

# INFERNNO!

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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure



# INFERNO!

**G**reat celebration here in the Black Library this week as we welcome to our plucky band our new webmaster, the splendidly named Ragnar Karlsson. (I mean, how could the publisher of William King's Space Wolf novels *not* employ someone with that name?) The Black Library's website is always the first thing we seem to neglect when we're busy preparing all these cool stories and comic strips and novels and art books and so on. But now, with the help of our new arrival, it's time to take our web presence up a gear. It's easy to make statements about how wonderful our new web site will be, how often it will be updated and all that malarkey – only for us to fall flat on our faces when the plan fails to come together. So I won't bore you with all the cool stuff we're planning, not until we actually have something to show you.

However, the arrival of our new web guy has sparked a lively debate here at the Black Library about our relationship with the web, indeed, any publisher's relationship with the web. And it's a discussion we're more than

willing to include you in, if you'd care to give us your opinions.

The first thought anyone seems to have when you mention you both publish regular magazines and run a website always seems to be 'So, you're going to stop putting out the magazines and just stick the stories up on the website then?' Definitely an appealing idea – rather than sell our books and magazines, we'll still buy a heap of great stuff from our contributors, but then give it away on the internet.

'No, no, silly,' say our almost imaginary critics, 'you don't give it away, you *charge* for it!' Well, once again, it sounds like a great idea – rather than go to the trouble of paying a printer to run out *Inferno!* every two months, we get the web guy to code it and post it online. All you have to do to read it is give us your credit card number and allow us to deduct the cover price from that every other month. Nice idea, but if even Stephen King can't make some of the keenest fiction fans in the world pay for his stuff, I suspect we might be in trouble. Besides, you can read *Inferno!* on the bus, in the bath, on the beach,

wherever. Until those funny little e-book machines get much cheaper and everyone has one, I can't see too many people lugging even a laptop around just to read a few storming action stories from the Warhammer World.

**S**o for now, at least, while we'll happily post some sample stories and strips on the website, and maybe once we have the time we'll even upload those rare promo issues, issue zeroes and other rare-as-hen's-teeth items. In the meantime, we'd love to hear from you about what we should put on our website, or anything else for that matter. Oh, oh, Ragnar, just thought of something else we could do on the site: a message board so *Inferno!* readers can add their comments directly rather than writing or emailing to the address below. What do you mean, you're a bit busy..?!

*Marco*

Marc Gascoigne  
Editor

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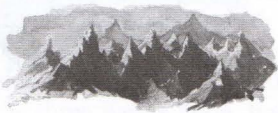
# THE WINTER WIND

by BRIAN CRAIG

THE WINTER WINDS are always bitterly cold in the northern reaches of the Middle Mountains, even when they blow from the Empire's heartland. The air is sharper still when it blows from the north, having passed over the icebound Sea of Claws, but it is worst of all when it blows from the north-east, from the troll country of the Northern Wastes.

It would be bad enough if the wind from the troll country were only carrying the kind of frost that can chill a man's bones, but there is a particular evil in the Wastes that sometimes rides the wind as well. Sometimes, that evil raises echoes in the glaciers that lie upon the highest mountains, and in the deep ice-caves that lurk beneath them.

The men of such Middle Mountain villages as Szerach are strong, and do not mind the cold at all. Knowing that they are likely to be cut off from the lowland towns for as much as five months in the year, they take care to insulate their homes very well, and to hoard firewood as abundantly as they hoard their winter supplies of fruit and meat. They rarely need to hunt in winter, because the ice that surrounds them and chills their air keeps their food stores very fresh, but when they are called upon to defend those stores against bears and wolves they do so with the utmost resolve and efficiency. All they desire from their neighbours, human and animal alike, is to be let alone – but when the wind blows from the troll country, their desire is not always granted.



IN EACH OF the last five winters in which Friedrich von Aist was headman of Szerach there was at least one mysterious disappearance, always involving a young boy or girl plucked from a warm bed, with no trace of any intruder save for mysterious unhuman footprints in the snow. In order to

approach and leave the village unseen, the monstrous maker of those footprints must not only have been invisible, but must also have had the power to render its victims invisible, at least for a while.

The older men of the village had followed such footprints more than a dozen times before and during Friedrich's tenure as headman, only to find them disappearing into mazy ice-caves beneath the glacier that wound like a sleeping serpent around the peak above the village. All of these elders agreed with Friedrich – whose hair and beard were as white as that glacier – whenever he called off such a search, saying: 'It is the way of the world, and there is nothing we can do but pray to Ulric, that our children might be luckier in the afterlife than they were in life.' But those who had lost their children often muttered that Friedrich did not understand, because his own son and daughter had grown up unmolested. When Friedrich died and was succeeded by his son Heinz, the new headman remembered these plaintive whispers, and determined to take a different view if and when the child-stealer returned.

