapidly and raised a hand to shade them before focussing, with some difficulty, on the image in the mirror.

It was no prettier than before. He looked like someone who had just risen from his bed after a week-long fever. As he struggled to recollect the events of the previous night, he peered more closely at his reflection. He noticed what looked like an elongated teardrop, rust-brown in colour, at the corner of one eye. He prodded at it with a finger and it flaked away at his touch. Blood?

There was blood caked around his nostrils too, he noticed. Alarmed, he turned his head to one side. There, running in a thin line from his ear to the corner of his jaw, was more. He turned his head in the opposite direction. His ear-lobe was caked in what looked like an enormous brown scab.

What, in the Emperor's Name, had happened at the compound last night? Had there been some kind of drunken brawl? Kravi remembered the squealing, the pressure inside his skull, as if something was trying to force its way inside his head.

There had been something in the room. Not the sanctum, but one of its annexes. The furniture had been cleared to make way for it. A solid shape, carved from a single block of black stone: a polyhedron. There had been markings on its surface – shapes, sigils of some kind – but they had been almost impossible to make out because the stone, though highly-polished, reflected hardly any of the light

cast by the candles that had been set around the room's perimeter. All of the other Protektors had been there; Graumann had nodded a greeting from the far side of the room. The Graf had been there, too, and Brek, but he didn't remember seeing Engel, the old Graftsberator. There had been someone else standing beside Gaudi, a face Kravi hadn't recognised, with hooded eyes and thin lips curled in an unpleasant smile.

Kravi groaned as another cramp rippled through him. Despite their violent evacuation, his guts felt heavy, bloated. It occurred to him that a drink might calm them down – and immediately discounted the idea as they clenched and rolled again.

Looking down into the sink, he saw that the yellow and green vomit was draining slowly and glutinously away. He thumbed the faucet and splashed his face with cold water, cupping his hands over his eyes to ease their aching.

Hangover or not, you've got work to do, he told himself. As the new Protektor he had to show his face, prove to his men, and to those who owed him tribute, that he was in control.

But he didn't feel as if he was in control. He didn't feel as if he had a hangover. His bowels rolled over yet again. It felt as if they were moving of their own accord, settling into a more comfortable position. He looked down at his flat, muscled abdomen and realised for the first time that he was naked. He didn't remember getting home last night; he didn't remember undressing. He had jolted awake to find himself sprawled on the couch in his new apartment's living room, wood-panelled and softly-lit in imitation of the Gaudi sanctum.

As he looked down at himself, he half-expected to see evidence that something was moving beneath his skin.

'Like it or not, I need a drink,' he muttered. The first mouthful of liquor came back up almost as quickly as he swallowed it. His guts cramped and twisted, but he persisted. The second mouthful burnt its way down his bruised throat, but didn't return. By the time he took his fifth and sixth pulls on the bottle, a pleasant numbness had spread through

him and he felt ready to face the day. He showered, dressed, then called Gregor to pick him up.

When Gregor arrived, Kravi took the half-empty bottle with him.



‘SORRY, MIKHAIL, but the old man ain’t takin’ any calls.’ Grisha Volk’s voice came from the vox-unit’s handset. ‘He’s cancelled all his tribute meetings, too. Didn’t say why. He ain’t looking too good, though.’

Sitting in the back of the armoured limousine he had ‘inherited’ from Graf Reisiger, Kravi knew what Volk – his replacement as Graumann’s chief lieutenant, a stolid, loyal soldier – was talking about. He had seen Gregor’s look of surprise when he had opened his apartment’s front door.

‘He really tied one on last night – we all did,’ Kravi replied – the same answer he gave to Gregor’s unspoken question.

‘That’s what I figured,’ Volk said with a chuckle.

‘Tell him I’ll be in touch tomorrow,’ Kravi said, then cut the line and sat in silence for a while, looking out at the city streets – his streets – that flowed past the vehicle’s darkened windows. Something was nagging at his memory: the Graf’s words from the previous evening, about how the shining alien weapons were just the beginning and that he was going to show the assembled Protektors the means by which Haus Gaudi’s hold over the city would be made secure for years to come.

And then what? There had been chanting, first in High Gothic, then in a language Kravi couldn’t properly recall. Not so much words as noises: clicks and squeals...

With the memory of the squealing came that of the pressure, building inside his head. With suddenly unsteady hands, he unstopped the bottle and lifted it to his lips.

‘Where to, Mikhail?’ Gregor asked via the inter-vox from the driver’s cab, separated from the passenger compartment by another sheet of black glass. Kravi swallowed twice, draining the bottle, before he replied.

‘Home.’



GRAUMANN WASN’T taking calls the following day, or the next. Neither were any of the other Protektors. Several had not emerged from their homes since the evening at the compound. For those whose territories had been in Gaudi hands for generations, that was not a problem. For Kravi, however, it was vital that he showed his face – however blotchy and blood-shot it might still be – to those traders, shopkeepers and bar and restaurant owners who until recently paid tribute to the Reisigers.

The drink helped. It steadied his hands and eased the cramps that still woke him early each morning. Not that his sleep was undisturbed, either. The memories of ghoulish, lurid dreams hung about him when he woke, too indistinct to remember clearly, though fragments would suddenly jump into unnaturally-sharp focus at odd times during the day: the Gaudi sanctum, the assembled faces of the other Protektors, subtly but monstrously changed, voices chanting in deep, immeasurably ancient voices, offering power in exchange for obedience. At such moments, Kravi would reach for the bottle again.

The liquor had another benefit: by clouding his mind, it allowed him to ignore the questions that nagged at him when sober. How did the alien weapons reach Equus III? Where did the black stone polyhedron come from and what did the sigils etched into its surface mean? These were questions that Kravi feared to face, because he already knew the answers.

Guns were one thing. The Dark Gods were another.

ON THE DAY he received the summons, he waited until dark before travelling alone to the Palace of the Ecclesiarchy.

As he stood at the foot of the broad marble steps, looking up at the vast double doors, decorated with an intricate bas-relief carving of the Emperor's triumph over the heretic Horus, he surprised himself by thinking of his father. Woyzek Kravi was a devout man, who raised his sons to trust in the Emperor's all-knowing wisdom and who never bothered to hide from them his distaste for the men who came to collect tribute in the name of Haus Gaudi. To their faces, however, he was always unfailingly courteous and respectful and this, Mikhail, his eldest son, saw as proof that they and the people they served had power over his father. That power fascinated him, grew into a desire to become one of them. He kept his early adventures into petty crime a secret from his father but, when Graumann accepted him into his crew, Mikhail could not resist visiting his father's office, dressed in a fine new suit and the newly-adopted arrogance of a Gaudi foot-soldier.

He had expected rage, but all he saw in his father's eyes was disappointment. Whenever they met during the years that followed, always as a result of Gaudi business, neither father nor son acknowledged their blood-tie. Only once did Mikhail ask after Emile, his younger brother, who had harboured ambitions to join the ranks of the Ecclesiarchy. Woyzek Kravi fixed his son with a steady gaze and informed him that Emile had been accepted as a student in the seminarium attached to the palace.

Two brass censers, each taller than two men, stood inside the main doors. Kravi walked between them, wisps of their pungent incense clinging to him as he passed. Ranks of pews spread out to either side as he walked down the nave's long central aisle. Supplicants sat or kneeled in prayer, just as many hundreds of thousands of others knelt in the subordinate chapels located throughout the city. A low, almost sub-sonic hum filled

the air. It came from the choir stalls at the far end of the aisle, ranged before the high altar: invocations of the Emperor's goodness and might, chanted and repeated endlessly by rotating shifts of priests and students. The hymns of praise never ceased, day or night.

Kravi scanned the vast space until he spotted what he was looking for: a priest, stepping through the iron gate set in the grille separating a side-chapel intended for private worship from the rest of the palace. The priest closed the gate, drew a ritual sigil of protection in the air before it, then moved off along a side-aisle. Quickening his pace, Kravi hurried after him.

'Father.' Kravi's voice was little more than a whisper. The priest turned. Kravi half-expected to see his brother's face framed by the hood of the priest's robe. Thankfully, a stranger returned his gaze.

'My name is Mikhail Kravi,' he told the priest, then paused. On Graumann's turf and now on his own, mention of his name usually produced some reaction. This time there was none. The priest remained silent, his gaze steady.

'I am a... a businessman and a loyal follower of the Emperor, blessed be his name,' Kravi continued, now doubting his wisdom in coming here. Fear had driven him to the palace, fear of what might await him at the Gaudi compound, to which he had been summoned in three days' time. That fear had been replaced by a cold, appalling sense of what he was about to do: break the first rule that any foot-soldier was expected to learn, the only rule he would carry in his heart until the day he died. *Never speak of Haus business to an outsider.*

'That is as it should be,' the priest replied. Kravi thought he saw a flash of impatience cross the other man's features. 'The Emperor watches over us that we may live secure from the works of the unholy, the blasphemous and the alien. If you have come to reaffirm your faith in his righteousness, take a seat. I am required to be elsewhere, but I will send a novitiate to guide you in the Litany of Renewal.'

'No!'

The priest took a surprised step back. Kravi hadn't meant to raise his voice, but he knew that, if he didn't speak now, he would not have the will to speak again. 'My faith is strong. I'd not be here if it wasn't. There's... there's something you must know. The Dark Gods. They're here-' His guts spasmed, cutting him off. He gasped, forced down the urge to retch, then continued; 'They're here. In Praxis. And I have seen them.'



THE CEREMONY had begun. The confined space of the sanctum annex was filled with the sound of thirty voices, chanting in unison. Viktor stood at the centre of the candle-lit room, flanked by Brek and the merchant, basking in the palpable sense of power that had already begun to permeate the atmosphere.

All but one of the Protektors had answered the summons. As they arrived, Viktor had detected a nervousness, but also a sense of anticipation. He understood the mixture of feelings – he had felt the same when Brek and the merchant had brought him before the polyhedron that now stood, altar like, at his back. There had been pain, uncertainty, but that had passed. When he now gazed upon the stone-set sigils, he saw only his future: more wealth and power than could have been imagined by the Grafs who had come before him and, if the rasping voices that spoke to him from the depths of the black monolith were to be believed, immortality.

Only Kravi, the newest Protektor, had failed to answer the summons. He would have to be removed, replaced. Viktor had decided to send Graumann, the boy's mentor, to do the job. As the chanting grew in volume, now underscored by a deeper, resonating tone that seemed to emanate from a past beyond reckoning, from a dimension beyond that through which mere humans moved, Viktor felt a vague sadness that Kravi would not share

in the riches to come.

The sudden rush of ecstasy swept the thought from his mind. His spine popped as he arched backwards, energy racing along the vertebrae, then igniting within his skull. Colours blossomed behind his eyes – a spectrum the human brain was never meant to perceive. With a strangled half-moan of blasphemous pleasure, he dropped first to his knees, then forward onto all-fours. The thing inside him thrashed against his ribs, coiling about itself in a voluptuous frenzy.

His head snapped up as another jolt ran through him and he saw that he was not alone. Most of the Protektors were also on their knees; several lay on the polished wood floor, writhing and groaning. He caught sight of Graumann, trembling like some palsied beast. As he watched, the older man's face began to melt, the skin running like tallow, remoulding itself into a series of new countenances, each more impossible than the last, as the power of the Lord of Change coursed through him.

At first, Viktor thought the series of dull, muffled concussions came from within him, another manifestation of the power that was being channelled into the room through the monolith. Only when he heard the merchant's curse did he suspect that something was wrong. Fighting against the fog of delirium that clouded his mind, he looked around the room. Several of the others had noticed it as well. The walls and floor vibrated as impact followed impact – the sounds of an attack, transmitted through the earth from the compound above.



THE THUNDERHAWK dropped vertically out of the night sky above the Gaudi compound, its bay doors already open. Its armour-clad cargo launched themselves into space, flares of exhaust from their jump packs slowing their vertiginous descent. Bolt pistols coughing throatily, they fired as they fell, clearing most of the guards from the

compound wall before their ceramite-booted feet touched earth.

The more quick-witted of those left guarding the vehicles parked in the compound managed to loose off volleys of shuriken fire at their attackers. Most of the shots went wide, but one, at least, found its target, cutting through a jump pack's fuel line. Suddenly engulfed in a ball of flame, the armoured figure plummeted to earth, ploughing through the roof of a limousine. A number of the foot-soldiers let out a small cheer of triumph, which was quickly extinguished as the still-blazing figure tore its way out of the vehicle, pumping round after round across the courtyard as the fuel that covered its power-assisted carapace burned harmlessly away.

The Gaudi foot-soldiers knew the battle was already lost but, now trapped within the walls which were intended to keep them safe, they had no choice but to fight back against the killers who had fallen into their midst. They were huge, half as tall again as any normal man and almost twice as broad, clad as they were in dull grey armour, emblazoned with the Imperial seal. Shuriken fire spattered against their breastplates like summer rain as they moved across the compound with deadly, implacable purpose. Those who threw down their alien weapons fared no better than those who died fighting. The Grey Knights of the Ordo Malleus had their orders: none who had dared lay hands on the works of the alien were to live.

By the time the gate exploded inwards in a shower of fire and debris, the compound was quiet. The Rhino transport that nosed through the ragged gap had been set down by the Thunderhawk far enough away to avoid detection and had sped towards the compound while the dropship delivered the rest of its cargo. Grinding to a halt in the centre of the courtyard, its tracks smeared with the pulped remains of fallen Gaudi foot-soldiers, the vehicle's side and rear hatches swung open and ten more grey-armoured figures emerged and immediately moved to set up a secure perimeter.

The Rhino's last passenger was far less physically imposing than his travelling companions. In contrast to the ceramite and plas-steel wargear of the figures who now moved about the compound, gathering up the alien weapons and stowing them within the Rhino, the suit he wore would not have looked out of place on the streets of Praxis's business district. A tall man, he still only reached the shoulder of the Grey Knight who greeted him.

'The compound is secure. We await your orders,' the Space Marine's voice emerged, electronically-filtered, from his helmet grille. Although he no longer wore his jump pack and his armour bore a patina of sooty scorch marks, the insignia on his armour's shoulder plates marked him out as a sergeant of the 4th Company, the Pax Mortuus. His name was Alexos, the leader of the airborne assault team.

'So I see.' Inquisitor Belael gestured towards the low, bunker-like structure that was the only visible sign that the compound comprised more than the shattered courtyard in which they stood. 'The informer provided us with a detailed description of the chambers that lie below-ground. Take your men. Clear every room. Inform me when you have located the abomination.'

'In the Emperor's name.' The Grey Knight nodded and turned away. As he marched across the compound, his assault team formed up behind him. Some had exchanged their bolt pistols for bolters, others for meltas. A krak grenade took care of the single door set into one face of the bunker and they filed cautiously inside.

Almost immediately, the sound of gunfire burst from the open doorway. The Grey Knights who had remained above ground turned, weapons held ready. As was suspected at least some of the compound's defenders had waited in hiding, while their fellows died. Judging by the way the sounds of combat grew fainter, they were able to offer little resistance to the downward progress of the sergeant's team.

Standing by the Rhino, Belael yawned. He had slept very little over the three days since the Palace of the Ecclesiarchy here on

Equus III had alerted the Inquisition to the presence of a newly-formed cabal of Chaos worshippers in Praxis. He never slept well when travelling and, immediately upon his arrival in the city, had conducted his own interrogation of the informer. The company of Grey Knights, in transit after the successful completion of another operation against the followers of Chaos, had arrived while he was interviewing Kravi.

He had found Kravi to be a dullard, barely able to comprehend the forces in which he had unwittingly become enmeshed. But even the most slow-witted may do his duty in the war that was raging across the Imperium and beyond. Belael smiled as he remembered the look of almost childlike gratitude that spread across the informer's face when he told him that his loyalty to the Emperor and to Mankind would be rewarded.

Oh, yes, Belael had assured him, he would see that he was appropriately rewarded.



THE ANNEX WAS a scorched ruin. The stench of cooked flesh hung thickly in the air as Belael stared at the sigils etched into the surface of the black stone monolith: blasphemous names, among which one stood out – Tzeentch, the Lord of Change. The polyhedron had operated as a channel for his unholy energies, but that channel was now closed. One of the crisped bodies that lay about the floor of the room would have been its human attendant. He must have warned his masters soon after the attack began. To all intents and purposes, the monolith was nothing more than an inert lump of rock. Soon it would not even be that.

'Set the charges,' Belael instructed Alexos. 'Then mine the entire compound. I have summoned the Thunderhawk. I will perform the Rite of Exorcism from the air.'

'In the Emperor's name,' the Grey Knight replied.

'Indeed,' Belael nodded. 'And once this place is little more than an unholy memory, I shall have one more job to do. In the Emperor's name.'



SITTING ALONE on the low, hard cot in the bare cell, Mikhail had lost track of time and of how many times he had repeated his story – first to the priest in the vast nave of the palace, then to the priest's superiors, in a series of smaller chambers set high in one of the palace's spires, and then, in the cell in which he now sat, to the inquisitor. With each telling, the reality of the events he described seemed to become more distant, less real. Had he misunderstood the events at the compound? Had he broken his vow of silence for nothing? If this were the case, he could expect swift and deadly retribution from Haus Gaudi. If he wanted to avoid that, he would need protection – the kind of protection even the Haus would recognise.

'Your loyalty to the Emperor and his works shall be remembered – and rewarded,' the inquisitor had told him.

Mikhail now knew what kind of reward he most desired: induction into the priesthood. No Haus in Praxis, or any of the other cities on Equus III, would harm a member of the Ecclesiarchy. That his brother was already a priest would surely stand his request in good stead. Of course, it would mean starting over, back at the bottom of the heap, but he had done that with Graumann's crew and the Ecclesiarchy was just another organisation, like the Haus. He was smart, he would learn how to get things done, catch the eyes of his superiors and rise through the ranks. Perhaps he would be sent off-world, where the opportunities for advancement would be limitless.

'Preacher Kravi' – the title had a nice ring to it.

The thud of heavy footsteps sounded on the other side of the cell door. His guts cramped and spasmed. Just nerves, he

told himself as he pressed a hand against his abdomen. Just nerves.

The door swung inwards and the inquisitor stepped into the room, followed by a towering figure: a living statue, cast from a dull grey metal that seemed to absorb the light from the cell's single ceiling light. The Imperial eagle spread its wings across the figure's chest and a human head sat atop its shoulders, whose eyes regarded Mikhail with a coldness he imagined to exist only in the gulfs between the stars.

'Did you find them?' Mikhail managed to tear his eyes from the grey apparition and turned to the inquisitor. 'Was I right? I have been waiting...'

He paused, searching for the right words to begin his petition for acceptance into the Ecclesiarchy. If an Imperial inquisitor was to lend his approval to Mikhail's request, surely none would argue.

'I have been praying that you found the blasphemers before their power grew stronger,' he continued, the words coming out in a rush. 'I... I know that I've not lived a conventional life. I have done things others would consider wrong, but... but I have always loved the Emperor. I have always been loyal. My one hope is that I may make amends for my past, prove my loyalty even further...'

Belael smiled, raised a hand to halt Mikhail's flow.

'We found them. As you suspected, they had assembled to perform another of their unholy rites... We brought it to a premature end and wiped their stain from this world. Had the stain been allowed to spread, it would have necessary to sacrifice this city, perhaps this world in the process of their annihilation.'

'Emperor be praised!' Mikhail, anxious to prove his piety, blurted out. 'I sought only to be of service to the Golden Throne. My greatest wish is to be of yet more service. Perhaps if...' He faltered as he saw the smile drop from the inquisitor's face.

'There is indeed one more service you can render to the Emperor.' In his eyes, Mikhail now saw something of the

coldness he had noticed in the eyes of the grey-clad hulk that stood behind him. 'There remains one last fragment of the unholy seed your former employers sought to sow on Equus III. It must be eradicated.'

'Of course!' Mikhail gushed. 'If you need a guide, someone who knows his way around Praxis, I...'. Then the meaning behind the inquisitor's words slammed home, cutting off his words.