In his first winter as headman before the early snows came, Heinz went south to the town of Leiswitz, where there was a scholar of slightly dubious repute named Dietmar Fichte. He told the scholar what sometimes happened in Szerach when the wind blew from the troll country. He explained that the village as a whole remained populous and prosperous, because the number of children lost to the invisible marauder was no greater than the number carried off by disease in lower-lying places, but that he could not stand by and see the parents of the stolen children suffer their uniquely dreadful form of grief.

'I have heard of such things,' Fichte admitted. 'You are not alone in your misfortune. Low-set in a valley as Leiswitz is, I can sometimes feel the evil that rides upon the north wind. There are other villages which suffer as yours does, but mountain



folk are stoical, and not much given to railing against the cruel dictates of fate. Most men of your kind are content to suffer in silence.'

'Then I am an exception, magister,' Heinz von Aist informed the scholar. 'The people of Szerach shall not suffer in silence any longer. Next time the invisible monster comes, I hope to follow it to its lair. I do not care how far I have to go into the ice-maze; I shall destroy it if I can. But I need to know, if you can tell me, what manner of daemon it is, and whether there is any way to make it visible to human eyes.'

'What would I know about the daemons of the glaciers?' the scholar asked, uneasily.

'For myself,' said Heinz, 'I do not believe in forbidden knowledge. Were you to tell me anything I should be glad to know. I certainly would not tell a living soul where I obtained the intelligence – and you would have a steadfast friend if ever you needed one.'

The scholar could see well enough that he was dealing with an honest man. He sprinkled a quantity of salt on his kitchen table, and asked Heinz to draw the outline of the unhuman footprints with his finger, as accurately as he could. Heinz did so.

Fichte nodded his head gravely. 'The men of the mountains believe themselves less susceptible to the dark gods than the men of the plains,' he said. 'There are no lovers of luxury hereabouts to attract the attention of tempters of that sort, and you know well enough how contagions cannot flourish in cold, crisp air. There are men of wrath everywhere, but those who live in the mountains find plentiful targets for their fury in the bears and wolves of the high forests, and rarely need to turn their hatreds against one another. But the one thing all mountain folk know very well is the striking change that overcomes the mountains as winter turns to spring – and when they pray for changes of that sort to hurry their arrival, their pleas are sometimes answered by the wrong kind of god. There are spirits that follow the Lord of Change, which delight in the metamorphosis of water into ice, because liquid water is the basis of all worldly life, and its crystallization is a uniquely subtle and ironic killing force.

'The creature which is harassing your village must be a very minor sort of daemon, if it deserves to be reckoned a daemon at all, or it would not be so persistent. It is probably vulnerable, else it would not be so well-

camouflaged, but you might not find it easy to identify the precise nature of its vulnerability, and you may be sure that it will be deceptive. You will have to catch up with it before you can kill it, and that will not be a simple task, given that it is so difficult to see with naked eyes. I have seen it written, however, that lenses of ice, ground with a precisely-measured curvature, may enable human beings to see the traces left by capricious elementals of the ice when they return to their own element, and also to see the monsters themselves no matter what disguises they put on.'

'If you will give me the measurements, magister, I shall be able to grind the lenses when winter comes,' Heinz assured the scholar.

'I will do that,' Dietmar Fichte promised, 'but I must also offer two words of warning. Firstly, the monster will not be the only thing you will see through the lenses when you follow it into its lair. Secondly, you may not find it as easy to take the lenses off as it will be to put them on. Once a man has become accustomed to them, he will find it hard to set them aside.'

'I am the appointed protector of Szerach,' Heinz told him. 'It is my duty to do everything I can to keep its children safe from harm.'

'In that case,' the scholar said, 'these are the curvatures to which you must grind the two surfaces of your lenses of ice.' He used black ink to inscribe the formulas upon a fragment of parchment, which Heinz carefully folded into his pouch. Although his surname was suggestive of an aristocratic heritage, Heinz was not a literate man – but he was carpenter enough to have been taught both his numbers and his angles, and he had inherited tools for grinding and polishing quartz from his grandfather, which would do as well for ice when winter came.



AS SOON AS the first heavy snows of winter came, whereupon the passes connecting Szerach to the outer world were swiftly blocked, Heinz von Aist set about making the lenses he would need to hunt the marauder from the glacier. It was as well that he started so soon, for the work proved far more vexatious than he had



anticipated. Recently-formed ice proved to be far too brittle and full of air-bubbles for his purpose. It shattered when he tried to work it, and when he finally contrived to produce a lens he found it quite opaque.

Realising that he needed ice of a sturdier kind, Heinz climbed up to the glacier, but its surface layers had been melted and refrozen dozens of times in every preceding century, and its quality was little better than that of the icicles descending from the eaves of his house. He had to go deep into an ice-cave to find ice of sufficient purity and hardness: ice as sturdy as a gemstone, and as flawless.

Even having found appropriate material, Heinz still found the work difficult. The formulas that Dietmar Fichte had given him required the outer and inner surfaces to be so nearly matched in their curvature that a lens which tapered to a sharp edge would have been far too thin, so he had to leave a broad rim. If that rim were chipped while he worked, no matter how slightly, the crack invariably spread until it split the lens. Nor was his work done when he finally contrived to produce a matching pair of lenses, for he had then to make a wooden frame to hold them – and all this work had perforce to be done out of doors, well away from the hearth-fire that would have melted his prizes. By the time he had finished them, shortly before winter solstice, Heinz von Aist felt that his fingers had become supple icicles themselves, and that the palms of his hands were mirrors clouded by frost.

He stored the lenses very carefully, wrapping them in muslin and placing them in the coldest recess of his larder, where neither warmth nor hungry raider could reach them. Then he waited.

Heinz was fully prepared to go through the whole process again in the following year if it happened that spring arrived without any evil visitation, so he felt free to pray that fate might be kind for once, and spare all the village children from harm. When the winter solstice was three weeks gone, though, the direction of the wind swung from the north-west to the north-east, and took on the unmistakable edge of the Northern Wastes. Three days after that, the monster came to Szerach two hours before dawn and carried away Gretchen Grummann, who had not yet attained her eighth year.

The men of the village gathered at first light, carrying their bows and blades, exactly as they would have done to drive a bear or a wolf pack back into the woods. Their headman allowed them to accompany him as far as the glacier's edge, in the faint hope that they might catch the creature in the open, so that the bowmen could take his instruction as to where to aim their darts. When the footprints disappeared as the snows gave way to the unremittingly hard ice of the pitted glacier, however, Heinz von Aist put on his lenses of ice.

At first he could see nothing with the lenses that he had not been able to see with his naked eyes, but when his eyes had properly adapted to their presence the footprints that had become invisible revealed themselves again to his eyes.

'The scholar was right,' Heinz announced. 'But I must go on alone. When I find the monster, I and I alone will be able to see it.'

The men of the village protested, as they were duty bound to do, but their protestations were not very forceful. Their headman told them to go back to their houses and warm themselves by their fires.

It was already half an hour past noon, and there would be little more than three hours of sunlight before dusk fell.

'Legend has it that those caves extended for ever, Heinz,' Rudolf Grummann told him, uneasily. 'Those lenses will not help you find your way out of the maze, if you ever reach its heart.'

'If I do not return within two days,' Heinz said, 'you will need to choose a new headman, for I shall certainly have frozen to death. But if I do return, I hope to have the severed head of the daemon in my hand. If so, we shall mount it on a pole in the village square, even if we have to paint it with pitch to make it visible.'

He gave his bow to Rudolf Grummann, judging that it would be useless in the mazy caves. He lit a lantern, and tied a large jar of oil to his belt so that he could refill its reservoir twice when the wick burned low. Then he unsheathed his blade. It was the best blade in all the village, forged for his father by the finest smiths in Altdorf, as befitted a headman whose name was suggestive of noble blood. It was as long as his forearm, from elbow to fingertip; one of its edges was honed to razor sharpness, and it had an exceedingly keen point.



Heinz looked back once, to see how his order had been obeyed. He was not too displeased when he saw Rudolf Grummann pause, seemingly resolved to stand sentry outside, at least until darkness came again.



WHILE THE cave's walls were dressed with fresh ice, which had melted and refrozen a hundred or a thousand times, Heinz could see very little through his lenses that he could not have seen with his own eyes, and that which he saw was as vague as sullen mist, drowned by the reflected glitter of lantern-light. As he went deeper into the underworld beneath the glacier, however, he came into the realm of the permafrost, which had not melted since the world was young, long before the Battle of Black Fire Pass and the founding of the Empire.