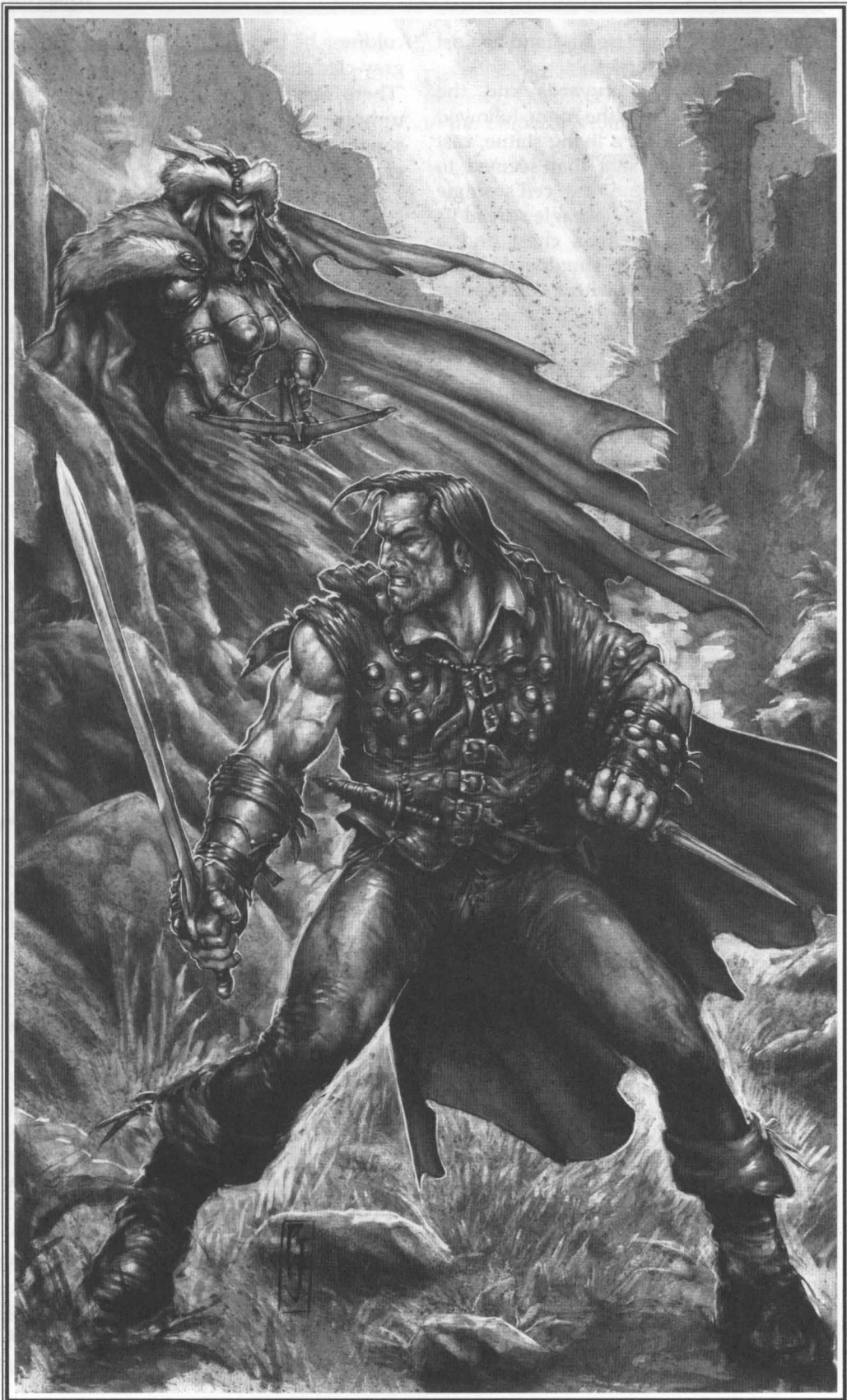
'No!' he gasped, wincing as something inside him began to twist and thrash, claws scraping against the cage of his ribs. Belael only nodded. Taking this as a signal, the Grey Knight stepped forward, raised one massive gloved hand. Seeing that hand held a bolt pistol, emblazoned with the Imperial seal and sigils of power, Mikhail tried to say something, anything that would delay the inevitable. But all that emerged from his throat was a low, guttural snarl, as if the thrashing thing within him had seized control of his voice.

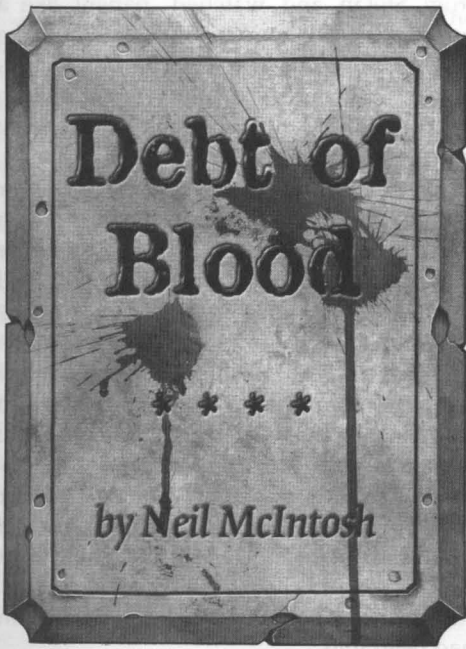
'I call upon the cleansing fire of the Emperor's gaze to purify this tainted vessel.' For the second time that day, Belael began to intone the Rite of Exorcism. Ignoring his words, Mikhail scrambled backwards across the narrow cot until his back pressed against the wall of the cell.

'As the Emperor sacrificed himself into the eternal embrace of the Golden Throne, so it is right and proper that all those tainted by the unholy and the blasphemous should submit themselves to his judgement.' Belael's words bored into Mikhail's mind. Legs still kicking in a futile attempt to get further away from the mouth of the bolt pistol and the steady, cold gaze of the figure who held it, he raised his hands in a final pleading gesture. Absurdly, he found himself thinking of Leon Kleist, grovelling in the filth outside the Split Pig.

'By fire and shell shall they become clean. Through sacrifice shall they receive their reward.'

The bolt pistol coughed once and Mikhail Kravi, loyal servant of the Emperor, received his reward. ☩





THE SUN HAD settled upon the horizon beyond Altdorf, throwing long shadows across the maze of cluttered streets. The warmth of the spring day still lingered, but Stefan Kumansky felt a deeper chill setting in.

That day had marked Heldenstag, when Altdorf celebrated its heroes. Stefan was not long returned from battle in the east, but stories of his bravery during the long siege of Erengard and its bitter aftermath had already spread through the taverns. All morning friends and fellow swordsmen had gathered to salute the city's noble son. By midday Stefan had drunk his fill of Altdorf ale, but the one face he sought amongst all others in the crowds was missing.

His brother had failed to turn up for their meeting in The Helmsman. Finally, wondering if there had been some misunderstanding, Stefan had moved on, first to the Black Crow, then to the Cutlass and the Two Moons. The word from the drinkers in each was the same. Michael Kumansky had been neither seen nor heard of for several days.

Now Stefan trod the cobbled road leading towards his brother's house on the edge of the old city. His head had cleared, but his heart grew ever heavier. In houses all along the way, lamps were being lit against the gathering dusk. Michael's house lay

marooned at the end of the street, an island of darkness.

Stefan had last seen his brother a few days ago. Michael had seemed troubled, but had refused to be drawn. Now, for the first time, he thought that some serious ill had befallen his brother began to take root in Stefan's mind.

The door to the house swayed open at his touch. Stefan stepped across the threshold, calling his brother's name half in hope, half in fear. Familiar shapes beckoned through the gloom, and old-remembered smells of waxes, wood and spice filled his nostrils. Yet Stefan sensed there was something else there, something he had never thought to find. He picked his way through the entrance hall, one hand on the hilt of the knife fastened at his belt.

The faintest of sounds drew Stefan in the direction of the large, open chamber at the heart of the house.

'Michael, what's wrong?' he called out. 'Are you ill?'

He was answered by an arm reaching round from behind to grip him firmly by the throat. Stefan felt hard steel pushed close against his ribs. Instinctively, he jabbed an elbow back into the gut of his attacker and threw his body weight forwards, pulling his assailant off-balance. With his left arm he bore down hard upon the hand clutching his neck, and sent the man tumbling across his shoulder. By the time his opponent hit the ground, Stefan had his knife raised to deliver the fatal blow.

'Don't kill him!'

Stefan froze at the sound of his brother's voice.

'Don't kill him,' Michael repeated. 'Or they'll kill me.'

Another voice, one that Stefan did not recognise, said calmly: 'Excellent, Herr Kumansky. Your performance doesn't disappoint. Light the lamp.'

A dull yellow glow spread through the room, revealing the scene. His brother Michael sat with his head bowed. Positioned around him stood at least a dozen armed men dressed in the scarlet uniforms of the Altdorf Civic Guard. The short steel knife rattled lightly upon the flagstones as Stefan let it drop.

Michael Kumansky looked up at his brother, fear and sorrow written in his face. 'I'm sorry, Stefan' he said. 'I've made a terrible mistake.'



THE FIGURE STOOD before Stefan was small, and dressed to match the grandeur of the surroundings. The man might have been a high courtier, or a merchant trading in fine silks. But Stefan already knew that the show of elegance served only to hide something much more dangerous and uncompromising.

The elegantly dressed man addressed Stefan. 'Let us be clear about where we stand' he said. 'There is no deal on offer here, no negotiation.'

'I didn't imagine that there was,' Stefan replied. The dull shock of the events were still seeping home. Barely two hours ago he had been drinking beer in the Two Moons. Now he had been taken under guard from his brother's house to the Palace of the High Council of Altdorf. Whatever transpired now, of one thing Stefan was sure: his family was deep in trouble.

The details of the charge of treason that had been laid against Michael were both vague and elaborate – rumours and fabrications, allegations of smuggled icons sold on to an anonymous Bretonnian trader. The words had washed over Stefan as they were read out loud. He had no doubt that the charges – wherever they'd come from – had been contrived. But, naive or plain impulsive, his brother had been snared. Now his foolishness would cost him dear.

Stefan turned his gaze upon Michael's accuser, Rheinhardt Kessler, Provost to the Council of Elders of Altdorf.

'My brother's no traitor,' he muttered.

Kessler moved closer to Stefan. 'So you say,' he said. 'But, unfortunately, what you say is of no import in this matter.' He leant forwards, close enough for Stefan to catch the scent of expensive pomades, rich oils of Cathay blended in the perfume houses of Couronne and Gisoreux. It was the smell of power, succinct and unmistakable.

'I can arrange for your brother to be spared,' he said. 'In return for a service, from you, to the state.' Kessler stood back

from Stefan and watched, patient like a hunter, to see how his words would be received. In contrast to the sharpness of his features, Kessler's grey-blue eyes were soft, almost mild. It lent him a look that could be taken – mistakenly – for kindness.

'No one else in Altdorf has the power or the will to help,' he added. 'But I can stop this now. It will go no further. Otherwise your brother spends what life the gods will grant him rotting in gaol. Either is in my gift.'

Stefan had no doubt of it. He knew enough about Rheinhardt Kessler to understand that his diminutive physical presence sat in stark contrast to his influence with the High Council. Kessler stood apart from his peers, a man renowned for his ruthless efficiency. For Rheinhardt Kessler the ends always justified the means. Altdorf had need of such men, or so Stefan had been told.

'What is it you want from me?' Stefan looked from Kessler to the third person present in the room, a figure who had so far sat silent throughout, face shrouded by the heavy cowl of a gown cut like a priest's robe.

Kessler opened a ledger lying upon his desk. 'Here, even within the city walls, there is evil. Evil that has lain for years undetected like a canker at the heart of Altdorf. Evil in the souls of those who have forged binding ties with an ancient family, deep in league with the dark powers. Ties that have stayed hidden, until now.'

'Until now?'

'Now, a member of that family has fallen upon the mercy of the State. Vowed to confess not just the sins of his family, but to name the faceless traitors who have given them succour. It's a prize which has escaped us too long.'

Kessler paused, his gaze lingering upon the hooded figure seated behind him.

'Your part,' he continued, 'is simple. In a few days from now, a full meeting of the High Council will be called. Electors from across the empire will be travelling to Altdorf to hear the confession and sit in judgement. The matter at hand is of such gravity that only the highest in the Council are privy to the details.'

He glanced towards the figure in the corner of the room. 'You must keep our valued confessor safe until he can be brought before their meeting,' Kessler rose and turned to address the other man directly for the first time.

'And now we complete our introductions, I think,' he said. 'If you would be so kind...'

The man straightened and drew back the heavy cowl. Sunlight illuminated the features of an ageing, gaunt-faced man. His head was shaven and his face bare but for a thin, close-cropped beard tinged with grey. The man regarded Stefan in calm silence through narrow, heavy-lidded eyes. A memory of a portrait glimpsed once, years ago, stirred in Stefan, and he shuddered.

'Loth-' he stopped himself, and turned back, startled, towards Rheinhardt Kessler. Kessler smiled, and shook his head ever so slightly.

'Ah, Lothar. Lothar von Diehl. Prince of corruption, thief of souls. No, this is not the dark sorcerer, not he. But your guess is not so wide of the mark.' Kessler stood and gestured towards the seated man. 'Stefan Kumansky, allow me to introduce you to Heinrich von Diehl, cousin to Lothar and his dear, dead brother Kurt, the bloody servant of Khorne.'

Heinrich von Diehl rose calmly from his chair, the faintest of smiles playing at the corners of his lips. 'You see, I'm no longer reviled,' he murmured to Stefan. 'In fact, I've become a valuable asset. So long as you, Kumansky, keep me safe from harm.'

Kessler spat: 'Your name is still an abomination in this city.'

Stefan turned from von Diehl to Kessler. 'Why me?' he asked.

'Because your reputation rides before you, in the taverns and on the streets of Altdorf,' Kessler replied. 'A hero amongst heroes on Heldenstag.' He circled around Stefan. 'And then we have the honest report of Bruno Haussman, your own lieutenant at Erengard. He describes your valour defending the city, and yet more so for tracking down and killing the murderous mutant that fled from the siege.'

Images of Alexei Zucharov filled Stefan's mind. Images of a man grown into a tattooed grotesque, a monster. Images of the friend and comrade he had once been,

before Chaos had wrought its terrible transfiguration.

'I sent Alexei Zucharov through the gates of Morr,' Stefan replied. 'His death brought me no comfort. Only weariness. I've no appetite for work such as this.'

Mention of Bruno Haussman's name brought Stefan little comfort, either. With Bruno by his side the burden that Kessler was placing upon him would have been lightened. But he had left Altdorf that same morning, called away on business to Nuln.

'To serve the Empire must be our all,' Kessler continued. 'I am charged to find the best amongst men for this task. One whose valour is matched by his skill. Your deeds commend you above your peers - you should be honoured.'

He paused and cast a gaze around the room. 'The von Diehl family and their allies have their eyes and ears everywhere - perhaps even here, in the High Palace. The offer I am making you will remain a secret. Accept the task and you will be assigned a number of my men, but you will have no other protection from the state.' He paused. 'I think,' he said, 'you understand by now what the alternative is.'

Von Diehl smiled at Stefan. The expression could have been either sympathy or disdain. 'I don't think Herr Kumansky has much liking for this task,' he observed, a hint of mockery in the soft tone of his voice.

'Liking doesn't come into it,' Kessler snapped. 'He serves the state or his brother pays the price of his folly.'

Stefan met von Diehl's eye for a moment. The likeness to the face he remembered in the portrait was unmistakable now. A face that had lured men down the path of madness, and beyond. 'I don't need to like you,' he said. 'But your family name doesn't inspire much trust.'

'Ah, trust.' Von Diehl nodded. 'A precious commodity indeed in these times.'

Stefan rose and made his way to the high window, shadowed by guards. Altdorf lay below, a sprinkling of stars upon the blanket of night. Right now the city, and Stefan's life, might as well be as distant as the heavens themselves.

'I haven't any choice,' he said at last. 'We may as well get under way now.'

HEINRICH VON DIEHL pushed the food away and took a long draught of wine before dabbing the corners of his mouth with a napkin. Three days of close confinement living off simple rations had clearly given him an appetite. He had worked his way through the best part of a flask of fiery *Kreigswein* and was more than a little drunk.

Von Diehl leant back and plucked threads of meat from between his teeth with the point of a knife.

'Excellent,' he pronounced. 'Decent food at last. Try it.'

He fixed Stefan with a sly stare. 'Curious, don't you think, that the flesh of beasts so vile in life can be rendered so sweet in death?'

'I think we're here for business,' Stefan replied. 'The sooner it's done and we're out of here the better.'

They had spent the first days in lodgings owned by an old friend of the Kumansky family. The house was large but unobtrusive, tucked away amongst the bustling streets of the artisans quarter. Stefan had shared the address with no one beyond Kessler, and no one had been permitted in, or out. The rooms were undeniably spartan, but Stefan was confident that they were secure.

The message had come from Kessler early that morning. The note informed Stefan that the terms set by the council had changed, and Kessler now needed to meet with von Diehl, urgently and discreetly. The only other detail was a roughly sketched map, indicating a tavern on *Marktstrasse*.

'Some gratitude!' Von Diehl snorted. 'All you've done is spend all week poisoning us all in some peasant rat nest. If Kessler wants to talk, and we eat a decent meal into the bargain, that's fine by me'

He cast his gaze over the six others seated around the long oblong table. 'Anyway,' he said, a sullen tone creeping into his voice. 'I don't see your men complaining.'

The six assigned Civic Guards weren't complaining at all. Like von Diehl, they were making the most of the opportunity to drink. Stefan turned his own glass between his fingers before pushing the wine away, untasted. He stared out from the ornate stained-glass facade that fronted the tavern, his attention fixed upon every movement,

every shadow that passed on the street outside. There was still no sign of *Rheinhardt Kessler*.

'Well, I couldn't care whether he comes or not.' Von Diehl replenished a tapered glass from the flagon at the end of the table. 'By the end of this week I'll be a free man. I'm due a small celebration, for *Taal's* sake.'

He reached out with his wine across the table towards Stefan's glass, still untouched. 'Come on.' Von Diehl urged him. 'In a matter of days you'll have something to celebrate too.'

Stefan's reply was drowned out by a thunderous roar as the windows of the tavern imploded. Jagged shards of rainbow-hued glass showered the table, scattering plates and tearing flesh indiscriminately.

In the time it took Stefan to shout a warning, one of the guards was already dead, pierced through the eye by a gobbet of glass the size of a spearhead. The others dived for cover beneath the table, sluggish and confused by the clouding fog of wine. Stefan seized von Diehl by the collar of his cloak and pulled him with him beneath the level of the window.

Von Diehl clung fast to Stefan, his smug complacency displaced by a pure and simple terror.

'Death not so sweet for you after all?' Stefan asked, pity mingling with disgust. 'Stay down.' He unsheathed his sword and emerged, slowly, into the carnage.

An eerie silence hung over the room for just a moment. Then the onslaught began.

Five of the heavily armed figures that now leapt through the shattered window were probably human. The sixth was probably not.

Stefan made a swift assessment of the strength of his own men. Three were standing, the drunkest still fumbling for his weapon. Poor odds, but the only odds that he was going to find. Stefan focused his gaze on the beast advancing through the debris of tables, and tightened his grip upon his sword.

The creature tore at Stefan as though starving for his blood. Stefan's parrying blow cut through yellowed bandaging wrapped across its face to expose the features of an abomination that was part man, part beast. Dead-snake eyes glittered back at Stefan from the rotted vestiges of a

human face. Above the eye sockets, where the stinking flesh had ruptured, fresh white horns were starting to bud. Stefan knew the creature had neither reason nor purpose other than to kill him.

For a few, frenzied moments, all Stefan could do was try and protect himself from the murderous assault. The creature lunged at him clutching a pitted but lethal sabre of ancient design, some remnant of a battle fought and lost in another life. Blows from the cutlass crashed into the scattered tables and chairs, slicing through heavy oak as though it were gauze. One stroke on target, Stefan knew, would be fatal. He ducked beneath the arc of another assault and jabbed home with his own sword. The blade met with little resistance as it pierced the rotted fabric of the creature's tunic, and a putrid stench filled the room. Yet his adversary's strength seemed undiminished, as though the wound had barely registered.

Stefan leapt back to avoid the creature's returning blow, heavy steel slicing the fabric of his own clothing just above the skin. He was being slowly driven back into a corner of the room. In a few moments he would be trapped.

Sensing victory, the creature bore down upon Stefan, its features illuminated by the swaying light of a raft of candles suspended from the roof of the tavern. Stefan leapt, and aimed his sword at the braided chain anchoring the candles. The links severed and the structure collapsed upon the advancing monster, entangling it in a web of chains. The creature brushed away the wreckage of metal and wax, but Stefan had bought himself a moment of respite. In that moment he marked the exposed skin at the base of the creature's neck, and swung his sword, double-handed, in a cross slicing blow. The sharpened steel bit deep, severing flesh from bone in a spray of dark-flecked blood. For a moment the unblinking snake eyes widened, and the fanged jaw dropped open in an expression of surprise. In the same instant Stefan turned and struck again from the other side, slicing the creature's head cleanly from between its shoulders.

The body fell amongst the debris of wood and iron with a thunderous crash. Stefan drew breath to take stock of the scene unfolding around him. He had underestimated Kessler's men. Drunk or

not, they were no cowards. The battle was now evenly matched, and the last of the attackers were being driven off. Von Diehl was huddled behind the refuge of an overturned table, his feast a distant memory. Stefan doubted it would be long before his family sent others to finish the work.

'Leave the rest of them,' he commanded. 'We have to get away from here, quickly.'

Stefan led the way through the passageway to the rear of the tavern, the two surviving guards bearing von Diehl between them.

Stefan looked around, trying to orientate himself in the unfamiliar streets. The scene appeared calm, almost empty after the carnage of the tavern. Yet something tugged at Stefan instincts, sounding an alarm.

Movement flashed at the edge of Stefan's vision. A figure that darted between the shadows, then vanished before he could locate it.

'Hurry!' he commanded. He cast a glance towards the three behind him. As he turned back he saw something flash in the sunlight, then a silver shaft speeding across the courtyard towards them.

The feathered tail of the crossbow bolt brushed his cheek as it cut a path no more than an inch from his face. There was no other sound, no panic and no alarm.

Just Stefan, the two guards – and von Diehl lying prostrate upon the ground, a pool of blood spreading from the fresh wound above his chest.

Seconds passed in silence. The two guards zigzagged across the sunlit courtyard and plunged into the shadows on the far side where the marksman must have hidden. Stefan stayed crouched low over von Diehl, his own body providing what little shelter could be offered the wounded man. He felt his heart pounding hard inside his ribcage as he braced himself for a second, decisive shot.

The guards returned moments later, empty handed. The attacker – or attackers – had fled.