The footprints in the ice were much clearer here, and Heinz followed them, his stride wary but purposeful.

According to legend, there had been men in Szerach before Sigmar was born, who had been strong enough and brave enough to hold the passes against orcs and goblins, but there had been no von Aists among them, nor Grummanns either. Uric's family, so its own traditions maintained, had first come to the Middle Mountains with the armies of Mandred Skavenslayer, and had stayed behind to make his conquests safe while Mandred returned to claim his soon-divided Empire. That had been two hundred human lifetimes ago, and Sigmar's time had been two hundred before that, but the walls of ice between which Heinz now walked might have been here two thousand or twenty thousand human lifetimes, and perhaps longer than that.

Once, when another child had been taken by the marauder, Heinz had asked his father, rather bitterly, why the evil gods always seemed to have their way in spite of all the prayers that the people of Szerach offered to virtuous Ulic.

'If the balance of good and evil in our human hearts were more decisively tipped towards the good,' Friedrich had said, in his weary and fatalistic fashion, 'we might be entitled to complain that the world in which

we live is sadly out of keeping. Alas, I suspect that we are not so ill-fitted to it as we should like to think. Perhaps it was different in the days before there were men or dwarfs or elves in the world, but I suspect not. That which is very old has at least as much malignity in it as that which is very new.'

Heinz had been annoyed with his father at the time, but as he followed the footprints into the bowels of the glacier he began to understand the remark a little better. He also began to understand the first of the warnings that Dietmar Fichte had given him. His naked eyes could not have seen any more in this ancient ice than they had at the mouth of the maze, but the lenses allowed him to see things very differently: to see through, or perhaps within, the ice to what seemed to be another world entirely.

Within his body, Heinz knew, there was liquid water in every part of his being – not merely his blood and his bladder but even in the marrow of his bones. Life of his kind required liquid water, not merely as a kind of fuel or lubricant but as a matter of essence, and the cost to a human being of remaining active was the heat that his body produced to keep that internal water liquid. Some living things could survive being frozen, but the cost of that survival was the suspension of all animation. Ice froze living creatures still, even if that stillness stopped a little short of death.

But there were things, Heinz now began to see and understand, that could exist and move in ice. Not living things, as he understood life, but things more elemental and mercurial: things unknowable to living eyes, unless the light those living eyes beheld had been filtered by ancient ice. That, Heinz realised, must be what was happening to him. It was not that the lenses were adding something to his sight, but that they were subtracting something that ordinarily obscured the creatures he could now apprehend. The lenses were not magical in themselves, nor was the protective veil that they rendered transparent. Heinz knew, though, that the things inside the ice – like the footprints he was following – were certainly magical, and very probably inimical to everything possessed of his liquid kind of life.

The things inside the ice through which he was walking were vaguely serpentine and insectile, although their outlines were in no



way distinct. If they had a suggestion of reptilian scales or shining wing-cases about them, it was only an impression, an uncannily persistent trick of the light. Their colours were equally indistinct: pale pinks and blues lighter than the summer sky, and violets trembling on the very edge of perceptibility. Their eyes were large but treacherously deceptive, as if compounded out of many different hollow corpuscles which could not quite be fitted into any accommodating whole.

These entities were not attracted by the light of his torch, but nor were they moved to flee as its robust yellow beams burrowed into the solidity that was their space, idly dissipating as the individual rays were splintered by refraction. The creatures were not afraid of him, and they made no gestures of threat, but they were not indifferent to him either. He could sense a certain contempt in the language of their strangely insubstantial bodies, and a certain dark amusement.

They know why I am here, he thought. They take me for a fool rather than a hero, but I shall show them what liquid life is worth, when it supports the intelligence of a human being.

The entities stirred, as if they had heard the thought spoken aloud, and they drew back into the depths of the ancient ice, as if they were taunting him. He continued on his way, following the misshapen footprints. He turned to his right, and then to his left, and then to his left again, and then to his right, moving all the while towards the hidden heart of the glacier.



AS HEINZ WENT on, the character of the ice changed, becoming even more ancient. The character of its inhabitants was altered too. Now, it was as if storm-clouds were moving through the primordial ice, as treacherous as the worst winter fog, parting occasionally to offer him sudden transitory glimpses of a world beyond the world: a world of gigantic flowers and huge trees, among which giant reptiles walked that were as big as houses. The largest of all wallowed in miry swamps, or moved in irresistible herds across lush plains.