Von Diehl's breath was coming in short, rapid bursts and he was losing blood from the wound, but he was still conscious. Stefan cut away the old man's robe below his neck and grasped the feathered stock of the crossbow bolt.

'This may hurt a little.' He pulled the bolt out from the bloodied flesh with one hand, stifling von Diehl's scream with his other.

Stefan's mind was racing, working through the options left open to him. Two attacks had come in quick succession; he had no doubt that a third would not be long in following. They had to reach a place of safety, or find reinforcements, but Stefan had seen enough of battle wounds to know that von Diehl would not survive long without the skills of healers.

'Either of you know this quarter of the city?' he asked the guards. Moeller, the younger of the two, nodded. 'I was born nearby,' he said.

Stefan tore a strip of cotton from his own shirt, and tied a bandage around von Diehl's wound. 'There used to be a temple of Shallya somewhere around here,' he said 'Could you find it?'

'I can find it,' Moeller affirmed, 'but nobody—'

'Never mind that,' Stefan interrupted. 'Just get us there.'

The second guard, Richter, looked to Stefan doubtfully. 'You sure we should move him?' he asked.

'We'll find out,' Stefan told him, easing an arm underneath von Diehl. 'Lift.'



SISTER AGNETHA hurried between rooms, kindling flames in the stubs of candles unlit for many months, wiping away thick residues of dust from tables and ledges long abandoned. She had not been expecting visitors.

'You must take us as you find us,' she told Stefan. 'We tend Shallya's flame in this temple, keep it burning as we must. But otherwise we are not prepared.'

'You offer us sanctuary. That's all the welcome we need,' Stefan assured her. The chill air of the temple was scented with months or even years of disuse. Voices echoed eerily along the empty corridors.

Stefan glanced down at the temple's most recent, and only patient. Von Diehl was still barely conscious, but he had begun twisting and writhing upon the narrow cot, muttering vile curses. Every few moments

the sister paused to wipe away the film of sweat that had collected on his brow. Stefan hoped it was a good sign.

'Will he live?' he asked.

The sister hesitated. 'He's not immortal,' she replied, 'but he's strong enough. He was lucky. The wound was clean, and the dart wasn't poisoned. He'll need rest and care but—' she tilted her head to one side and looked back at Stefan, 'he'll have no need of the priests of Morr just yet.'

Stefan beckoned Richter to him. 'I want you to try and get a message back to Kessler. Tell him we were attacked, but von Diehl is still alive. And safe—for the moment. Gather some more men, then get back here as quickly as possible.'

Moeller looked on as his comrade fastened his sword and prepared to leave.

'Do you want me to go with him?' he asked Stefan.

'No. Sit here and keep watch a while.' He lifted a candle from the ledge. 'I'm going to take a look around.'

The temple was larger than Stefan had first imagined, with long, inter-linking corridors built around a central hub, and dozens of chambers where the sick once lay. His tour confirmed his fears; defending the Temple against any kind of sustained assault would be virtually impossible. He returned to where Sister Agnetha and Moeller sat with von Diehl.

'Why was this place abandoned?' he asked.

Sister Agnetha shrugged. 'We are not given to know such things,' she said. 'The Goddess blessed our work here, but perhaps the temple itself was not so blessed.'

'How so?' Stefan asked.

'It sits above the ruins of tunnels hewn out of the rock by the dwarfs in the old times,' the sister explained. 'Perhaps it was ill-favoured to build upon them.'

'So how many of your sisters still tend the flame with you here?' Stefan asked.

Sister Agnetha looked at Stefan as though he had gone slightly mad. 'Why, none,' she answered. 'None at all. There is only me.'



BEYOND THE SLITTED windows of the temple of Shallya the days last shadows had dissolved into the cloak of night. Fresh candles had been set outside the tiny cell where von Diehl lay in fevered sleep. The young guard, Moeller, looked at Stefan and broke a long silence.

'They're not coming, are they?' Fear had set an edge to his voice. 'Richter's captured. Or dead. No one's coming, are they?'

Stefan kept his gaze turned downwards. Privately he had long given up hope of Richter returning with re-inforcements. He fought with a heaviness in his heart that proved harder to lift with every minute that passed. 'No,' he conceded. 'But I fear others will come. Others that mean us harm.'

He looked from Moeller to Agnetha, the sister of Shallya, the young and the old. Both waiting. Both afraid. Facing death in the heat of battle was one thing. To wait quietly for it to come in the still of night was quite another.

'A thousand thanks, sister,' he said at last. 'You've done everything you can for your patient. But it's no longer safe here. Fetch your cloak and whatever else you may need.' He nodded towards Moeller. 'This soldier will take you to a place a safety.'

The young guard looked at him. The implications of what Stefan had said sank in.

'You don't need to stay here either, with that one,' Moeller insisted. 'You owe him nothing.'

'Go, take the sister,' Stefan told him, quietly. 'And may the gods attend your journey.'



ALONE WITH von Diehl in the temple, Stefan waited. Something was on its way now, a change coming slow but sure. He could see it reflected in the dust motes suspended like tiny stars in the candlelight. He heard it in the low keening of the wind as it raked the corridors of the abandoned temple. Stefan balanced his sword across his knees and waited, all his senses sharpened for warning of the change which would signal the call to battle.

Drawn by an instinct Stefan got to his feet and stepped outside the cell into the passageway lit at each end by a single, flickering flame. He scanned the passage from end to end. Nothing moved.

He had almost convinced himself that imagination was getting the better of when he heard the voice directly behind him.

'Let's see how much of a hero you are now.'

Stefan spun round in disbelief. Someone was standing no more than ten feet from him. A young woman with fine, aquiline features and a crop of short, jet-black hair returned his gaze with venom, a crossbow pointed squarely at Stefan's head.

'The marksman,' he said, quietly.

The young woman's features curled into a sneer. 'I won't miss again from this range.'

Stefan shook his head, confused. 'Again?'

The young woman looked him up and down, her eyes full of loathing.

'Shooting the old man was an accident,' she said. 'I meant him no ill.' She raised the crossbow another fraction. 'The dart was meant for you.'

Stefan stared at the young woman. They had never met before he was sure, yet somewhere in Stefan's mind a connection began to form.

'I want you to know who I am before you die, you bastard,' the girl said, her voice burning with anger. 'I am Natalia. But you'll know me better by my family name: Zucharov!'

The connection snapped shut and hit Stefan like a hammer-blow in his stomach. 'Zucharov? Then Alexei Zucharov—'

'Is my brother!' the girl spat. 'Or was — until you murdered him'

Pieces of the puzzle fell into place. 'Wait!' Stefan urged. Now he needed to buy some time. 'Things aren't always what they seem.'

Natalia Zucharov laughed bitterly, as though Stefan had made a poor joke.

'Don't waste your breath,' she told him. 'Word travels fast around the ale houses of the Altquartier. Stefan Kumansky, the hero of Erengard!' She spewed the words out as though his name were poison. 'The hero who dragged my brother beneath the water and watched him drown, like a dog. You took Alexei's life. And now I'm going to take yours.'

Stefan measured the distance between himself and the girl, weighing his chances of bridging the gap before she shot him. At close quarters he would certainly overpower her. At this range, she would kill him before he had the chance.

'Listen to me,' he said firmly. 'It's true that I brought your brother to his death. I'll carry that burden for the rest of my life. But believe me, the brother you loved had perished as a mortal man long before the creature he had become met his end.'

Natalia turned her face from Stefan, contemptuous. 'You haven't even the guts to admit to the truth you coward. Well, don't worry. I'm going to make sure you won't have to carry your "burden" for long.'

Natalia curled a finger around the trigger of the crossbow. As she did so, something stirred, deep in the ground beneath the temple. A shuddering vibration shook the building, throwing her off balance. She regained her feet before Stefan could close on her, but she looked shaken, confused.

'Open your ears and listen,' Stefan told her. 'Listen to what's happening around you.'

There was a moment of absolute stillness. Puzzlement turned again to contempt on Natalia's face and she once again raised the crossbow and took aim at Stefan. Then, distant but clearly audible, the sound of something moving far beneath, the sound slowly but steadily closing in upon them from opposite directions.

Natalia's eyes narrowed. 'What's that?' she demanded. 'Friends of yours? If it is, they've come too late.'

'No friends of mine,' Stefan replied, quietly. 'Nor of yours either, unless I'm mistaken.'

The faintest shadow of a doubt clouded Natalia's features and she lowered the crossbow slightly. 'What is this about?' she demanded.

A voice, weak but clear, came from the lighted cell behind Stefan.

'It's about me.'

Heinrich von Diehl stood in the doorway, propping his weight on a wooden staff. The fever had passed, draining his face to the pallor of death, but, otherwise, he was still very much alive.

'They're coming to finish the work you inadvertently started,' he told Natalia. 'But I doubt they'll be averse to dealing with you, as well. If I may say so, my dear, your timing is as unfortunate as your aim.'

A note of defensiveness crept into the girl's voice. 'I'm sorry for what happened,' she said. 'I didn't mean to shoot you.'

'Shoot me too if you think that's going to put things right,' Stefan told her. 'But you're going to need a stronger brand of magic if it's going to get you out of here alive.'

Natalia looked at him, startled. 'Who said anything about magic?'

'No one,' Stefan replied. 'But I've seen enough of this world to know the difference between a conjuror and a mage. You got behind my defences, twice. You wear the cloak of spells. Which college?' he demanded.

'The Grey Guardians,' Natalia said, a note of defiant pride in her voice. 'Apprentice of Magic, first class.'

'I can believe that,' Stefan replied, thinking of her ability to materialise as if from thin air.

'Well,' he continued, 'you were good enough to get yourself in here. Perhaps between us we can still get you out'

'Meaning?' Her grip on the crossbow loosened slightly.

'Meaning that I'm prepared to stay – hold them back for as long as I can. Long enough, maybe, to give you a chance of escape.'

'What about me?' von Diehl interjected. 'You leave me to die?'

Stefan flicked a gaze at von Diehl then back to Natalia. 'I stay and fight,' he said. 'He goes with you.'

Natalia Zucharov eyed Stefan warily. 'This is just tricky.'

Stefan shook his head. 'I don't play tricks either,' he said. 'But I also have a debt of a kind to discharge, and a life that depends upon it.'

Natalia hesitated, uncertain. Somewhere in the depths of the darkened Temple, the sound of splintering metal and wood as the heart of the building surrendered to some unseen force.

'What about your debt to von Diehl?' Stefan said. 'If you're truly sorry for what you did, you've a chance to save his life now – and yours with it.'

Natalia looked from Stefan to von Diehl, and bit upon her lip. 'If I do this, then it is for him,' she said. 'But understand that my debt isn't cancelled – only suspended.'

'That's understood,' Stefan agreed.

Natalia lowered the crossbow.

Stefan turned to von Diehl. 'Can you walk now?'

'I don't think walking later will be an option,' he observed. He reached out an arm towards Natalia. 'I suggest you spend more time in future honing your aim with a crossbow,' he told her. 'If there is a future, of course.'

Stefan wrote hurriedly upon a paper. 'This house is owned by a trusted friend,' he told Natalia. 'He has been away from the city but, gods willing, he returns to Altdorf this night. Take the old man there and explain what has happened. I'll come as soon as I can. If I can.'

Natalia read the slip, then placed the folded paper inside her tunic. 'We'll meet again,' she promised Stefan.

The muffled sounds were much louder now, and all around them, like something eating its way through the very fabric of the temple.

'Just go,' Stefan urged. 'We don't have any time left.' He cast a final look at von Diehl. 'I pray to the gods your testimony is worth all this,' he said.

Von Diehl raised an eyebrow and shrugged. Stefan looked away, his patience exhausted, and turned to check the passageway behind them. When he looked back a moment later, Natalia Zucharov – and von Diehl – had disappeared.



NOW STEFAN WAS quite alone. He knew the situation would not endure for long. The groaning from the belly of the earth itself grew in intensity until, suddenly, the floor of the temple where Stefan stood burst apart, and a fissure split the ground from one end to other. A banshee wail broke through the shattered stones, and a stench of putrefaction thickened the air of the temple.

Stefan turned in a slow circle as the floor crumbled, disappearing beneath his feet. He wondered, briefly, whether Natalia and von Diehl had had any chance of making good their escape. Wondered whether he himself would be granted sight of another dawn, or whether this memory of erupting hell would be his last upon this earth.

Shadowy figures were crawling from out of the tunnels below the temple. Creatures that belonged to the dead earth. Twisted arms of rank, corrupted flesh forced their way through the rubble of cracked stone and splintered wood, reaching out blindly to entwine any living being that might come within their grasp. Stefan worked his sword with a fury, harvesting the stinking limbs in a storm of flashing steel. But for every mutant he despatched back to hell, two more emerged to join battle. Soon he was surrounded on all sides by foes spirited from his worst nightmares; grey wraiths moulded from the clay of dead human flesh.

Stefan was forced back under an attack led by a creature wielding a curved and rusting cutlass. Its bloodless face had only scorched black sockets where eyes had once been, yet the mutant seemed able to anticipate Stefan's every movement. The scarred blade split the air a hair's breadth from his face. Stefan side-stepped the blow, then watched as his own sword cut through the creature's neck, severing the head clean from between the shoulder blades. The creature staggered, but did not fall. Blows rained down upon Stefan from all sides. He ducked low to avoid a dagger thrust; as he did so, he felt a hard blow against the side of his head.

Stefan's legs buckled beneath him, and darkness fell across his eyes.



THE BRIGHTNESS flooding back into his vision was very much of this world, and the chamber it lit looked confusingly familiar. Without understanding why or how, Stefan understood nonetheless that he was still alive.

He was slumped in chair set in the middle of a brightly lit room, vaguely aware of figures moving around him, watching him, waiting for something. As consciousness

returned, one of the figures approached and bent towards him.

Stefan's head ached as though it had been pounded into the ground. Much of his body was covered with cuts and bruises, yet he knew that, by some miracle, he had survived the onslaught intact. A face in front of him swam in and out of focus. A voice, one that he had been hearing only as a distant drone inside his head, now became audible. And familiar.

'Where is he?' The question was being repeated, softly but persistently. The voice possessed the cold reason of the inquisitor. The face settled into a recognisable shape. Stefan looked up at Provost Kessler with quiet astonishment.

'Where is who?' he replied at last, confused.

'Von Diehl. He wasn't in the temple. I need to know where he has been taken.'

Stefan blinked. The light was still too strong. He lifted a hand to shade his eyes. Kessler brushed it away, impatient. 'Where is he?'

'He's gone—' Stefan struggled for the words and the memory but then stopped, abruptly. With his returning senses came the realisation, cold and stark. Why he was here. Why he was still alive. And why Kessler now wanted von Diehl found. A sick sensation crept into his stomach.

Kessler read the look in Stefan's eyes. 'Yes,' he said. 'Circumstances have changed a little.'

Stefan could taste the iron tang of his own blood in his mouth. He spat on the flagstones at Kessler's feet.

'What did they promise you?' he asked the provost. 'What did it cost the von Diehl's and their friends to buy you?'

'Everything has its price,' Kessler told him, coldly. 'Now you'll discover the price of your obduracy. One final time: where is he?'

Stefan met Kessler's impassive gaze with loathing in his heart.

'Go to hell.'

Kessler crouched down before him so that they were eye to eye. 'It's you that's going to hell, my friend,' he said, softly. 'If you want me to torture you first, that's entirely up to you.'

Somewhere behind Stefan, the door opened. He heard footsteps entering the chamber. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a figure in uniform, talking with Kessler. The news the messenger brought was clearly to the provost's liking.

'Good! Very good,' he pronounced, clapping his hands.

Kessler grasped Stefan by the jaw and twisted his face to meet his own. 'We have von Diehl,' he said, his eyes glittering. 'Found wandering barely a stone's throw from these walls. Weak. Lost. Confused. He came to my men like a lamb.' He laughed, short and humourless. 'Unto the slaughter.'

Kessler signalled to a guard. 'And now we complete our business,' he said, all warmth gone from his voice. 'Bring the other one up here.'

In the moments that followed Stefan tried to come to terms with what was now lost. What had happened to Natalia he had no way of knowing, but what he did know was that she had failed in her pledge to him. Perhaps she had been killed in the escape, or perhaps, he reflected bitterly, this was her way of repaying him for her brother's death.

A stooped and hooded figure was dragged inside by the guards. Rheinhard Kessler embraced von Diehl as he might his own kin.

'My dear Heinrich,' he purred. 'You can't imagine how glad I am to see you safely returned to us. I'm sorry our reunion will be somewhat brief.' He gestured towards the guards. 'Give our new arrival somewhere to sit. Gods forfend that he should die on us... just yet.'

The provost turned towards Stefan. 'I underestimated you,' he murmured. 'Or should that be overestimated? Either way, your zeal very nearly cost us dear.' He drummed his fingers against the polished oak of the desk. 'But no matter. In a short time now Heinrich von Diehl will be reunited with his family.' He turned and smiled at the figure of von Diehl. 'I think you can be sure of a warm reception.'

Kessler paused and looked at Stefan for a moment. 'Of course, there's you to consider, young Kumansky. I could have you killed now,' he said. 'But then again, how delighted my new masters might be to have the hero of Erengard delivered to them with their dear kinsman!'

Kessler sat back, relishing the scenario. 'Enough for now,' he said at last. 'Take them back to the cells.'

Stefan intervened as the guards moved to seize von Diehl.

'Leave him,' he told them. 'The old man can walk well enough with me.'

Stefan extended an arm and helped the stooped figure to his feet.

'Can you walk?' he asked. The answer was muffled, the voice strangely unfamiliar. Stefan had to bend low to try to hear the words.

'Ready,' von Diehl seemed to be muttering, or perhaps even 'Get ready.' Baffled, Stefan peered down at the face beneath the heavy cowl, and saw something that astonished him.

Von Diehl's face was altering; lines and contours moving before Stefan's eyes. The pinched, sepulchral features were still vaguely recognisable in the shadows, but his face – indeed his whole body – was starting to change. Flesh smoothed and tightened under Stefan's gaze as the years seemed to melt away.

The face was no longer von Diehl's. It was that of a woman.

Stefan gasped involuntarily.

'Get ready,' von Diehl – or whoever von Diehl had become – repeated.

There was perhaps a single, frozen moment when Stefan found himself staring at the face of Natalia Zucharov. The moment broke as she smashed an arm into the body of the nearest guard, knocking the sword from his grip.

Stefan's response was fractionally slower, but fast enough to seize the initiative from the second of Kessler's men. Stefan's blow caught him in the guts and the guard doubled over. He hit him again, two-fisted, under the chin and knocked him senseless against the marbled wall of the chamber.

Natalia was still struggling with her opponent. The man was nearly twice her size and within moments he had recaptured his sword. Stefan seized the weapon from the prostate body at his feet.

'Over here!' he shouted. As the man swung round, Stefan brought the blade down in a swirling arc. The steel sliced clean through the base of the guard's neck, killing him instantaneously.

Stefan could hear a voice – Kessler's – shouting to raise the alarm.

He slammed the door to the chamber before the provost could reach it and fastened the bolts across.

'That's not going to hold them for long,' Natalia commented. She sank down on one knee and lay the palm of her right hand flat against her face.

'What now?' asked Stefan.

'It's sorcery, remember?' she said, caustically. 'I'm setting a warding spell to try and hold the door a little longer.'

Kessler stood on the far side of the chamber, his route of escape cut off. But if he was feeling any fear at the sudden reversal of fortune then he wasn't showing it.

'Admirable bravado,' he said at last. 'Admirable deception, too,' he added, turning towards Natalia. 'But pointless. More men than you can ever overcome will soon be outside that door. Witchcraft won't hold it forever.'

'No,' Stefan replied. 'Just for long enough.' He raised his captured sword and closed on Kessler.

'Ah,' Kessler murmured. He fixed Stefan with an icy smile. Stefan noted the slender rapier hanging at the provost's waist.

'This is the point where you expect me to beg for mercy, like the grovelling coward I surely am.' He drew the rapier briskly from its inlaid silver scabbard. For the first time, Stefan noted the flicker of darkness glittering like black stone in Kessler's eyes.

'I was despatching souls to the mercy of Morr when you were suckling at your mother's breast. I fear neither death, nor you, Stefan Kumansky.'

Natalia grabbed at Stefan's arm. 'We haven't time for this,' she shouted. 'We have to get out.'

The door to the chamber shuddered as something heavy struck against it from outside. 'Let's just go,' Natalia urged.

In the same instant, Kessler attacked. Stefan had barely time to react as the rapier flashed towards him, then slammed to a halt in mid-air, as though the blade had struck a transparent wall. Kessler screamed a curse, and Stefan struck back. The heavy sweep of his own sword passed through the invisible barrier unimpeded until it cut deep into Kessler's body.

A sharp gasp escaped Kessler's lips and the rapier fell from his grip. He gazed down in disbelief at the blade driven into his flesh,

the steel already running red. He clasped at the bloodied sword with one hand as Stefan withdrew his blade. Kessler raised his eyes to meet Stefan's and his lips formed around a silent word. Then the light dimmed in his eyes, and life fled the Provost of Altdorf as he fell upon the ground.

Stefan exchanged glances with Natalia. 'We won't push the magic any further,' he said. 'Let's just get out. Now.'

Stefan looked down out of the chamber's single window. A narrow ledge ran the length of the exterior wall of the building several feet below.

'How are you with heights?' he asked Natalia.

'Not good,' she replied. 'Not at all.'

'Well,' Stefan said. 'Now's the time to confront your demons. We won't want to be here once Kessler's men get through.' He swung his legs across the frame of the window and dropped down upon the ledge.

He looked up stretched out his hand towards Natalia. 'Come on,' he urged. Natalia hesitated momentarily then slithered down from window. Stefan reached out and grasped her arm as she struggled to secure her footing.

'Steady,' he said. 'It's a long way down.'

The night air bit cold and deep as a cruel wind blew off the hills into the heart of Altdorf. Stefan looked down briefly at the glow-worm lights of the city flickering all too far below them. His left hand searched anxiously for a grip on the stone wall behind him. His right was slick with sweat where it held tight upon Natalia's own.

'Don't look down,' he shouted, to himself as much as to Natalia. 'Keep talking. And keep moving.'

'What do you expect me to talk about?' Natalia's voice sounded small and fragile.

Stefan edged slowly to his left in the darkness. Away from the window, the ledge felt barely more than the width of a single brick. He had to concentrate.

'For a start,' he said 'Tell me how you carried yourself off as von Diehl? Come on,' he urged her. 'We're going to die if we don't make this.'

'That spell was easy,' she said, moving at last. 'Easier than this anyway.' Natalia was spacing her words with deep breaths. 'Simple credulity spell. Kessler had men out looking for von Diehl. I gave them what

they wanted. Sometimes you see just what you need to see. Wait!'

She pulled up short again, tugging her hand free and fumbling to grip hold of the wall at her back. 'I can't do this,' she said

'You have to.' Stefan prised her hand away from the wall and pulled her on towards him.

'The other spell was even better,' he continued. 'The one that stopped Kessler.'

'The mirrored gate,' Natalia replied. 'That was just instinct. Couldn't let Kessler rob me of my vow by killing you first.'

'Thanks,' Stefan said. 'It's nice to know someone cares that much.'

'Lucky, though. That spell sometimes falls the other way. Would have blocked your blow and let Kessler—'

'Kill me?' Stefan said. 'Thanks again.' He felt Natalia's body stiffen against the wall.

'Gods watch over us,' she said. 'It is a long way down.'

'Keep moving!' he commanded. 'And keep talking. What's happened to the real von Diehl?'

'I took him to the address you gave me. Your friend wasn't there.'

'Not there?' Stefan's heart sank. 'Then what—'

Natalia inched further along the ledge. 'I got von Diehl into the house anyway,' she said. 'That wasn't difficult.'

'And then?' Stefan asked, warily.

'Then? I left him there and came looking for you.'

Stefan toppled forwards and had to fight to regain balance. 'You left von Diehl there, alone?'

'No one may pass in or out of the house,' Natalia assured him. 'I cast—'

'Yes, I know,' said Stefan. 'A warding spell. I remember the last one.' He took a grip on Natalia's arm. 'Keep moving,' he commanded. 'We have to get back there before something else goes wrong.'

They had come to the end of the ledge running along the outer wall of the palace. Ten feet away, across the street, across the black gulf of night, the roofs of adjacent buildings that would lead them to freedom.

Somewhere behind them the sound of a door being broken open. Voices at the window.

Stefan and Natalia stood on the ledge, their faces only inches apart. He could feel the shaking through her hand where she clung on to him.

'I don't suppose you know any levitation spells that would get us across to that rooftop?' Stefan asked.

'Definitely not.'

'Then we have to jump.'

Natalia's face was an unblinking mask. 'I can't,' she said.

'Well, I'm going,' Stefan told her. 'And if you're serious about honouring your debt, then you'll just have to follow.'

Stefan let go Natalia's hands, and extended one foot to the edge of the ledge, bracing himself against the wall behind. He weighed the height and distance of the far building. He would get no second chance. If he got it right, the slates layering the rooftop would be giving him a painful landing. If he got it wrong, it would be the last decision he ever made.

'See you in this world – or the next!'

Natalia's answer was lost in the wind as Stefan propelled himself into empty space between the buildings. A second later he hit the rooftop, gouging a line of flesh from his thigh as jagged tiles broke his fall.

He looked back towards Natalia, frozen like a statue against the marbled wall of the palace.

'Come on!' he held out his hands. 'It's just a few feet.'

Natalia edged forward, mimicking the position Stefan had taken for the jump. Her expression was blank, as though she was walking through a dream. She was going to jump. But she doesn't believe she can make it, Stefan realised.

An instant before she leapt from the ledge, Natalia hesitated. The hesitation cost her dearly. Her jump was short.

Stefan threw out his arms, grabbing out blindly. His fingers raked empty air then locked with Natalia's own. She screamed out, her dead weight spinning in space between the rooftops.

Stefan's arm was at full stretch. He fumbled in the darkness, trying to secure a grip upon Natalia's wrist. Her fingernails bit deep into the palm of his hand as she struggled, with equal desperation, to hold on.

Yet when Stefan looked down at Natalia's upturned face, he saw no fear in her eyes. It was as though she were ready now for whatever fate had destined for her. She looked up at him, questioning.

'Are you going to let me fall?'

Stefan gazed down at the figure swaying beneath him in the darkness. He felt a tearing pain, growing by the moment as the dead-weight of Natalia dragged ever heavier at the socket of his arm. His mind flew back to their first meeting in the temple. If the cards of chance had fallen differently she would have killed him then.

His strength was fading; he was growing so tired. He knew that he had done his best. It would be so easy to let go now. The path of darkness whispered to him, sweet and beguiling.

Stefan screwed his eyes shut and shook the shadows from out of his head.

'I've never yet murdered an innocent man!' he shouted down at her. 'Do you believe me?'

Natalia stared up at him. Her mouth opened but no words came to her lips. The ache in Stefan's arm was growing unbearable. In a moment his grip would fail.

He dug deep for the last ounce of strength, and hauled Natalia up, up into his arms and on to the safety of the roof. He turned her face towards his own.

'I didn't murder your brother,' he told her. 'Do you believe me?'

For a moment the ice in Natalia's eyes thawed. She brushed something away from her cheek. 'I don't know,' she said. 'It's what I want to believe. I think.'



ELEVEN BELLS HAD chimed before Stefan and Natalia finally reached the house on Knarbenstrasse. Natalia peered intently at the light playing upon the peeling plaster walls, and checked her step.

'The warding spell has decayed,' she told Stefan. 'Either that, or someone has managed to breach it. I'm sorry,' she said. 'Someone may have managed to get inside.'

'Or perhaps,' Stefan mused, quietly, 'someone may have managed to get out.' He crouched down behind the thicket of ivy wound around the iron gateway fronting the house. 'There's no time for subterfuge now,' he said. 'Wait for me. Give me five minutes in there. What you do after that is up to you. You've done what you can for the old man at any rate.'

Natalia nodded, thoughtfully. 'All right,' she said.

Stefan drew his sword and crept towards the door of the house. A gentle push against the wood panels told him the door was probably fastened from the inside. Stefan allowed himself the luxury of a single deep breath then rammed his body hard against the door.

As he half ran, half fell into the interior of the house Stefan glimpsed another figure running towards him, sword in hand. Stefan sprung back upon his feet and drew his sword across his body to fend off the first strike.

The other man eyed him up and down, his brows knotting in a frown.

'That's the cost of a fine oak door I'm adding to your bill, you swine!'

Stefan cast his sword down and took the man in an embrace that owed as much to sheer relief as it did to joy.

'Who are you calling a swine?' he demanded, laughing. 'Cantering around Nuln when I needed you most!'

Bruno Hausmann pulled back from his friend's embrace, his eyes widening in disbelief. 'I've only been gone four days!' he said. 'In Sigmar's name, Stefan, don't tell me you've managed to sniff out more trouble in just four days?'

'More trouble than I'd care to,' Stefan replied. Bruno filled two mugs with wine and thrust one at Stefan. 'Well,' he said, 'perhaps the story better begin with my house guest.'

Stefan stopped the wine short of his lips. 'Is he...?'

Bruno turned the key in the lock of an adjacent door and threw it open. Von Diehl sat despondently upon a low stool, his head cupped deep in his hands.

'I arrived home to find our friend here intent on leaving,' Bruno explained. 'Since I hadn't invited him in the first place, and since he bears a strong resemblance to some

very unwholesome folk, I decided the best thing to do was keep him under lock and key until I'd sorted out what was happening.'

'Earnest thanks for that,' said Stefan, sipping his wine.

Bruno crossed the room to a bureau and picked up a sheet of paper lying upon it.

'Then I find this,' he said. 'It explains who our friend is, and how he got here, but I'm still none the wiser over who wrote it.'

'That would be me.'

Natalia stood framed in the doorway of the house. 'Perhaps the hero of Erengard would like to make some introductions.'

Events that Stefan had temporarily set aside now came back to be addressed.

'Yes,' he said, quietly. 'Yes of course.' He put down his wine. 'This is Bruno, Bruno Haussmann,' he said. 'Another hero of Erengard, in fact.' He paused, and turned towards Natalia. 'Bruno was also your brother's comrade. He was there when he met his end.'

A look of astonishment broke slowly over Bruno's face. 'Then this is—'

'Natalia, Apprentice of Magic – first class,' Stefan explained. 'And sister to Alexei Zucharov. Actually,' he added, matter-of-factly, 'Natalia's here because she holds me responsible for Alexei's death. She's vowed to kill me for it.'

A loyal reflex had Bruno reaching for his sword. He stepped in smartly to place himself between Stefan and the girl.

'You'll have to kill me first,' he told her. 'Your brother was no mortal man at the end. He'd become a mutant, a—'

Natalia held up her hands to stem the flow. 'That's not the only reason I'm here,' she insisted. 'Anyway, I know what you're going to say.' She wiped a hand across her face where tears had begun to well. 'It's just I don't think I can bear to hear it, not yet.'

Stefan nodded to Bruno. 'Later, maybe.'

Bruno shrugged his shoulders, 'What about him, then?' he asked, indicating von Diehl.

'Heinrich von Diehl has been summoned to confess before a full meeting of the High Council,' Stefan said. 'He has a long story to tell, and I need to make sure he gives full account.'

'I think Heinrich had other ideas,' Bruno observed. Von Diehl met their gaze for the first time, stirring himself out of his sulking torpor and rising to his feet.

'There was nothing in this for me any longer,' he pronounced, his voice leaden, without emotion. 'Nothing but death, at any rate. Kessler betrayed us both.'

Bruno reacted sharply at the name. 'There's a man I wouldn't like to cross,' he observed.

'We had to do rather more than cross him,' Natalia said. 'Kessler's dead. And by your comrade's sword.'

Stefan waved away Bruno's protest. 'It's true. Kessler has betrayed all of us, and snared Michael in business that's cost him his liberty, into the bargain.'

He took his friend to one side. 'There's corruption in the heart of Altdorf that may run even to the very top of the Council. Von Diehl has names, dates and evidence that will flush the poison out, but we must be sure to take his story only to someone we can absolutely trust.'

Bruno considered for a moment. 'Someone like Cornelius Moorhausen, perhaps?'

'First Secretary to the Elector of Nuln?'

Bruno nodded. 'If the High Council is to meet, then he will surely already be in Altdorf. Cornelius is an old friend of my fathers. More than that – he lost a son at Erengard. I'm sure he'd grant us audience.' Bruno paused, frowning. 'But whether he can sway the Council—'

'He won't need to,' Stefan assured him. 'The knowledge von Diehl carries with him will be our guarantee of that, and of Michael's liberfy too.'

'Very well then,' Bruno affirmed. 'We'll go to his lodgings at first light.'

Von Diehl had been standing on the edge of their whispered conversation, waiting quietly. 'Kessler was offering me riches sweet enough to loosen the tightest of tongues,' he observed, bitterly. 'What do you offer me, Kumansky?'

Stefan looked von Diehl up and down. Plainly exhausted, and still in much pain from his wound, the old man seemed now thoroughly drained of the menace his name carried. He looked weary; a man struggling simply to survive.

'I offer you ordeal, confession, and, just possibly life imprisonment,' he said. 'If you fled now, the Council would find you even if your own family didn't. Sometimes, my friend, the truth is the only weapon we have.'

'The old man looks all in,' Bruno observed. 'I'll give him some food at least.'

Stefan nodded. 'Then let him rest whilst he may. I doubt that the day will bring him much peace.'

He watched Bruno lead von Diehl away, then looked round and found Natalia at his side.

'So,' she said. 'It seems that all may yet fall well at the final reckoning. For your family, at least.' She held his eye for a few moments then looked away, embarrassed or distracted by something.

'And your account with Kessler is level,' she continued. 'I'm glad of that. Truly, I am.'

Stefan hesitated. Natalia still wouldn't meet his eye. 'But what then of *our* account?' he asked.

Natalia looked at him now. Her eyes were rimmed with red. 'You saved my life,' she said. 'You could easily have let me fall.'

'That's true enough,' Stefan replied. 'Perhaps our debts are levelled, too.'

'So easy.' Natalia laughed, short and uncomfortable. 'But debts of blood aren't like sums in a book,' she said. 'They can't just be balanced off.'

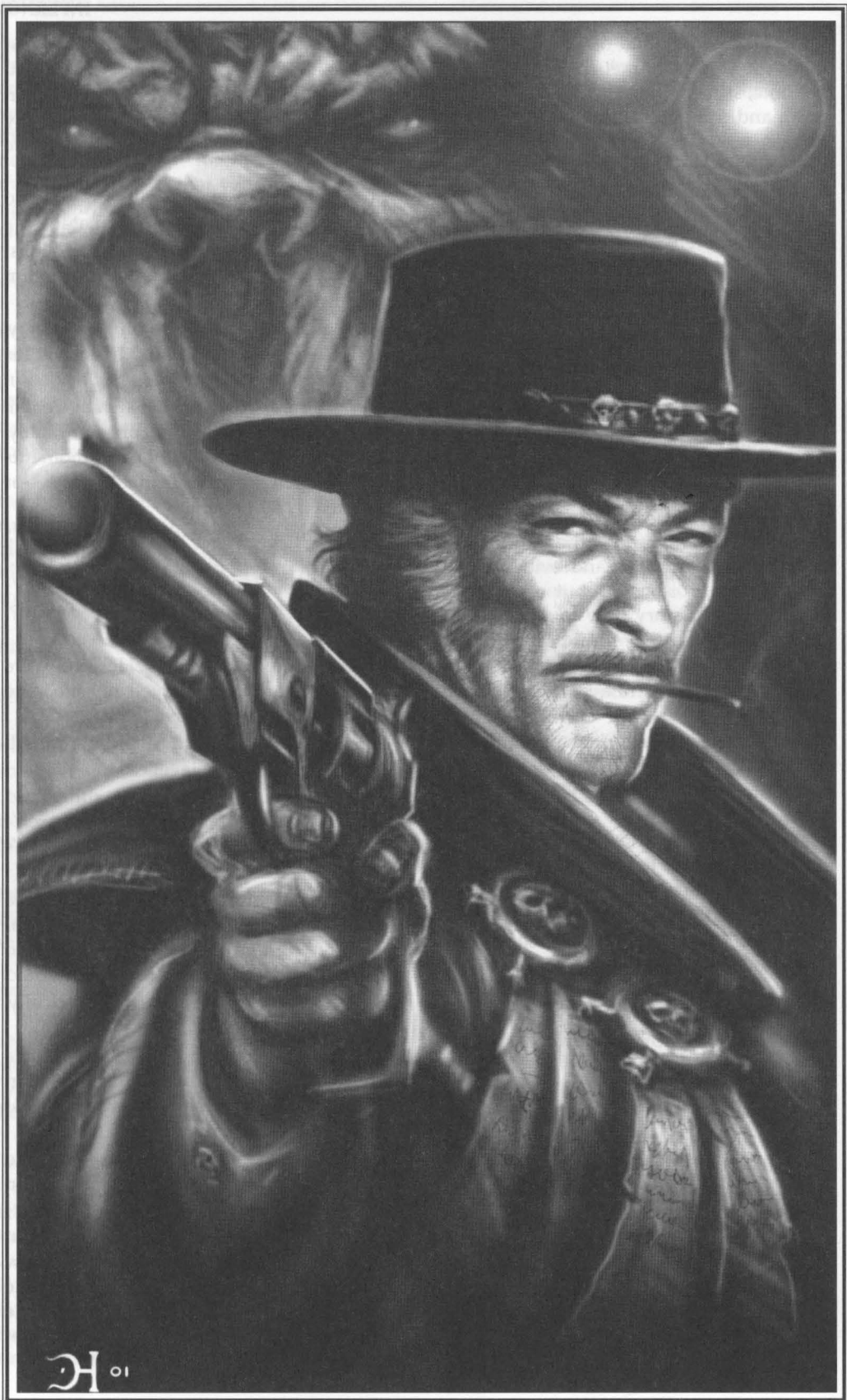
Somewhere in the heart of the city a distant clock struck a quarter short of twelve. 'I will find a way – some way – to honour my debt,' she said. 'But not this day.'

Stefan looked at her, quizzically. 'Meaning?' he asked.

'I don't know what it means,' Natalia admitted. 'But you were right back there in the temple. Sometimes things aren't all that they seem.'

'Sometimes,' Stefan agreed. He reached to fill a third mug from the flask standing on the table behind him.

He turned to offer Natalia the wine, but she was gone. All that stood before him now was an empty doorway that led towards the street, towards the city, towards the thousand possibilities of a life as yet uncharted. C



H^{oi}

BOYZ IN THE HIVE

A NATHAN CREED ADVENTURE • BY JONATHAN GREEN

IT WAS COLD and desolate out here in the millennia old post-industrial wasteland, beyond the furthest human settlement. Concrete and steel ruins of buildings stood all around but not a single one was wholly intact. The ground here was of a cracked and grey soil, almost nutrient-free and deposited hundreds of centuries ago by ancient industrial processes now only half-understood by the factory workers and their tech-adept overseers. The distant thrum of the factories drifted down from above, just audible over the fan-winds that swept through this part of the Underhive, bringing with them the acrid stink of petrochemical pollution. All that lived out here were ripperjacks, the ever-pernicious wireweed and the occasional sump-spawned monstrosity. But then that was why they called such places the Badzones.

A man stood at the foot of a slag heap looking at the broken and discarded cargo container resting at an angle on the summit. Half of the dome of the man's head was made up of a shiny metal plate, connected to the skin covering the rest of his skull by tarnished rivets. Below the level of the half-balding, half-metallic pate long, straggly white hair hung down to the man's shoulders. He was dressed in something that might once have resembled a long, white lab coat, although now the garment was covered with the greasy smears of machine oil and the rust-brown stains of dried blood. The coat was buttoned tightly to the neck to help keep out the chill, biting wind. He was a scientist, a surgeon and, like all who lived as long as he had in the urban dereliction of the Underhive, a survivor.

It was hard to tell how old he was but judging by facial appearance alone he had the semblance of a man in his forties. Bionic implants had a habit of preserving the organic parts of a body, granting the owner some measure of longevity, as long as they didn't die of unnatural causes first.

But in the lawless Badzones of the Underhive, death by gunshot wounds or an early demise at the hands of a cannibal scavvy gang seemed almost more natural than heart failure and old age.

A gust of wind blew the scientist's lank hair into his face. It was at moments like these that the man felt reassured. It reminded him that whatever else seemed to happen in the shadows of the Underhive ancient systems continued to perform their regular cycles, recycling channelling air and water – the most basic essentials for life – around Hive Primus. It was these same cycles which added credence to the scientist's belief that Hive Primus was in fact a living thing and the people and other degenerate species that dwelt within it merely parasites.

Working glowglobes were few and far between in the derelict dome and those that blazed overhead cast long shadows over some stretches of the wasteland while leaving other areas in a permanent twilight. The scientist looked up towards the cracked dome roof fifty metres above his head. The concave surface was covered in a riot of piping and cable bundles, and was riddled with holes. Some were mesh-covered vents, others were all that was left of lift shafts. All of them dark recesses within which all manner of things lurked, from rabid rats and vicious face-eaters to secrets not even the Inquisition knew about.

Struts of an elevator gantry still descended ten metres from a square hole, larger than the rest, directly above him. That was where the container must have been dropped from. Its crumpled base and the fractures running up its sides attested to that. But such cargo containers were built to last: they could survive a turbulent journey through the Warp in the bellies of space-faring freighters. The container must have originally been almost four metres tall. The once white plasteel casing had

ruptured, exposing tubing and wires that spilled from the rent like the intestines of some cyborganic beast.

'Wait here, One-Eight-Seven,' the man addressed the servitor standing motionless next to him. The slave machine said nothing; its infra-sensor implant and human right eye both unblinking. As much metal as living flesh, it towered over the tall scientist. In place of a left arm it had a huge mechanical construct of wire bundles and hydraulic pistons that ended in a vice-like steel claw. Other cables were connected along the length of its spine, via vertebra connector ports, culminating at the base of its hairless skull. A scratched and acid-scoured brass plaque hung around its neck, engraved with now barely legible runes.

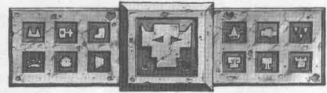
Pulling a battered motion detector from a pocket in his lab coat, the scientist turned a knurled brass knob next to a small display panel and, after a second or two, a grid of fine green lines appeared on the screen. Holding the detector in front of him, the man scanned the slag heap. Nothing. Cautiously the scientist began to climb the slate grey hillock. Nearing the top, and the container, the man suddenly froze as the motion detector began to emit a rapid bleeping and a white dot of light winked on and off on the display screen. Something was moving in his direction.

With his eyes fixed on the cable-spilling rent, and his heart pounding, he began to back away slowly down the slope. As he watched, a creature – no longer than a man's arm – emerged from the broken cargo container on a myriad of legs. The scientist chuckled to himself as the hive-born vermin, looking like a cross between an elongated crab and a long-tailed chameleon, scuttled away over the top of the slag heap and down into the shadows on the other side. The sensor in his hand became silent again and quietened as the white dot faded.

Reaching the container, he peered cautiously inside. From his long years of experience the scientist could see quite clearly that the interior of the vessel had been modified to carry live cargo in a state of suspended animation. It was just as he

had suspected; the saloon-bar rumours had been right for once. His source had done well and would be rewarded accordingly, the next time he needed patching up after a gang-squabble over disputed territory. There was only one problem: the cryo-suspension chamber was empty. As a result of the fall from Uphive and the container breaking open the cargo's cryo-sleep had been broken. The impact of the fall from Uphive had broken the container open. The creature was gone.

Turning around, the scientist descended the slag heap towards the still unmoving servitor. 'Well, One-Eight-Seven, it would appear that our guest has gone,' he said, addressing his cyborg slave once more. 'I think we're going to need some help with this one.'



CHAOS REIGNED at the fungus farm of White Spore Stoop. Figures ran through the gloom; women and children were screaming in fear and confusion as the men-folk armed themselves with whatever lay to hand. Picking up a trenching tool, Silas Pendrell sprinted back to the fungus fields, the beam of his cap-mounted lamp lurching violently in all directions, catching terrified faces momentarily in its halogen light. Hurdling a wooden fence, he dashed over the raised soil ridges, crushing the soft flesh of sump mushrooms underfoot as he ran, sending clouds of spores into the air around him. With his scarf in place over his mouth and nose to protect him Silas ignored the spore-bursts as he raced through the choking clouds panting heavily, his heart straining inside his chest. Then he saw it.

The beast had appeared as if from nowhere. One minute the farmers had been tending to their crop of bulbous, thick-stemmed, white mushrooms, the next the monster emerged from the gloom, roaring its rage, and knocked Gil Yarrow flat with one swipe of its massive fist. Gil hadn't got up again. Before the others knew what was going on the beast

had lifted Tem Slemor into the air yelling only to bring him down again and slammed him down across its knee. Tem's body, his back broken, crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

Silas looked at the hulking creature and knew what fear was. The beast held Gil's adolescent son, Porl, in one huge hand and the poor boy's right arm in the other. Porl was desperately scrabbling at the rough skin of the creature's arm. With a careless tug the arm came free at the shoulder as if it were nothing more than a rotten toadstool stalk. Porl's screaming was quickly silenced as the monster tossed the arm aside and used its now free hand to crush the boy's skull.

For a moment there was a pause in the fighting as the men recovered their breath and hardened their resolve. The beast stood unmoved, turning its head slowly to take in the cowering men around it. Veins bulged on its thick neck while it flexed its huge fingers, ready for the next challenge.

Silas looked up at the vicious creature. It seemed well over two metres tall. Humanoid in form, its body was a robust mass of muscle but its head spoke more of man's supposed primitive ancestry. Its forehead receded while its lower jaw jutted out beyond its upper lip, its mouth full of blunt yellow tusks. In all his years scraping a living as fungus farmer in Hive Bottom he had never heard of anything like this violent beast before. In some ways it was almost like the reptilian scabies that made allegiances with the devolved scavvies but its skin, although rough, wasn't scaly, it didn't have a tail and it wore a pair of crude britches.

The farmer suddenly realised that the monster was looking directly at him. The thing bellowed. In response Silas gave a shout and hurled himself at the beast, the trenching tool raised above his head. Before he could bring it down on the creature, he felt his improvised weapon clasped in an inflexible grip. As the monster lifted Silas into the air by the blade of the trenching tool, the desperate farmer saw muscles bulge in its arm. With a roar, the beast hurled Silas bodily across

the field. He hit a fence post, which splintered under the impact, and slumped stunned among the broken mushrooms. He watched as the beast pounded towards the cluster of farm buildings. He tried to pick himself up but his back screamed out in pain, forcing Silas to slump to the ground again.

A shot rang out. At last, someone had found a gun. From where he lay, Silas could see into the heart of the homestead. Old Obadiah stood at the centre of the compound his ancient blunderbuss in his shaking hands. In his heightened emotional state Silas suddenly found himself laughing – this would beat even one of the old man's far-fetched fireside tales. Before Obadiah could let off a second shot, the monster was on top of him. The old man pulled the trigger as the beast swept him aside with a backhanded swipe, the shrapnel peppering the side of the holestead's fuel tank. Clear liquid spurted from a number of holes, spraying the floor of the compound with fuel.

The beast bellowed again. Its guttural roar was answered by the growl of a combustion engine. The wooden door of a barn burst apart as the tractor smashed through it, driven by Silas's brother, Jed. Hydraulics whirring, the prongs on the fork-lift at the front of the tractor rose up, coming into line with the beast's broad barrel chest. Jed put his foot to the floor and drove the machine straight at the monster. Snarling, the creature grabbed the nearest weapon to hand, tearing a plank from the compound fence, and held it ready like a club.

When the tractor was mere metres from it, the beast leapt aside with surprising agility and in the same motion brought the plank around, breaking it across the back of Jed's head. Silas could only watch in horror as his brother slumped unconscious across the tractor's controls, turning the vehicle so that it was heading at speed, directly at the ruptured fuel tank. There was nothing anyone could do as the tractor ploughed into it. Metal scraped against metal, sending sparks raining down on the spreading pool of petrol. The flammable liquid ignited,

flames leaping up around the tractor. The fuel tank erupted in a ball of orange fire and greasy black smoke as the rest of its contents ignited. Seconds later the tractor's fuel tank exploded, blowing the vehicle – and Silas's brother – apart.

Engine housings and sheared axles crashed down around the monster, which was making a curious barking noise. It was only as the beast turned its tusked head in his direction once more, and he saw the upturned corners of its malformed mouth that Silas realised that the monster was laughing.

The flames were spreading, the farm buildings closest to the fuel tank were already on fire, bathing the compound in unaccustomed illumination. The beast stood silhouetted against the backdrop of the burning holestead, the flicker of firelight playing over its green skin.



WITH A HISS of compressed gas, the polished metal doors slid open and the bounty hunter entered the laboratory. Nathan Creed took in his new spacious surroundings at a glance: the operating table, the gleaming trolley of tools next to it, the chrome shelves packed with coolant containers and the polished metal floor. The lab could almost be described as pristine. Here, in the unhygienic Underhive, it was positively immaculate. A converted cargo transport container, the lab's uniform rectangularity was broken only by the shelving units that filled half its space, like a suggestion of a labyrinth. What was on show here represented a fair few Guilder tokens. A doorway at the end of the lab led to a smaller unit containing the occupant's living quarters. Creed's eye was drawn to the motionless steel and flesh statue standing in the far corner of the laboratory.

'Creed,' the scientist sitting at a dissection unit addressed the bounty hunter, 'come in.' The tall, thin man put down the electronic implement he had been using to probe the robotic arm

pinioned on the worktop in front of him.

The scientist seemed out of place in the immaculate lab: his coat was filth-stained and his personal appearance obviously wasn't of the same importance to him as the state of his working environment.

'Doc.' The bounty hunter adjusted his hat so that its wide brim shielded his eyes from the harsh fluorescent light. The same light reflected off the scientist's gleaming chromium head plate.

Doc Haze grimaced. 'Do you mind not smoking that in here?'

'Sure thing.' Creed took the cheroot out of his mouth and dropped it on the polished floor, crushing it firmly under his booted heel. 'I see you've got yourself a new friend,' the bounty hunter said in his familiar downhive drawl.

'Ah yes. One-Eight-Seven. Well after that incident at Fester Hole I missed that fool Veral, degenerate half-breed though he might have been.'

Doc Haze stood up and walked over to the cyborg. He tapped the slave machine's massive mechanical arm with a spanner, suddenly produced from a pocket, making the metal joints ring.

'Ex-Mechanicus. Picked him up at auction last month. Proving to be quite useful around the place, aren't you, One-Eight-Seven?' The servitor said nothing. 'So how's the arm?'

'Good,' Creed replied flexing and turning the muscles and sinews of his healed right arm, remembering how it had been broken during his encounter with Gator Kaynn's pet albino sumpgator. 'But enough small talk. What can I do for you?'

'I've got a job for you.'

'I'd kinda guessed as much.' Unconsciously Creed took another cheroot from a crumpled packet and took out a lighter. The scientist coughed and shook his head sternly. Suddenly remembering himself Creed put the smoke and lighter back in a deep pocket in his long leather coat. 'What sort of a job is it?'

'Manhunt. Well, more of an alien hunt really,' Doc Haze explained.

'What do you mean?'

'Here let me show you.' The doctor picked up a data-slate from his worktop and, having flicked a switch on its side, handed it to the bounty hunter. After a few moments an image appeared on the screen, its resolution becoming crisper as the hand-held data-slate's circuits warmed up. A pair of axes had been displayed on the viewing panel, the y-axis calibrated in metres. Standing on the x-axis were two ugly humanoid creatures, or rather two different elevations of one ugly creature. According to the measurements on the grid, the creature was two and a half metres tall. Its head was angular with a narrow forehead and wider jaw, from which protruded long tusks, and sat on a short neck between broad shoulders. Pointed ears jutted out bat-like and it had beady little eyes. If the scale was correct, the creature's head was over half a metre long. The rest of the creature's body was made up of muscle and more muscle, covered with rough green skin. It made a Goliath heavy look practically anorexic.

Creed looked up from the image on the data-slate at the Doc, his expression forming the query. 'Hardly little green men, is it?'

'It's an *ork*,' Doc Haze said, by way of explanation. 'It's an alien life form, not native to Necromunda, but found throughout the galaxy. In fact, some scholars believe orks are more widespread than mankind. It is also believed that orks are a genetically engineered warrior race. Fighting's what they were bred for, fighting's what they love and fighting's what they do best! And there's one loose in the Underhive.'

'What's it doing here?'

'Rumour has it was headed for the Spire, would you believe? For Lord Helmawr's private zoo. Story is it was brought in from off world by the Guildler Antrobus Vetch but the Arbites got wind of it. Some even say that Helmawr was being investigated by the Inquisition. Anyway, our mighty planetary governor wanted it got rid of fast and Vetch had to dump it. Where better than down here in

the Underhive, out in the Badzones? He probably thought he could come back and pick it up later when the heat was off.'

'But trouble is it got free and now you want me to catch it?'

'That's why you're here. From what I've read, they really are fascinating creatures. It's no wonder Helmawr wanted one for his menagerie. They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, you know. Their DNA is bonded at a molecular level with a fungus, giving them the ability to reproduce themselves asexually. When an ork dies it releases spores, which if they find the right conditions to grow in will eventually produce a womb-like cocoon under the ground in which a new ork will grow. Certain scientists have speculated that orks even shed these spores on a more regular basis, just as humans shed skin cells constantly. The possibilities are quite incredible when you think about it.'

'Okay, enough with the xeno-biology. Just tell me how to find and how to kill it.'

'Oh, I don't want you to kill it,' Doc Haze said, taken aback. 'Whatever gave you that idea? I can't let a scientific opportunity like this pass me by.'

'Excuse me? Did I miss something, Doc?'

'I'm sorry, did I not say? Orks are renowned for their regenerative abilities. They can survive wounds that would prove fatal to a human. It's got something to do with their algal/fungal DNA base. It means that if an ork loses a limb it can be grafted back on after lying on a battlefield for hours with little risk of tissue damage. Even more amazingly, it allows for the crudest bionic implants to be grafted directly onto bodies without the danger of tissue rejection or necrosis around the implant connecting point.'

'Obviously any research I could carry out on a live specimen would improve my medical skills and surgical procedures no end. If I could introduce such orkoid powers into your average hiver or be able to replace missing limbs for a patient so that he could be up and fighting again in a matter of hours rather than days or weeks, think how it would revolutionise gang warfare! Gangs would be queuing

up to pay those extra credits for my unique surgical skills.'

'Money,' Creed sighed. There was no hint of a judgmental comment in his words however; after all, he himself was a bounty hunter. Credits and trader tokens were what kept Hive Primus living and breathing and they gave a purpose to the lives of the pitiful millions trapped within its plascrete and ceramite walls, and never more so than in the Underhive.

'Let me get this straight, you want me to bring this thing in alive?'

'That's right. Now it's not going to be easy, I know, but that's why I'm hiring you. You'll take the job, of course.'

'You know me, Doc. If the money's right...'

'Four hundred credits if you bring it in alive.'

Creed took a moment to ponder the deal. 'Done,' he said at last.

'You'll need this,' the doctor said, opening a drawer and taking out a large handgun with a barrel that tapered to a thick, syringe-like needle at the tip.

'Looks like a needle pistol,' the experienced Underhive gunslinger commented.

'It's a tranq gun. Got enough adroxinil to drop a synth-ox on 'slaught. Twenty doses to be exact. But you'll have to get up close to use it.'

The doctor handed the tranquilliser gun to Creed. The bounty hunter weighed it in his hand and turned it, inspecting every detail on the barrel and every mark on the stock.

'By my calculations four or five doses should be enough to knock out an ork,' the scientist went on, 'and I don't expect you to literally bring it in. These things can weigh up to two hundred kilograms each. When you've taken it down call me on this.' Doc Haze tossed a battered vox-set communicator over to the bounty hunter who caught it deftly in one callused hand.

'It shouldn't be hard to find. Start out at Ripperjack Reach, you'll find a discarded cargo container there, and then follow the trail of destruction. Like I said, orks love a fight. Any questions?'

'Just one,' Creed said, grinning like a ripperjack. 'Where exactly did you get your qualification, Doc?'

'Same place you got yours,' the doctor said, sitting down again. This was the eccentric scientist's way of saying that the conversation was over, the deal done.

Secreting the tranq gun inside the folds of his long, leather coat, Creed strode towards the door. He could already feel his pulse rate starting to rise: the hunt was on.



THE DOC HAD been right: it hadn't been hard to track the ork. Deep-set alien footprints in the grey soil led Creed from the slag heap into the depths of the Badzones and along a trail of mindless destruction. But it was nothing compared to what he found when he reached the fungus farm.

Before he even reached White Spore Stoop the smell of the burning fungus fields was carried to his nostrils by the fan-breezes. Entering the dome through a wide access tunnel, he saw at once the still smouldering barns and other farm buildings. The survivors had managed to douse most of the blaze but burning debris had been carried into the fields by the thermals and, by the looks of things, an explosion, setting fire to the crop still in the soil. This year's harvest was ruined.

Creed entered the compound. Women and children were doing their best to put out the last of the fires but it seemed that not a single building had been left untouched. Some women were weeping while others tended to their men folk and their injuries. The burnt out wreckage of a tractor protruded from the remains of a fuel storage tank. The bounty hunter could see a number of bodies lying to one side of the compound, barely covered by a bloodstained tarpaulin.

'What happened here?' Creed asked a man, sitting with his back to a fence, an arm in a sling and his head wrapped in a bandage.

The farmer looked up at Creed and seemed to take a moment to focus on him. 'It came out of nowhere,' the man muttered. 'Have you two come to help us?'

Probably suffering from concussion, Creed decided. 'What did this?' he asked.

'Don't rightly know,' a woman piped up. 'Big and green it was, but it wasn't a scaly.'

'Let me guess: it was about this tall,' Creed drawled, raising his hand to an arm's length above his head, 'and it had tusks.'

'That's right. How did you know?'

Creed didn't answer but looked out into the gloom beyond the smouldering compound, in the opposite direction from which he had come. Putting a cheroot between his lips he picked up half-burnt plank and lit the cigar with the glowing embers at its tip.

How could one creature create such carnage, he wondered?

'Was it armed?'

'No, it didn't need to be.'

There were six dead here and at least another ten injured, not to mention a farm that had been razed to the ground. Instinctively Creed put his hands on his holstered stub guns. 'What are we dealing with here, girls?' he whispered under his breath.

'Stranger, help us,' the woman suddenly burst out pleading, tears streaking her soot-grimed cheeks.

'Sorry, ma'am, I'm just passing through,' he said. 'Which way did it go?'

The woman sank to her knees sobbing. Slowly she raised her arm, pointing north.

'Much obliged,' the bounty hunter said and went on his way.



THE STACCATO drumming of gunfire rattled around the ruined factory sheds, echoing off corroded walls of corrugated iron. The ork's lips curled in what might have been a smile. It sniffed the air, picking up the scent of cordite,

gunpowder and energised plasma. The alien creature grunted to itself and stepped through a hole in a wall that took it closer to the heart of the abandoned factory complex and the battle raging within. Having crossed a polluted watercourse and finding itself at the edge of another ruined dome, it had been attracted to the carcasses of the construction sheds by the sound of weapons being discharged and the shouts of frenzied gangers. At last it could look forward to a decent fight.

The incident with the ferryman had done nothing to relieve any of its aggression, although it had provided the ork with a harpoon gun, usually used to hunt giant raft spiders. It hefted the sturdily made weapon in its great, green hands, eager to try it out. It had already acquired two other weapons on its rampage through the human settlements. There was an axe from the farm tucked into the belt of its britches and a well-worn heavy stubber, wrested from the hands of large mohican-haired man, was slung over its back. The ork had also taken the man's studded harness – it liked the crudely-fashioned iron skull that was central to its design – and wore one of his hands on a chain around its neck, the urge to collect trophies another consequence of its genetic pre-programming. The ammo belts for the huge gun were slung across its chest.

The ork advanced with surprising stealth between the derelict crane gantries and dead power turbines. Rounding a still-standing bulkhead it saw the two groups of humans engaged in the shoot-out. To one side a gang of men in blue tunics and black leather facemasks were holed up behind the columns and ranged over the high walkways close to the factory wall. Their opponents, all of them wild-haired females, only partially arrayed in pieces of tiger-striped or leopard-spotted cloth, sheltered behind conveyor belts and lifting machinery that had ground to a halt long ago. Both sides were doing their best to blow their opponents to kingdom come with an assortment of guns.

What they were fighting over didn't matter to the ork. All that mattered was that they were fighting. Adrenal glands kicked in, flooding the alien's system with stimulant chemicals and filling it with the urge to join the battle. The strong muscle of its heart pounding, unable to contain itself anymore, the ork let out a bellowing roar of battlelust and charged into the fray.

The harpoon flew from the spider-hunting gun and found its mark in the stomach of a hooded man high on an overhanging platform. As the man toppled from the platform towards the factory floor below the ork threw the discharged harpoon gun at another man and swung the heavy stubber round, pulling on the trigger handle as it did so. Before the falling ganger even hit the ground, three of his companions were gunned down in a hail of bullets as the stubber roared into life. Swinging the flame-scorched muzzle of the heavy weapon round the ork took out several of the women, as round after round shredded the tracks of the conveyor belts.

There was a moment of confused calm as the two gangs realised that the great green monster wasn't working for their enemies and stopped firing on each other. Almost as one the men and women brought their guns to bear on the creature and began firing again but by now the ork was moving. As it stomped through the wreckage of the construction shed it found its mark again and again with the huge gun that it held as if it was nothing more than a las-pistol, spent cartridges showering down around its feet.

A thickset woman rose from her hiding place, in front of the creature, and hefted a bulky heavy bolter onto her shoulder. As the ork brought its own massive gun to bear another woman flew at it from out of the shadows and fired off a volley of darts from a crossbow-like device attached to her arm. The stubber roared again and the thickset woman fell forward. In her death-spasm she fired the heavy bolter sending a chugging stream of explosive shells into the ground in front of the ork. The alien was unconcerned, ignoring the darts sticking out of its bulging bicep: it was

already concentrating on its next target. In one fluid movement it pulled the axe from its belt and hurled it at the woman with the crossbow. She was thrown off her feet as the axe cleaved into her skull.

The women were running now, screaming to each other as they fled from the ruined factory. But not so the masked men. From their elevated positions on the wrought-iron walkways the gangers caught the creature in their sights and fired. Calling down damnation upon the alien blasphemy as they let fly with their weapons, it soon became clear that their faith was surer than their aim. A ball of super-heated, blazing green fire streaked past the creature's-head. Then a stray bullet clipped the ork's side and the hulking brute replied with its own bellowing war cry: 'Waaaaaaggghhh!'

This time the stubber found a heavy-set man, wearing an iron faceplate, standing braced against an iron pillar and holding a large, but unfortunately for him a recharging, plasma weapon. Stub gunfire tore through his ribcage and into the energising chamber of the plasma gun. The weapon exploded like a miniature supernova, vaporising the face-plated man and melting through the metal column behind him. The ork raised one massive hand to protect its eyes from the searing blast and so only heard the walkways, strewn with masked gangers, come crashing to the floor of the factory as the main support pillar collapsed, having been melted through at its base. When the alien looked again all it could see amidst a cloud of dust and ash was a mass of twisted metal debris and mangled, skewered bodies.

One remaining ganger got unsteadily to his feet, looking around him in bewilderment as if he didn't know where he was. The ork took pleasure in unhurriedly fitting a new belt feed into the huge gun. It began to laugh, in its barking way, as it levelled the reloaded stubber.



AS THE LAST Cawdor fell, Creed realised that his moment had come. He had watched almost the whole battle from his vantage as he clambered around on the girders up near the factory roof. The ork had advanced right under his position as it had blown the ganger away. The bounty hunter wasn't going to get a better opportunity than this. Gripping the tranquilliser gun firmly in his right hand, he left go of the rail he was holding with his left and dropped directly onto the ork.

Creed hit the alien's broad back and for a split second was stunned as the air was knocked out of him and also because the ork stayed exactly where it was. He had half expected the beast to be floored by the impact of him dropping onto it from a gantry six metres up. This thing's tougher than a scaly he thought.

Recovering himself, Creed flung his left arm around the ork's thick neck and held on tight as he rammed the tip of the tranq gun into a bulging vein. *Four or five doses, the Doc said, he went over in his mind.* Well better make it six, just to be sure. Pulling the trigger that operated the injection needle Creed pumped adroxinil into the monster. One, two, three –

A huge hand grabbed the bounty hunter's coat and, unable to do anything to prevent it, Creed felt himself being yanked from the ork's back. One moment he was delivering the tranq gun's payload of knockout narcotic and the next he was flying through the air, upside down, only to come crashing down on top of the body of a dead Escher. He knew instinctively that his moment was gone and that unless he got moving pretty fast he wasn't going to get another one!

Stubber rounds kicking up debris from the fallen walkways behind him Creed ran for cover. The three doses he had already given the ork didn't even seem to be slowing it down! As he ran, he pocketed the tranquilliser gun and unholstered his more familiar stub guns. They were an impressive pair of hand-cannons, his girls, and they had got him through a fair few scrapes. Ducking behind a sturdy bulkhead the bounty hunter counted to ten under his breath to calm himself and then came out guns blazing.

Nathan Creed was renowned from Toxic Sump to Fester Hole for being a crackshot with his two, point six-six calibre, solid-shot stub guns and plenty of once wanted men, dead or otherwise, had the gunshot wounds to prove it.

With his first two bullets he ripped open the ork's shoulder. The third blew a hole clean through its thigh while the fourth removed one of its fingers. The alien brute still hadn't had time to turn and face this new onslaught as Creed prepared to take a headshot. Then he remembered the conditions of the job; he didn't want to miss out on the bounty just because he'd bungled a perfectly simple contract.

'The Doc wants you alive,' he drawled as he adjusted his aim, 'so I guess it's your lucky day.'

The fifth shot ricocheted off the stubber's chamber housing but the sixth found its mark at the point where the belt magazine entered the gun's breach. There was the painful squeal of metal buckling and the stubber ceased firing. The weapon had jammed, its internal workings mangled as a result of Creed's pinpoint bullet.

The ork grunted in surprise and, suddenly forgetting the bounty hunter, began thumping the stubber with a huge fist in the vain hope of unjamming the ruined weapon. Hearing the clatter of chains the enraged alien looked up in time to see the massive iron crane hook hurtling directly towards it.

The heavy hook slammed into the side of the ork's head, tearing away half its face. The monster turned, leering at Creed. He could see its exposed cheekbone and molars, while the torn flap of flesh hung uselessly from its jaw. Then, slow as a toppling pylon, the ork crashed to the ground.

'You sure are one ugly alien freak,' Creed said, looking down at the stunned ork. 'Lucky for you the Doc ordered plenty of beauty sleep.' The bounty hunter knelt down next to the huge body and emptied the tranq gun's entire contents into the alien's bloodstream. The thing stank. 'Sleep well,' he said with a grin.

The ork grunted and half opened its eyes. Creed leapt back.

'What the skav are you?' he shouted at the beast, continuing to back away. 'What the hell does it take to put you down?'

Drunkenly the ork got to its feet. It swayed unsteadily for a moment, adjusting its footing as if it was trying to get its balance on a sump raft, and seemed to be having trouble focusing. Then its gaze found Creed and an ominous growl rose from its throat. Raising the useless heavy stubber in its power glove-sized hands by the barrel, as if it were a club of some kind, the ork staggered towards Creed, ready to bludgeon the bounty hunter to death. It hadn't gone more than five paces when its trunk-like legs gave way beneath it and it came crashing down again on the hard floor of the factory. As its chin struck an old gas pipe there was a loud crack and a discoloured, tusk-shaped lump of ivory rolled against the tip of Creed's boot.

Taking the battered comm-link from inside his coat, Creed turned a knurled brass dial and spoke into the vox unit. 'Doc? If you want your ork you'd better come and get it.' The message delivered he flicked the communicator off again and dropped it into a pocket.

Looking down again at the prone body of the ork, Creed gave the beast one last vicious kick in the side of its head. 'Sleep that one off, you big green bastard,' he spat.



WITH WHEEZING, pistoning steps, the servitor marched back into the lab, servos protesting under the weight of the ork that it carried in its arms as if it was a baby. If it had been a strain for the slave machine to carry the two hundred kilogram mass of the the alien over ten kilometres it didn't show it. 'One-Eight-Seven,' the doctor said, 'secure the patient.'

The servitor carried the comatose alien over to the solid stainless steel operating table at the back of the lab which, Creed noticed, had been modified by the addition of a number of thick kevlar straps. Whatever was tied down on that table wouldn't be getting free in a hurry, even if it were able to move. One-Eight-Seven laid the ork down roughly on the gurney and began securing its legs.

'Now, Doc, the matter of my fee,' Creed said, getting back to business.

'Ah, of course,' Doc Haze replied, as if his failure to mention it already had been due to a lapse of memory rather than an intentional oversight. 'Two hundred and fifty, wasn't it?'

The bounty hunter smiled coldly. 'Now come on, Doc. Don't try that with me, not after the Fester Hole incident. Four hundred credits was the deal and I even brought back your tranq gun.'

'But you damaged it,' the doctor retorted, pointing at the ork. 'Look, half its face is missing. I hope you haven't hurt it too badly.'

'What did you expect? It fought like a daemon!' Creed hands dropped to his sides. 'Now do you want to settle up or would you rather discuss the matter with my two, wide calibre associates?'

'Four hundred then,' Doc Haze said with none of his usual joviality. 'If you'll bear with me for a minute, I've got it here somewhere.' The scientist walked over to a gleaming white unit and started rummaging unnecessarily around in a drawer.

Some people will do anything to avoid paying up, Creed considered.

As he waited for the doctor to go through his charade of looking for the credits Creed looked around the lab once more. There seemed to be a large number of drums containing chemicals used in cryogenic freezing stored in the lab at present.

Doc Haze must be planning to use a fair bit in his new improved surgical techniques and this stuff isn't easy to get hold of, Creed thought. The Doc's obviously been stocking up for a while. I

wonder how long he's known about the deal with the ork? And I wonder who dropped Antrobus Vetch in it with the Arbites?

A roar accompanied by the screeching of tearing metal made both men spin round. The ork was sitting up on the operating table holding a mechanical limb in one hand. The metal claw attached to it flexed spasmodically. Next to the gurney One-Eight-Seven stood stock still, confusion written on its half-human features as its onboard cogitator engine tried to process what had happened. Almost carelessly, the ork swung the arm at the servitor, smashing it across the side of the head and knocking it to the floor. The red lens of its bionic eye shattered. The cyborg twitched for a moment, coruscating bolts of electricity playing over its entire body, and then it was still.

Aghast the two men stared at the ork. The alien looked back at them with drug-glazed eyes and then shook its head as if trying to shake off its stupor. It started to pull at the straps buckled tightly around its legs.

'By Helmawr's rump!' Creed gasped in amazement.

'Are you sure you gave it enough adroxinil?' Doc Haze asked, despite the desperate nature of the situation.

'I pumped enough tranq into that beast to make a scaly sleep for a week!' the bounty hunter exclaimed.

'Well it's not sleeping now.'

'I can see that, Doc!' Creed snapped back.

'So do something!'

'Don't worry, I intend to.'

Fast as quicksilver Creed had pulled both stub guns from their holsters and was pulling back the cocking hammers as the ork swung its legs off the operating table. The bounty hunter shot off a couple of rounds as he ran across the lab at the brute, feeling the familiar recoil in his wrists, and chunks of flesh were blasted out of the alien's torso.

'Creed! Don't kill it!' Doc Haze screamed over the blasting of the stub guns.

Creed faltered in his charge, his last shot going wide and sending the table of scalpels, clamps and saws flying, the medical instruments rattling over the polished metal floor. 'For skav's sake!' Creed muttered half under his breath. His mind racing he tried to think of an alternative way to put the ork out of action.

He didn't hesitate for long but it was enough for the enraged, and rapidly recovering, ork. The servitor's still twitching robot arm connected with his midriff and the bounty hunter was swept aside by the blow. Creed slid across the lab and lay where he came to rest, amid the scattered surgical tools, gasping for air and wincing in pain as he did so; he was sure the blow had broken a few ribs.

The bounty hunter now out of range of the ork's anger the monster turned on the closer Doc Haze who had backed into a corner. The creature stomped towards the scientist

Doc Haze looked up into the face of his killer: the beady yellow eyes; the flaring nostrils; the exposed bone of its jaw; the tusked split of its misshapen mouth dripping with saliva. The stink of the thing washed over him. Panicking he pushed himself even further back into the corner, clutching behind him in desperation for anything that might help him. A sweaty palm closed on a cylindrical plastic handle and as he pulled it round in front of him he felt the electrical flex attached to it uncoil. In his hand, he held a bone-saw. The business end of the gruesome-looking surgical implement was a long serrated blade. The doctor flicked a switch on its side and with a high-pitched whine, like a phosphorfly trapped in a specimen jar, the toothed edge of the blade began to whiz around the knife like a tiny chainsword.

The ork brought a hand down towards the doctor's head, as if it was intent on seeing what was inside his chrome dome! In response, Doc Haze brought the buzzing bone-saw up and with both hands gripping the handle forced it into the alien's arm below the elbow. Before

the ork knew what was going on the blade had sliced cleanly through flesh and bone alike and its right hand fell onto the floor. Hot crimson blood pumped from the wound over the doctor's already filthy lab coat.

Seemingly unconcerned, the ork glanced down at its own hand lying at its feet. Then pain and anger took effect. The alien lunged at the scientist, clutching at the man as if it still had both hands, giving Doc Haze the chance to dodge free of its grasp. The crazed scientist ran to Creed's side and helped the bounty hunter who was getting painfully to his feet. The ork started to advance towards them.

'You still want it alive, Doc?' Creed asked, grimacing as pain flared in his chest.

'No, you fool!' Doc Haze screamed at him. 'Kill it! Kill it now!'

'Now you're starting to make some sense at last,' Creed said and managed a grin. 'Come on girls, it's time to dance.'

Both index fingers compressed triggers and the stub guns belched their leaden cargo in the ork's direction. Round after round slammed into the thick muscle of the monster's arms, legs and body but still the greenskin came at them. It just seemed to soak up the bullets, which now appeared unlikely to even slow it down let alone kill the beast!

'Are you too stupid to even know when you're dead?' Creed bellowed at the alien.

Taking careful aim with both guns, he fired two rounds at the monster's head. The ork's face exploded in a scarlet eruption. Smoke and blood obscuring his vision, Creed wiped his eyes clear with a sleeve of his coat. When he looked back at the alien, he could hardly believe what he saw.

The creature continued to advance, fixing him with one blazing yellow eye – but then it only had one eye left as half its skull was missing. What Creed took to be the creature's brain was visible through a mess of bone and skin. It was as if a milliasaur had taken a bite out of the ork's head. The monster tried to open its

mouth but its jaw was broken and, besides, most of its tongue was missing too. Despite bullet holes riddling its torso and half its head gone the creature charged.

The ork half ran and half fell at Creed. The fist powering towards his stomach, however, was definitely not carried by momentum alone. Creed twisted his spine around in an attempt to avoid the blow and felt his broken ribs send knives of white-hot pain stabbing through his body. The punch landed, lifting him bodily off the ground, and breaking yet more ribs, sending new daggers of agony lancing through his torso. For the moment in which he still knew what was going on he thought he was going to be sick. Then he smashed into the regimented lines of shelves, rocking the units so that the chemical tubs stacked on them came tumbling down around him. He could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth.

Through a haze of concussion, Creed was just able to make out the blurred shape of the ork stumbling towards him. A white plastic drum landed in his lap, knocking what little air was left in his lungs out of him, and making him look at it. Around the side of the container in black stencilled runes were the words, 'Warning! Liquid Nitrogen.'

The ork came a step closer the smashed glass of a phial crunching under its foot and demanding Creed's attention again. His vision obscured by grey patches in front of his eyes now it was the bounty hunter's turn to try to shake awareness back into his brain.

He could see more shelves behind the ork stacked high with drums stencilled with the same warning, 'Liquid Nitrogen'. The creature was getting closer by the second. If he didn't do something soon Creed doubted he would ever do anything again. Doing his best to ignore the concussion and focus on the imminent danger of sudden, violent death, Creed took aim and fired. On the third shot, he hit his target. The large coolant drum fractured and the ork was suddenly bathed in a shower of freezing liquid which steamed as it came into contact

with the air, a great white fog obscuring it from Creed's view.

Slowly the chemical mist cleared as the last of the liquid nitrogen evaporated into the surrounding atmosphere. Before the bounty hunter stood a glittering, yet hideous, statue. White frost covered the ork's quick-frozen ravaged body. Creed took aim one last time and fired. The dum dum bullet hit the frozen ork, high velocity converting into devastating force in an instant as the round impacted against the alien's brittle flesh. The shockwave from the impact rippled through the frozen form and the ork's body shattered, shards of icy green flesh tinkling down on the laboratory floor like a thousand splintered icicles. What was left of the creature's head rolled against Creed's leg, the only part of the creature that was still recognisably ork.

The bounty hunter slumped back against the tubular metal shelves and prepared to give himself up to unconsciousness. Closing his eyes against the harsh neon glow of the florescent lights, he listened to the fizzing and cracking of the pooling liquid nitrogen as it froze mere centimetres from his feet.

The crunch of footsteps breaking the thin film of ice on the floor made Creed unwillingly open his eyes again. Doc Haze stood over him, the now silent surgical tool gripped in his hand.

'So that'll be two hundred credits then,' the scientist said, smiling weakly.

'What?' said a dazed Creed in reply.

'Half bounty for delivering the ork dead rather than alive.'

'But when you brought the brute in it was still alive,' Creed explained, pain and exhaustion the only things keeping his growing anger in check.

'Then there's the damage done to the lab,' the doctor went on.

Ignoring him the bounty hunter took a cheroot from a crumpled packet and put it to his lips.

'And liquid nitrogen isn't easy to get hold of down here. You have to pay premium rate.'

Creed took the lighter from his pocket and flicked the burner aflame.

'So at the end of the day I calculate that you owe *me* one hundred credits. And do you mind not smoking in my lab?'

Creed lit the cheroot and took a long drag on the smouldering cigar. He exhaled loudly, blowing the smoke at the increasingly edgy scientist.

'Look, Doc,' he said, gesturing with a loaded stub gun, 'do you want to discuss this with my associates?'



THE FAN-WINDS were cold out here, at the edge of the Badzones. Pulling his long coat tighter about him thin frame the tall figure crouched down behind the battered carcass of the cryogenic cargo container and began his examination of the area. The distant light of irregularly positioned glowglobes reflected off the shiny metal plate that made up half the dome of the man's head. Below the half-chromium pate wisps of dirty, long white hair twisted in the breeze.

Not far away the repaired servitor stood waiting for its master to finish his work, scanning the doctor's work on the slag heap with a cracked red-glass eye. Its reattached mechanical limb twitched from time to time: the damage done to its circuits by the ork would have some lasting effects.

Doc Haze stood suddenly upright and gave a whoop of joy: 'I've found it! I knew it! I knew it would be here, One-Eight-Seven!'

Removing a glass specimen jar from a pocket of his lab coat the scientist bent down again. Carefully he lifted a piece of rubbish away from the corner of the crumpled container, revealing the curious, pointed green toadstools that were poking up through the grey-black soil underneath. Chuckling to himself, he began gently brushing spores from the gills of the fungi with a fine-haired brush into the jar. ❁

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

SCRIPT: NIK VINCENT • ART: PAUL DAVIDSON • LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON

'The Tale of the Musician'

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE OLD WORLD AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

...WHILE SOME JUST COME TO RELIEVE THE PATRONS OF A COIN OR TWO.

BY THE PELT! ANY CHANCE OF GETTIN' A DRINK AROUND 'ERE?

BEGGAR OFF! WE'RE SHUT!

ULRIC'S TEETH! WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE WOLF HAPPENED HERE?

I'LL TELL IT IF YOU'RE BUYIN'... THOUGH THE GOD'S ONLY KNOW IT'S NOT MY TALE TO TELL.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

"THE OLD ALE ROOM WAS FULL TO BRIMMIN' LAST EVE, BUT WELL-NATURED ENOUGH... SO THERE THEY WERE RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME--"

YOU HAVE A FINE ESTABLISHMENT HERE, SIR, PERHAPS YOU'D ALLOW US TO ENRICH IT FURTHER WITH A LITTLE MUSIC.

THANKING YOU, SIR, BUT I DON'T PAY FOR PLAYERS IN MY INN.

HE SPOKE ALMOST AS PRETTY AS SHE LOOKED.

SO HE PLAYED AND SHE SANG, AND YOU NEVER HEARD ANYTHING SO LOVELY, NOR SEEN ANYTHING SO SWEET AS THE WAY THAT GIRL SWAYED TO THE MUSIC.

THEN WE'LL GLADLY PLAY FOR NOUGHT AND IF ANYONE SHOULD THROW A COIN OR TWO IN MY HAT, I'LL CONSIDER THAT PAYMENT ENOUGH.



"BY RIGHTS VLAD, YON BIG FELLA AT THE BAR, SHOULD BE TELLING THIS. I CAN'T SAY I REMEMBER MUCH OF IT."





"SO ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL, OR SO YOU'D THINK, BUT IT DIDN'T END THERE."



THAT'S MY GOLD, YOU SCUM!

GIVE ME MY NECKLACE, WENCH!

"OF COURSE EVERYONE WANTED THEIR FAIR SHARE... MORE IF THEY COULD GET IT."



JUST WANTED A QUIET DRINK. THAT'S THE THANKS OL' VLAD GETS.



QUITE A PIT FIGHTER IN YOUR DAY, EH VLAD?

THE BEST!

THOSE CON-MERCHANTS DIDN'T RECKON ON OLD VLAD. GOT HIT ONCE TOO OFTEN IN THE PIT. BETWEEN YOU AND ME... HE'S DEAF AS A POST!

END

Ancestral Honour

by Gav Thorpe

THICK, BLUE-GREY pipe smoke drifted lazily around the low rafters of the tavern, stirred into swirls and eddies by the dwarfs sat at the long benches in the main room. Grimli, known as the Blacktooth to many, hauled another keg of Bugman's Firestarter onto the bar with grunt. It wasn't even noon and already the tavern's patrons had guzzled their way through four barrels of ale. The thirsty dwarf miners were now banging their tankards in unison as one of their number tried to recite as many different names of beer as he could remember. The record, Grimli knew, was held by Oransson Brakkur and stood at three hundred and seventy-eight all told. The tavern owner, Skorri Weritaz, had a standing wager that if someone named more beers than Oransson they would get a free tankard of each that they named. The miner was already beginning to falter at a hundred and sixty-three, and even Grimli could think of twenty others he had not mentioned yet.

'Stop daydreaming, lad, and serve,' Skorri muttered as he walked past carrying a platter of steaming roast meat almost as large as himself. He saw Dangar, one of the mine overseers, at the far end of the bar gazing around with an empty tankard hanging limply in his hand. Wiping his hands on his apron, Grimli hurried over.

'Mug of Old Reliable's, Dangar?' Grimli offered, plucking the tankard from the other dwarf's grasp.

'I'll wait for Skorri to serve me, if'n you don't mind,' grunted Dangar, snatching back his drinking mug with a fierce scowl. 'Oathbreakers spoil the head.'

Skorri appeared at that moment and shooed Grimli away with a waved rag, turning to Dangar and taking the proffered tankard. Grimli wandered back to the Firestarter keg and picked the tapping hammer from his pocket. Placing a tap three fingers' breadth above the lower hoop, he delivered a swift crack with the hammer and the tap drove neatly into the small barrel. Positioning the slops bucket under the keg, he poured off the first half-pint, to make sure there were no splinters and that the beer had started to settle.

As he wandered around the benches, picking up empty plates, discarded bones and wiping the tables with his cloth, Grimli sighed. Not a single dwarf met his eye, and many openly turned their back on him as he approached. Sighing again, he returned to the bar. A shrill steam whistle blew signalling a change of shift, and as the incumbent miners filed out, a new crowd entered, shouting for ale and food.

And so the afternoon passed, the miners openly shunning Grimli, Skorri bad tempered and Grimli miserable. Just as the last ten years had been. Nothing had changed in all that time. No matter how diligently he worked, how polite and respectful he was, Grimli had been born a Skrundigor, and the stigma of the clan

stayed with him. Here, in Karaz-a-Karak, home of the High King himself, Grimli was lucky he was even allowed to stay. He could have been cast out, doomed to wander in foreign lands until he died.

Well, Grimli thought to himself, as he washed the dishes in the kitchen at the back of the tavern, perhaps that would be better than the half-life he was leading now. Even Skorri, who was half mad, from when a cave-in dropped a tunnel roof on his head, could barely say three words to him, and Grimli considered him the closest thing he had to a friend. In truth, Skorri put up with having the Blacktooth in his bar because no other dwarf would lower themselves to work for the mad old bartender. No one else would listen to his constant muttering day after day, week after week, year after year. No one except Grimli, who had no other choice. He wasn't allowed in the mines because it would bring bad luck, he'd never been taken as an apprentice and so knew nothing of smithying, stonemasonry or carpentry. And as for anything to do with the treasuries and armouries, well no one would let an oathbreaker by birth within three tunnels of those areas. And so, bottle washer and tankard cleaner he was, and bottle washer and tankard cleaner he would stay for the rest of his life, perhaps only two hundred years more if he was lucky.

That thought started a chain of others in Grimli's mind. Dishonoured and desperate for release, from this living prison of disdain and hatred, the dwarf's thoughts turned to the Slayer shrine just two levels above his head. He was neither an experienced nor naturally talented fighter. Perhaps if he joined the Slayers, if he swore to seek out an honourable death against the toughest foe he could find, then he would find peace. If not, then his less than ample skills at battle would see him dead within the year, he was sure of it. Grimli had seen a few Slayers; some of them came to Karaz-a-Karak on their journeys and drank in Skorri's tavern. He liked them because they would talk to him, as they knew nothing about his family's past. They would never talk about their own dishonour, of course, and Grimli didn't want to hear it; he was still a dwarf

after all and such things were for oneself not open conversation even with friends and family. But they had talked about the places outside of Karaz-a-Karak, of deadly battles, strange beasts and mighty foes. As a life, it would be better than picking up scraps for a few meagre copper coins.

He was decided. When his shift finished that evening, he would go up to the shrine of Grimnir and swear the Slayer oath.



AS HE STEPPED through the large stone archway into the shrine, Grimli steeled himself. For the rest of the day he had questioned his decision, looking at it from every possible angle, seeing if there was some other solution than this desperate measure. But no other answer had come to him, and here he was, reciting the words of the Slayer oath in his mind. He took a deep breath and stared steadily at the massive gold-embossed face of Grimnir, the Ancestor-God of battle. In the stylised form of the shrine's decoration, his beard was long and full, his eyes steely and menacing, his demeanour proud and stern.

I am a dwarf, Grimli recited to himself in his head, my honour is my life and without it, I am nothing. He took another deep breath. I shall become a Slayer, I shall seek redemption in the eyes of my ancestors. The lines came clearly to Grimli's keen mind.

'I shall become as death to my enemies until I face he that takes my life and my shame,' a gravely voice continued next to him. Turning with a start, Grimli was face-to-face with a Slayer. He had heard no one enter, but perhaps he had been so intent on the oath he had not noticed. He was sure that no one else had been here when he came in.

'How do you know what I'm doing?' asked Grimli suspiciously. 'I might have come here for other reasons.'

'You are Grimli Blacktooth Skrundigor,' the Slayer boomed in his harsh voice. 'You and all your family have been accused of cowardice and cursed by the High King for

seventeen generations. You are a serving lad in a tavern. Why else would you come to Grimness' shrine other than to forsake your previous life and become as I?'

'How do you know so much about me, Slayer?' Grimli eyed the stranger with caution. He looked vaguely familiar, but even if Grimli had once known him, his transformation into a Slayer made him unrecognisable now. The Slayer was just a little taller than he was; though he seemed much more for his hair was spiked with orange-dyed lime and stood another foot higher than Grimli. His beard was long and lustrous, similarly dyed and woven with bronze and gold beads and bands, which sparkled in the lantern light of the shrine. Upon his face were numerous swirling tattoos – runes and patterns of Grugni and Valaya, to ward away evil. In his hand, the Slayer carried a great axe, fully as tall as the Slayer himself. Its head gleamed with a bluish light and even Grimli could recognise rune work when he saw it. The double-headed blade was etched with signs of cutting and cleaving, and Grimli had no doubt that many a troll, orc or skaven had felt its indelicate bite.

'Call me Dammaz,' the Slayer told Grimli, extending a hand in friendship with a grin. Grimli noticed with a quiver of fear that the Slayer's teeth were filed to points, and somewhat reddened. He shuddered when he realised they were bloodstained.

Dammaz, he thought. One of the oldest dwarf words, it meant 'grudge' or 'grievance'. Not such a strange name for a Slayer.

He took the offered hand gingerly and felt his fingers in a fierce grip which almost crushed his hand. Dammaz's forearms and biceps bulged with corded muscles and veins as they shook hands, and it was then Grimli noticed just how broad the other dwarf was. His shoulders were like piles of boulders, honed with many long years of swinging that massive axe. His chest was similarly bulged; the harsh white of many scars cut across the deep tan of the Slayer's bare flesh.

'Do you want me to accompany you after I've sworn the oath?' guessed Grimli, wondering why this mighty warrior was taking such an interest in him.

'No, lad,' Dammaz replied, releasing his bone-splintering grip. 'I want you to come with me to Karak Azgal, and see what I have to show you. If, after that, you want to return here and be a Slayer, then you can do so.'

'Why Karak Azgal?' Grimli's suspicions were still roused.

'You of anyone should know that,' Dammaz told him sternly.

'Because that is... was where...' Grimli started, but he found he couldn't say the words. He couldn't talk about it, not here, not with this dwarf who he had just met. He could barely let the words enter his own head let alone speak them. It was too much to ask, and part of the reason he wanted to become a Slayer.

'Yes, that is why,' nodded Dammaz with a sad smile. 'Easy, lad, you don't have to tell me anything. Just answer yes or no. Will you come with me to Karak Azgal and see what I have to show you?'

Grimli looked into the hard eyes of the Slayer and saw nothing there but tiny reflections of himself.

'I will come,' he said, and for some reason his spirits lifted.



IT WASN'T EXACTLY a fond farewell when Grimli told Skorri that he was leaving. The old dwarf looked him up and down and then took his arm and led him into the small room next to the kitchen which served as the tavern owner's bed chamber, store room and office. He pulled a battered chest from under the bed and opened the lid on creaking hinges. Delving inside, he pulled out a hammer which he laid reverentially on the bed, followed by a glistening coat of chainmail. He then unhooked the shield that hung above the fireplace and added it to the pile.

'Take 'em,' he said gruffly, pointing to the armour and hammer. 'Did me good, killed plenty grobi and such with them, I did. Figure you need 'em more 'n me now, and you do the right thing now. It's good. Maybe you come back, maybe you don't,

but you won't come back the same, I reckon.'

Grimli opened his mouth to thank Snorri, but the old dwarf had turned and stomped from the room, muttering to himself again. Grimli stood there for a moment, staring absently out of the door at Snorri's receding back, before turning to the bed. He took off his apron and hung it neatly over the chair by the fire. Lifting the mail coat, he slipped it over his head and shoulders where it settled neatly. It was lighter than he had imagined, and fitted him almost perfectly. The shield had a long strap and he hooked it over one shoulder, settling it across his back.

Finally, he took up the hammer. The haft was bound in worn leather, moulded over the years into a grip that his short fingers could hold comfortably. The weight was good, the balance slightly towards the head but not ungainly. Hefting it in his hand a couple of times, Grimli smiled to himself. Putting the hammer through his belt, he strode out into the busy tavern room. The conversation died immediately and a still calm settled. Everyone was looking at him.

'Goin' somewhere, are ye?' asked a miner from over by the bar. 'Off to fight, perhaps?'

'Perhaps,' agreed Grimli. 'I'm going to Karak Azgal, to find my honour.'

With that he walked slowly, confidently across the room. A few of the dwarfs actually met his gaze, a couple nodded in understanding. As he was about to cross the threshold he heard Dangar call out from behind him.

'When you find it lad, I'll be the first to buy you a drink.'

With a lightness in his step he had never felt before, Grimli walked out of the tavern.



FOR MANY WEEKS the pair travelled south, using the long underway beneath the World's Edge Mountains when possible, climbing to the surface where collapses and disrepair made the underground highway impassable. For the most part they

journeyed in silence; Grimli used to keeping his own company, the Slayer unwilling or unable to take part in idle conversation. The night before they were due to enter Karak Azgal they sat camped in the ruins of an old wayhouse just off the main underway. By the firelight, the stone reliefs that adorned the walls and ceiling of the low, wide room flickered in ruddy shadow. Scenes from the great dwarf history surrounded Grimli, and he felt reassured by the weight of the ancient stones around him. He felt a little trepidation about the coming day, for Karak Azgal was one of the fallen Holds, now a nest of goblins, trolls, skaven and many other foul creatures. During the nights they had shared in each other's company, Dammaz had taught him a little of fighting. Grimli was not so much afraid for his own life, he was surprised and gladdened to realise, but that he would fail Dammaz. He had little doubt that the hardened Slayer would not need his help, but he fancied that the old dwarf might do something reckless if he needed protecting and Grimli did not want that on his conscience.

'Worried, lad?' asked Dammaz, appearing out of the gloom. He had disappeared frequently in the last week, returning sometimes with a blood-slicked axe. Grimli knew better than to ask.

'A little,' Grimli admitted with a shrug.

'Take heart then,' Dammaz told him, squatting down on the opposite side of the fire, the flames dancing in bright reflections off his burnished jewellery. 'For fear makes us strong. Use it, lad, and it won't use you. You'll be fine. Remember, strike with confidence and you'll strike with strength. Aim low and keep your head high.'

They sat for a while longer in quiet contemplation. Clearing his throat, Grimli broke the silence.

'We are about to enter Karak Azgal, and I'd like to know something,' Grimli spoke. 'If you don't want to answer, I'll understand but it'll set my mind at rest.'

'Ask away, lad. I can only say no,' Dammaz reassured him.

'What's your interest in me, what do you know about the Skrundigor curse?' Grimli asked before he changed his mind.

Dammaz stayed silent for a long while and Grimli thought he wasn't going to get an answer. The old dwarf eventually looked him in the eye and Grimli meant his gaze.

'Your distant forefather Okrinok Skrundigor failed in his duty many centuries ago, for which the High King cursed him and all his line,' Dammaz told him. 'The name of Skrundigor is inscribed into the Dammaz Kron. Until such time as the honour of the clan is restored, the curse will bring great pain, ill fortune and the scorn of others onto Okrinok's entire heritage. This I know. But, do you know why the High King cursed you so?'

'I do,' Grimli replied solemnly. Like Dammaz, he did not speak straight away, but considered his reply before answering. 'Okrinok was a coward. He fled from a fight. He broke his oaths to protect the High King's daughter from harm, and for that he can never be forgiven. His selfishness and betrayal has brought misery to seventeen generations of my clan and I am last of his line. Accidents and mishaps have killed all my kin at early ages. Many left in self-exile, others became Slayers before me.'

'That is right,' agreed Dammaz. 'But do you know exactly what happened, Grimli?'

'For my shame, I do,' Grimli replied. 'Okrinok was sworn to protect Frammi Sunlocks, the High King's daughter, when she travelled to Karak Azgal to meet her betrothed, Prince Gorgnir. She wished to see something of her new home, and Prince Gorgnir, accompanied by Okrinok and the royal bodyguard, took her to the treasuries, the forges, the armouries and the many other great wonders of Karak Azgal. Being of good dwarf blood, she was interested in the mines. One day they travelled to the depths of the hold so that she could see the miners labouring. It was an ill-chosen day, for that very day vile goblins broke through into the mines. They had been tunnelling for Grugni knows how long, and of all the days that their sprawling den had to meet the wide-hewn corridors of Karak Azgal it was that one which fate decreed.'

Grimli stopped and shook his head with disbelief. A day earlier or a day later, and the entire history of the Skrundigors may have been completely different; a glorious heritage of battles won and loyal service to the High King. But it had not been so.

'The grobi set upon the royal household,' continued Grimli. 'Hard-fought was the battle, and bodyguard and miners clashed with a countless horde of greenskins. But there were too many of them, and their wicked knives caught Frammi and Gorgnir and slew them. One of the bodyguards, left for dead by the grobi, survived to recount the tale to the High King and much was the woe of all the dwarf realm. Yet greater still was the hardship for as the survivor told the High King with his dying breath, Okrinok Skrundigor, upon seeing the princess and prince-to-be slain, had fled the fight and his body was never found. Righteous and furious was the High King's anger and we have been cursed since.'

'Told as it has been to each generation of Skrundigor since that day,' Dammaz nodded thoughtfully. 'And was the High King just in his anger?'

'I have thought of it quite a lot, and I reckon he was,' admitted Grimli, poking at the fire as it began to die down. 'Many a king would have had us cast out or even slain for such oathbreaking and so I think he was merciful.'

'We will speak of this again soon,' Dammaz said as he stood up. 'I go to Kargun Skalfson now, to seek permission to enter Karak Azgal come tomorrow.'

With that the Slayer was gone into the gloom once more, leaving Grimli to his dour thoughts.



THE STENCH OF the troll sickened Grimli's stomach as it lurched through the doorway towards him. It gave a guttural bellow as it broke into a loping run. Grimli was rooted to the spot. In his mind's eye he could see himself casually stepping to one side, blocking its claw with his shield as Dammaz had taught

him; in reality his muscles were bunched and tense and his arm shook. Then the Slayer was there, between him and the approaching monster. In the darkness, Grimli could clearly see the blazing axe head as it swung towards the troll, cleaving through its midriff, spraying foul blood across the flagged floor as the blade continued on its course and shattered its backbone before swinging clear. Grimli stood in dumbfounded amazement. One blow had sheared the troll cleanly in two. Dammaz stood over the rank corpse and beheaded it with another strike before spitting on the body.

'Can never be too sure with trolls. Always cut the head off, lad,' Dammaz told him matter-of-factly as he strolled back to stand in front of Grimli.

'I'm sorry,' Grimli lowered his head in shame. 'I wanted to fight it, but I couldn't.'

'Calm yourself, lad,' Dammaz laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'Next time you'll try harder, won't you?'

'Yes, I will,' Grimli replied, meeting the Slayer's gaze.



FOR TWO DAYS and two nights they had been in Karak Azgal. The night before, Grimli had slain his first troll, crushing its head with his hammer after breaking one of its legs. He had already lost count of the number of goblins whose last vision had been his hammer swinging towards them. Over twenty at least, possibly nearer thirty, he realised. Of course, Dammaz had slain twice, even thrice that number, but Grimli felt comfortable that he was holding his own.

Dammaz had been right, it did get easier. trolls still scared Grimli, but he had worked out how to turn that fear into anger, imbuing his limbs with extra strength and honing his reflexes. And most of all, it had taught Grimli that it felt good to kill grobi. It was in his blood, by race and by clan, and he now relished each fight, every battle a chance to exact a small measure of revenge on the foul creatures whose kind had

ruined his clan so many centuries before.

They were just breaking camp in what used to be the forges, so Dammaz informed him. Everything had been stripped bare by the evacuating dwarfs and centuries of bestial looters and other treasure hunters. But the firepits could still clearly be seen, twenty of them in all, spread evenly across the large hall. Grugni, God of Smithing, was represented by a great anvil carved into the floor, his stern but kindly face embossed at its centre. Dammaz told him that the lines of the anvil used to run with molten metal so that its light illuminated the whole chamber with fiery beauty.

Grimli would have liked to have seen that, like so many other things from the days when the dwarf realms stretched unbroken from one end of the World's Edge Mountains to the other. Such a great past, so many treasures and wonders, now all lost, perhaps never to be regained and certainly never to be surpassed. Centuries of treachery, volcanoes, earthquakes and the attacks of grobi and skaven had almost brought the dwarfs to their knees. They had survived though; the dwarfs were at their fiercest when hardest-pressed. The southern holds may have fallen, but the northern holds still stood strong. In his heart, Grimli knew that the day would come when once more the mountains would resound along their length to the clatter of dwarf boots marching to war and the pound of hammers on dwarfish anvils. Already Karak Eight Peaks was being reclaimed, and others would follow.

'Dreaming of the golden age, lad?' Dammaz asked, and Grimli realised he had been stood staring at the carving of Grugni for several minutes.

'And the glory days to come,' replied Grimli which brought forth a rare smile from the Slayer.

'Aye, that's the spirit, Grimli, that's the spirit,' Dammaz agreed. 'When we're done here, you'll be a new dwarf, I reckon.'

'I'm already...' started Grimli but Dammaz silenced him with a finger raised to his lips. The Slayer tapped his nose and Grimli sniffed deeply. At first he could smell nothing, but as he concentrated, his nostrils detected a whiff of something unclean, something rotten and oily.

'That's the stink of skaven,' whispered Dammaz, his eyes peering into the darkness. Grimli closed his eyes and focused his thoughts on his senses of smell and hearing. There was breeze coming from behind him, where the odour of rats was strongest, and he thought he could hear the odd scratch, as of clawed feet on bare stone, to his right. Opening his eyes he looked in that direction, noting that Dammaz was looking the same way. The Slayer glanced at him and gave a single nod of agreement, and Grimli stepped up beside him, slipping his hammer from his belt and unslinging his shield from his back.

Without warning, the skaven attacked. Humanoid rats, no taller than Grimli, scuttled and ran out of the gloom, their red eyes intent on the two dwarfs. Dammaz did not wait a moment longer, launching himself at the ratmen with a wordless bellow. The first went down with its head lopped from its shoulders; the second was carved from groin to chest by the return blow. One of the skaven managed to dodge aside from Dammaz's attack and ran hissing at Grimli. He felt no fear now; had he not slain a troll single-handedly? He suddenly realised the peril of overconfidence as the skaven lashed out with a crudely sharpened blade, the speed of the attack taking him by surprise so that he had to step back to block the blow with his shield. The skaven were not as strong as trolls, but they were a lot faster.

Grimli batted away the second attack, his shield ringing dully with the clang of metal on metal, and swung his hammer upwards to connect with the skaven's head, but the creature jumped back before the blow landed. Its breath was foetid and its matted fur was balding around open sores in places. Grimli knew that if he was cut, the infection that surrounded the pestilential scavengers might kill him even if the wound did not. He desperately parried another blow, realising that other skaven were circling quickly behind him. He took another step back and then launched himself forward as his foe advanced after him, smashing the ratman to the ground with his shield. He stomped on its chest with his heavy boot, pinning it to the ground as he brought his hammer

smashing into its face. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Dammaz was still fighting, as he'd expected, a growing pile of furry bodies at his feet.

Two skaven then attacked Grimli at once, one thrusting at him with a poorly constructed spear, the other slashing with a wide-bladed knife. He let his shield drop slightly and the skaven with the spear lunged at the opportunity. Prepared for the attack, Grimli deflected the spearhead to his right, stepped forward and smashed his hammer into the skaven's chest, audibly splintering ribs and crushing its internal organs. He spun on the other skaven but not fast enough, its knife thankfully scraping without harm along the links of his chainmail. He slammed the edge of the shield up into the skaven's long jaw, dazing it, and then smashed its legs from underneath it with a wide swing of his hammer. The creature gave a keening, agonised cry as it lay there on the ground and he stoved its head in with a casual backswing.

The air was filled with a musky scent, which stuck in Grimli's nostrils, distracting him, and it was a moment before he realised that the rest of the skaven had fled. Joining Dammaz he counted thirteen skaven corpses on the ground around the Slayer, many of them dismembered or beheaded.

'Skaven are all cowards,' Dammaz told him. He pointed at a darker-furred corpse, both its legs missing. 'Once I killed their leader they had no stomach for the fight.'

'Kill the leader, I'll remember that,' Grimli said as he swung his shield back over his shoulder.



FOR THE REST of the day Grimli felt the presence of the skaven shadowing him and the Slayer, but no further attack came. They passed out of the forges and strong rooms down into the mines. The wondrously carved hallways and corridors led them into lower and more basically hewn tunnels, the ceiling supported now by pit props and not pillars

engraved with ancient runes. The stench of skaven became stronger for a while, their spoor was littered across the floor or of the mineshafts, but after another hour's travel it faded quickly.

'This is grobi territory, lad. The skaven don't come down these ways,' Dammaz informed Grimli when he commented on this phenomenon.

As they continued their journey Grimli noticed even rougher, smaller tunnels branching off the workings of the dwarfs, and guessed them to be goblin tunnels, dug out after the hold fell. There was a shoddiness about the chips and cuts of the goblin holes that set them apart from the unadorned but neatly hewn walls of dwarf workmanship, even to Grimli's untrained eye. As he absorbed this knowledge, Dammaz led him down a side-tunnel into what was obviously once a chamber of some kind. It was wide, though not high, and seemed similar to the dorm-chambers of Karaz-a-Karak.

'This is where it happened,' Grimli said. It was statement, not a question. He realised this was where Dammaz had been leading him.

'Aye, that it is, lad,' the Slayer confirmed with a nod that shook his bright crest from side to side. 'This is where Okrinok Skrundigor was ambushed. Here it was that Frammi and Gorgnir were slain by the grobi. How did you know?'

'I'm not sure as I know,' Grimli replied with a frown. 'I can feel what happened here, in my blood, I reckon. It's like it's written in the stone somehow.'

'Aye, the mountain remembers, you can be sure of that,' Dammaz agreed solemnly. 'You can rest here tonight. Tomorrow will be a hard day.'

'What happens tomorrow?' asked Grimli, unburdening himself of his shield and pack.

'Nothing comes to those who hurry, lad, you should know that,' Dammaz warned him with a stern but almost fatherly wag of his finger.

THAT NIGHT, Grimli's dreams were troubled, and he tossed and turned beneath his blanket. In his mind he was there, at the betrayal so many centuries before. He could see Frammi and Gorgnir clearly, inspecting the bunks of the wide dormitory, protected by ten bodyguards. Gorgnir was wide of girth, even for a dwarf, and his beard was as black as coal and shone with a deep lustre. His dark eyes were intelligent and keen, but he was quick to laugh at some jest made by Frammi. The princess, to Grimli's sleeping eye at least, was beautiful; her blonde hair tied up in two tresses that flowed down he back to her knees. Her pallor was ruddy and healthy, her hips wide. Clad in a russet gown, a small circlet of gold holding her hair back, she was unmistakably the daughter of a High King. In his dream-state, Grimli sighed. The lineage of those two would have been fine and strong, he thought glumly, had they but been given the chance to wed. At the thought, the deadly attack happened.

It seemed as if the goblins sprang from nowhere, rushing through the door with wicked cackles and grinning, yellowed teeth. Their pale green skin was tinged yellow in the lamplight, their robes and hoods crudely woven from dark material that seemed to absorb the light. The bodyguards reacted instantly, drawing their hammers and shields, forming a circle around the royal couple. The goblins crashed against the shieldwall like a wave against a cliff, and momentarily they were smashed back by the swings of the bodyguard's hammers, like the tide receding. But the press of goblins was too much and those at the front were forced forward into the determined dwarfs, crushed and battered mercilessly as they fought to get at the prince and princess. Soon they were climbing over their own dead, howling with glee as one then another and another of the bodyguard fell beneath the endless onslaught. The shield wall broke for a moment, but that was all that was needed. The goblins rushed the gap, pushing the breach wider with their weight of numbers.

This was it, the dark moment of the Skrundigor clan. It was Gorgnir who fell first, bellowing a curse on the grobi even as



his axe lodged in one of their skulls and he was swarmed over by the small greenskins. Frammi wrenched the axe free and gutted three of the goblins before she too was overwhelmed; one of the tresses flew through the air as a sword blade slashed across her neck.

Almost as one the three remaining bodyguards howled with grief and rage, hurling themselves at the goblins with renewed ferocity. One in particular, a massive ruby inset into his hammer's head, smashed a bloody path into the grobi, every blow sweeping one of the tunnel-dwellers off its scampering feet. His helm was chased with swirling designs in bronze and gold and he had the faceplate drawn down, showing a fierce snarling visage of Grimnir in battle. The knives and short swords of the goblins rang harmlessly off his mail and plate armour with a relentless dull chiming, but they could not stop him and he burst clear through the door.

The other two bodyguards fell swiftly, and the goblins descended upon the dead like a pack of wild dogs, stripping them of every item of armour, weapon, jewellery and clothing. They bickered and fought with one another over the spoils, but soon the pillaging was complete and the goblins deserted the room in search of fresh prey. For what seemed an eternity, the looted bodies lay where they had been left, but eventually a low groan resounded across the room and one of the bodies sat up, blood streaming from a dozen wounds across his body. Groggily he stood up, leaning on one of the bunks, and shook his head, causing fresh blood to ooze from a gash across his forehead. He staggered for a moment and then seemed to steady.

'Skrundigorrrr!' his voice reverberated from the walls and floor in a low growl.



THE DREAM WAS still vivid when Grimli was woken by a chill draught, and he saw that the fire was all but dead embers. He added more sticks from the bundle strapped to his travelling pack and stoked the ashes until the fire caught

once again. As it grew in size, its light fell upon the face of Dammaz who was sitting against the far wall, wide awake, his eyes staring intently at Grimli.

'Did you see it, lad?' he asked softly, his low whisper barely carrying across the room.

'I did,' Grimli replied, his voice as muted, his heart in his throat from what he had witnessed.

'So, lad, speak your mind, you look troubled,' Dammaz insisted.

'I saw them slain, and I saw Okrinok fight his way free instead of defending their bodies,' Grimli told the Slayer, turning his gaze from Dammaz to the heart of the fire. The deep red reminded Grimli of the ruby set upon Okrinok's hammer.

'Aye, that was a terrible mistake, you can be sure of that,' Dammaz grimaced as he spoke. The two fell into a sullen silence.

'There is no honour to be found here,' Grimli declared suddenly. 'The curse cannot be lifted from these enduring stones, not while mighty Karaz-a-Karak endures. I shall return there, swear the Slayer oath and come back to Karak Azgal to meet my death fighting in the caverns that witnessed my ancestor's treachery.'

'Is that so?' Dammaz asked quietly, his expression a mixture of surprise and admiration.

'It is so,' Grimli assured the Slayer.

'I told you not to be hasty, bearding,' scowled Dammaz. 'Stay with me one more day before you leave this place. You promised you would come with me, and I haven't shown you everything you need to see yet.'

'One more day then, as I promised,' Grimli agreed, picking up his pack.



THEY ENTERED THE goblin tunnels not far from the chamber where Grimli had slept, following the sloping corridor deeper and deeper beneath the World's Edge Mountains. They had perhaps travelled for half a day when they ran into their first goblins. There were

no more than a handful, and the fight was bloody and quick, two of the grobi falling to Grimli's hammer, the other three carved apart by the baleful blade of Dammaz's axe.

'The goblins don't live down here much. They prefer to live in the better-crafted halls of Karak Azgal itself,' Dammaz told Grimli when he mentioned the lack of greenskins. 'But there are still plenty enough to kill,' the Slayer added with a fierce grin.

True enough, they had not travelled more than another half mile before they ran into a small crowd of greenskins moving up the tunnel in the opposite direction. The goblins shrieked their shrill war cries and charged, only to be met head-on by the vengeful dwarfs. In the confines of the goblin-mined cavern, the grobi's weight of numbers counted for little, and one-on-one they were no match for even Grimli. As he smashed apart the skull of the tenth goblin, the others turned and ran, disappearing into the darkness with the patter of bare feet. Grimli was all for going after them, but Dammaz laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Our way lies down a different path, but there will be more to fight soon enough,' he told Grimli. 'They will head up into Karak Azgal and fetch more of their kind, and perhaps lie in wait for us somewhere in one of the wider spaces where they can overwhelm us.'

'That's why we should catch them and stop them,' declared Grimli hotly.

'Even if we could run as fast as they, which we can't, lad, the grobi will lead us a merry chase up and down. They know these tunnels by every inch, and you do not,' Dammaz countered with a longing look in the direction the goblins had fled. 'Besides, if we go chasing willy-nilly after every grobi we meet, you'll never get to see what I have to show you.'

With that the Slayer turned away and continued down the passage. After a moment, Grimli followed behind, his shield and hammer ready.



GRIMLI WAS SURPRISED a little when the winding path Dammaz followed led them into a great cavern.

'I did not think the grobi could dig anything like this,' he said, perplexed.

'Grobi didn't dig this, you numbskull,' laughed Dammaz, pointing at the ceiling. Grimli followed the gesture and saw that long stalactites hung down from the cave's roof. The cavern had been formed naturally millennia ago when the Ancestor Gods had fashioned the mountains. Something caught the young dwarf's eye, and he looked futher into the hall-like cave. A massive mound, perhaps a great stalagmite as old as the world itself, rose from the centre of the cavern.

Grimli walked closer to the heap, and as he approached his eyes made out the shape of a small arm stuck out. And there was a tiny leg, just below it. Hurrying closer still, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. The mound was not rock at all, but built from the bodies of dozens, even scores of goblins, heaped upon one another a good ten yards above his head. Walking forward again, amazed at the sight, Grimli saw that each goblin bore at least one wound, crushed and mangled by what was obviously a heavy hammer blow. He looked over his shoulder at Dammaz, who was walking towards Grimli, axe carried easily in one hand.

'You recognise the handiwork, lad?' Dammaz asked as he drew level with Grimli and looked up at the monumental pile of greenskin corpses.

'Okrinok did this?' Grimli gaped at the Slayer, wondering that he could be even more astounded than he was before.

'Climb with me,' Dammaz commanded him, stepping up onto the battered skull of a goblin.

Grimli reached for a handhold and as his fingers closed around the shattered arm of a goblin, it felt as hard as rock beneath his touch. There was no give in the dead flesh at all and his skin prickled at the thought of the magic that obviously was the cause. Pulling himself up the macabre monument, Grimli could almost believe it had been fashioned from the stone, so unyielding were the bodies beneath his hands and feet. It was a laborious process, hauling himself

up inch by inch, yard by yard for several minutes, following the glow of Dammaz's axe above him. Panting and sweating, he pulled himself to the top and stood there for a moment catching his breath.

As he recovered from his exertions, Grimli saw what was located at the very height of the mound. There stood Okrinok. He was unmistakable; his ruby-encrusted hammer was still in his grasp, lodged into the head of a goblin that was thrusting a spear through the dwarf's chest. The two had killed each other, and now stood together in death's embrace. Grimli approached the ancient dwarf slowly, almost reverentially. When he was stood an arm's length away, he reached out and laid a trembling hand upon his ancestor's shoulder. It was then that Grimli looked at Okrinok's face.

His helmet had been knocked off in the fight, and his long, shaggy hair hung free. His mouth was contorted into a bellow, his scowl more ferocious than any Grimli had seen before. Even in death Okrinok looked awesome. His beard was fully down to his knees, bound by many bronze and gold bands and beads, intricately braided in places. Turning his attention back to his ancestor's face, he noted the familiar ancestral features, some of which he had himself. But there was something else, something more than a vague recognition. Okrinok reminded him of someone in particular. For a moment Grimli thought it must be his own father, but with a shiver along his spine he realised it was someone a lot closer. Turning slowly, he looked at Dammaz, who was stood just to his right, leaning forward with his arms crossed atop his axe haft.

'O-Okirinok?' stuttered Grimli, letting his hammer drop from limp fingers as shock ran through him. He staggered for a moment before falling backwards, sitting down on the goblin mound with a thump.

'Aye, lad, it is,' Dammaz smiled warmly.

'B-but, how?' was all Grimli could ask. Pushing himself to his feet, he tottered over to stand in front of Okrinok. The Slayer proffered a gnarled hand, the short fingers splayed. Grimli hesitated for a moment, but Okrinok nodded reassuringly and he grasped the hand, wrist-to-wrist in warriors' greeting. At the touch of the

Slayer, Grimli felt a surge of power flood through him, suffusing him from his toes to the tips of his hair.



GRIMLI FELT LIKE he had just woken up, and his senses were befuddled. As they cleared he realised he was once again in the mine chamber, witnessing the fight with the goblins. But this time was different – he was somehow inside the fight, the goblins were attacking him! Panic fluttered in his heart for a moment before he realised that this was just a dream or vision too. He was seeing the battle through Okrinok's eyes. He saw Frammi and Gorgnir once more fall to the blades of the goblins and felt the surge of unparalleled shame and rage explode within his ancestor. He felt the burning strength of hatred fuelling every blow as Okrinok hurled himself at the goblins. There were no thoughts of safety, no desire to escape. All Grimli could feel was an incandescent need to crush the grobi, to slaughter each and every one of them for what they had done that day.

Okirinok bellowed with rage as his swung his hammer, no hint of fatigue in his powerful arms. One goblin was smashed clear from his feet and slammed against the wall. The backswing bludgeoned the head of a second; the third blow snapped the neck of yet another. And so Okirinok's advance continued, his hammer cutting a swathe of pulped and bloodied destruction through the goblins. It was with a shock that Okirinok realised he had no more foes to fight, and looking about him he found himself in an unfamiliar tunnel, scraped from the rock by goblin hands. He had a choice; he could return up the tunnel to Karak Azgal and face the shame of having failed in his sacred duty. Or he could keep going down, in the lair of the goblins, to slay those who had done this to him. His anger and loathing surged again as he remembered the knives plunging into Gorgnir and he set off down the tunnel, heading deeper into the mountain.

Several times he ran into parties of goblins, and every time he threw himself at them with righteous fury, exacting vengeance with every blow of his hammer. Soon his wanderings took him into a gigantic cavern, the same one where he now stood again. Ahead of him the darkness was filled with glittering red eyes, the goblins mustered in their hundreds. He stood alone, his hammer in his hands, waiting for them. The goblins were bold at first, rushing him with spears and short swords, but when ten of their number lay dead at Okrinok's feet within the space of a dozen heartbeats, they became more cautious. But Okrinok was too clever to allow that and sprang at the grobi, plunging into the thick of his foes, his hammer rising and falling with near perfect strokes, every attack crushing the life from a murderous greenskin.

To Okrinok the battle seemed to rage for an eternity, until it seemed he'd done nothing but slaughter goblins since the day was born. The dead were beyond counting, and he stood upon a mound of his foes, caked head-to-foot in their blood. His helmet had been knocked loose by an arrow, and several others now pierced his stomach and back, but still he fought on. Then, from out of the bodies behind him rose a goblin. He heard a scrape of metal and turned, but too slowly, the goblin's spearshaft punching into him. With blood bubbling into his breath, Okrinok spat his final words of defiance and brought his hammer down onto his killer's head.

'I am a dwarf! My honour is my life, without it I am nothing!' bellowed Okrinok, before death took him.



TEARS STREAMED down Grimli's face as he looked at Okrinok, his expression grim.

'And so I swore in death, and in death I have fulfilled that oath,' Okrinok told Grimli. 'Many centuries have the Skrundigor been blamed for my act, and I have allowed it to happen. The shame for the deaths of Gorgnir and Frammi was real, and the High King was owed his curse. But no longer shall

we be remembered as cowards and oathbreakers. The goblin king was so impressed that he ordered his shamans to draw great magic and create this monument to my last battle. But in trapping my flesh they freed my soul. For many years my spirit wandered these tunnels and halls and brought death to any grobi I met, but I am weary and wish to die finally. Thus, I sought you out, last of the Skrundigor, who must be father to our new line, in honour and in life.'

'But how do I get the High King to lift the curse, to strike our name from the Dammaz Kron?' asked Grimli.

'If you can't bring the king under the mountain, lad, bring the mountain over the king, as we used to say,' Okrinok told him. He pointed to his preserved body. 'Take my hammer, take it to the High King and tell him what you have seen here. He will know, lad, for that hammer is famed and shall become more so when my tale is told.'

'I will do as you say,' swore Grimli solemnly. Turning, he took the haft of the weapon in both hands and pulled. Grimli's tired muscles protested but after heaving with all his strength, the dwarf managed to pull the hammer clear.

He turned to thank Okrinok, but the ghost was gone. Clambering awkwardly down the mound of bodies, Grimli's thoughts were clear. He would return to Karaz-a-Karak and present the hammer and his service to the current High King, to serve him as Okrinok once did. It was then up to the High King whether honour was restored or not. As he planted his feet onto the rock floor once more, with no small amount of relief, Grimli felt a change in the air. Turning, he saw the mound was being enveloped by a shimmering green glow. Before his eyes, the mound began to shudder, and saw flesh stripping from bones and the bones crumble to dust as the centuries finally did their work. Soon there was nothing left except a greenish-tinged haze.

Hefting Okrinok's hammer, Grimli turned to leave. Out in the darkness dozens of red eyes regarded him balefully. Grimli grinned viciously to himself. He strode towards the waiting goblins, his heart hammering in his chest, his advance quickening until he was running at full charge.

'For Frammi and Gorgnir!' he bellowed. ♣



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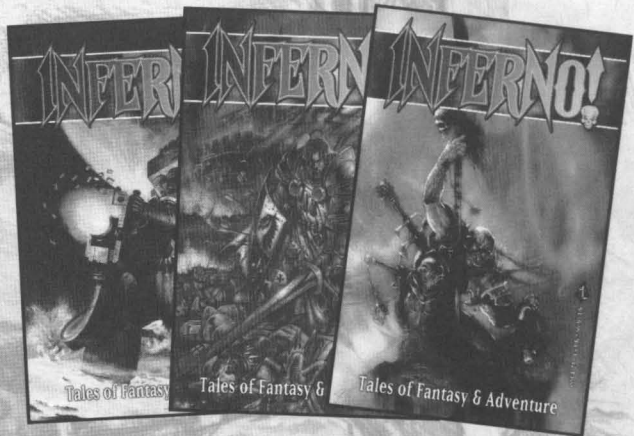


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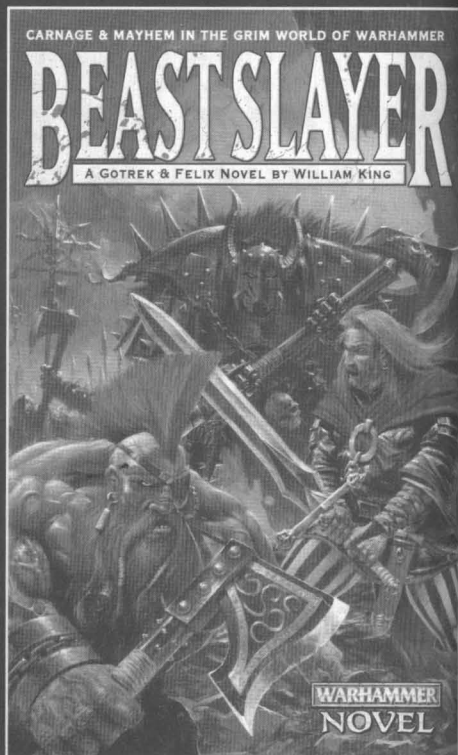
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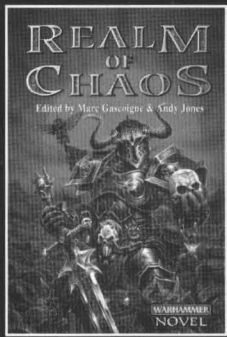
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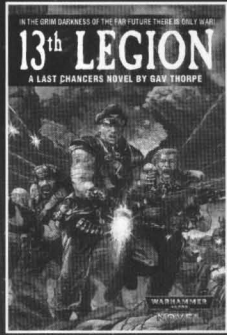
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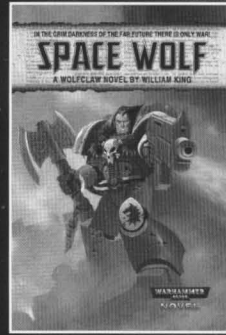
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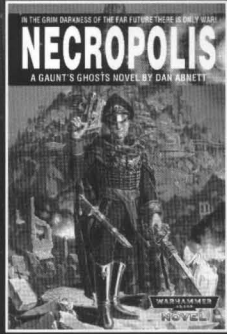
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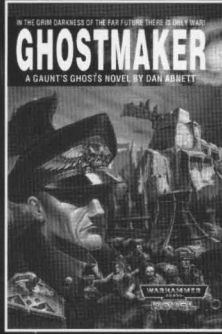
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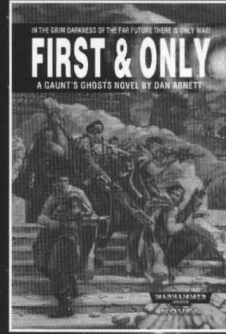
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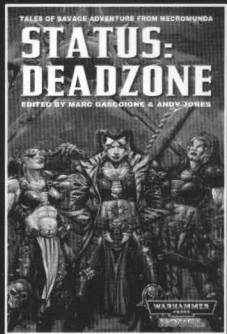
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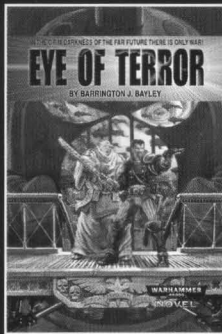
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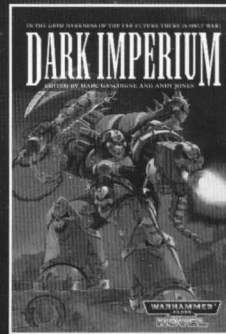
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- **LOYALTY'S REWARD** by **Simon Jowett**

There was no recoil when he triggered the alien weapon. For a moment, Kravi feared that the firing mechanism had malfunctioned. If this was so, if all of the weapons the Graf had delivered to the Graumann crew were defective, then he and his men would die here, in a storage depot under the protection of Haus Reisinger.

- **DEBT OF BLOOD** by **Neil McIntosh**

Twisted arms of rank, corrupted flesh forced their way through the rubble of cracked stone and splintered wood, reaching out blindly to entwine any living being that might come within their grasp. Stefan worked his sword with a fury, harvesting the stinking limbs in a storm of flashing steel. But for every mutant he despatched back to hell, two more emerged to join battle. Soon he was surrounded on all sides by foes spirited from his worst nightmares: grey wraiths moulded from the clay of dead human flesh.

- **BOYZ IN THE HIVE** by **Jonathan Green**

Silas looked up at the vicious creature. It seemed well over two metres tall. Humanoid in form, its body was a robust mass of muscle but its head spoke more of man's supposed primitive ancestry. Its forehead receded while its lower jaw jutted out beyond its upper lip, its mouth full of blunt yellow tusks. In all his years scraping a living as fungus farmer in Hive Bottom, he had never heard of anything like this violent beast before.

- **TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT** by **Nik Vincent & Paul Davidson**

THE TALE OF THE MUSICIAN

'So he played and she sang, and you never heard anything so lovely, nor seen anything so sweet as the way that girl swayed to the music.'

- **ANCESTRAL HONOUR** by **Gav Thorpe**

He slammed the edge of the shield up into the skaven's long jaw, dazing it, and then smashed it's legs from underneath it with a wide swing of his hammer. The creature gave a keening, agonised cry as it lay there on the ground and he stoved its head in with a casual backswing. The air was filled with a musky scent, which stuck in Grimli's nostrils, distracting him, and it was a moment before he realised that the rest of the skaven had fled. Joining Dammaz he counted thirteen skaven corpses on the ground around the Slayer, many of them dismembered or beheaded.

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