He saw creatures that stood erect, as if they were men, although their heads were the heads of frogs or snakes. They bore exotic weapons in their hands. He glimpsed oceans choked by grey weed, where creatures with many legs and spiny shells congregated in limitless crowds, and he saw troubled skies where reptilian gliders with wings like bats flocked together, clattering their toothy beaks.

He also saw himself, although he knew that the appearance was a mere reflection, more ghostly by far than the reflection he saw when he looked down into the water of a lake in high summer.

Heinz had always been proud to see himself in the summer lake, tall and fair and handsome, but he could not be proud of the simulacrum captured by the ice, which seemed unnaturally old and pale. He took heart, though, from the blade which his reflection carried, so golden in the lamplight that it seemed to have brought something of the sun's light and heat into this illimitably dismal place.

When he looked to his left and his right he saw that there were, in fact, two reflections rather than one, which marched with him on either side, and not in any comforting fashion.

Still the footprints led him on, deeper and deeper into the glacier, until at last his lamp burned low and he had to refill it, leaving the stone jar at his waist half-empty.

When the light above the wick flared up again, fully renewed, it seemed that the walls of ice became windows, and that his reflections put on more substance than they had mustered before.

'Go back now,' said the phantom self which marched to his right, in a voice that seemed tender in spite of its coldness.

'I will not,' Heinz told himself. 'I will not turn around until I have found the girl, be she dead or alive, and killed the monster that took her.'

'If you go on,' said the phantom that marched on his left, in a similarly paradoxical tone, 'you might learn more than you care to know, about yourself and the world in which you live.'

'So be it,' said Heinz, and went on, following the footprints with ever-more ambitious strides.



There were armies in the ice-walls now, but they were not human armies. They were armies of beasts that walked like men. They carried weapons as men might carry weapons, but they were snakes and insects in their souls. They paid him no heed as they marched this way and that, and he understood that they could not see him at all – but there were disembodied eyes in the storm-clouds now, which stared down upon all warriors alike, including Heinz and his ice-reflections. The gaze of those awful eyes was full of contempt, but Heinz was not to be intimidated.

Nor was he intimidated when he saw that some trick of the light inside the ice was multiplying his reflections yet again, so that he marched in the middle of an infinite line, and yet was more alone than ever.

‘There is not one world but an infinite number,’ whispered the nearest phantom on his right. ‘A man is but one of a million potential selves, every one of which clamours night and day for admission into his soul. And how shall a man resist them, whose soul is soft and liquid? For ice can always enter into water, and dissolve itself there – and form again, stronger than before, when winter returns. When you leave these caves, Heinz von Aist, you will take us with you.’

‘I will not hear you,’ Heinz said. ‘I am myself, and myself alone.’

‘Time flies as water flows, in your world,’ whispered the nearest phantom on his left, ‘but it flows into the sea of oblivion, to be lost forever. In our world, time is frozen and everpresent. It is never lost but always with us. Your life has but three score years and ten to run, and might easily escape in an interval far less, cascading through your fingers even as you try to cup and hold it. We have eternity at our beck and call, and time is ours to shape as well as hold. If you leave these caves, Heinz von Aist, you will rush to your doom – and you will know it.’

‘I will not hear you,’ Heinz said. ‘I am here to slay a monster, and I cannot rest until I have done so.’

The reflections disappeared as he spoke, and the entire world within the ice vanished with them – and Heinz saw that he had emerged from a narrow tunnel into a vast cave, wider in extent than the village of Szerach.

**I**T SEEMED THAT Heinz had passed through the mantle of glacier-ice that had dressed the peak since the world was young, and had come into the heart of the mountain itself. The walls of the cave were black rock, but the rock was pitted with holes and crevices where crystals of ice clung like swollen stars or magnified diamonds. Some were as carefully constructed as gargantuan snowflakes, six-spiked and fractally ornamented; others were as shapeless as slime-moulds, inchoate masses of petrified protoplasm.

The black rock seemed to suck up the light of Heinz’s lamp, absorbing its light without returning any glow at all, digesting its heat without any easing of its appetite. The gemlike stars were more generous by far; it seemed that they gave back more light than any that impinged upon them, amplifying the rays as they were reflected but turning their colour from golden yellow to the purest white.

In the middle of the cave there was a platform of black rock, not unlike a crude altar, on which Gretchen Grumann’s body had been laid supine. The little girl did not seem to have been wounded, but it was impossible to tell whether she was dead or merely unconscious. Heinz knew that if she were alive she must be nearly frozen to death, and that he had to get her out of the cave quickly if she were to have the slightest chance of survival.

But where was the monster that had taken her?

The footprints led to the black dais and stopped, as if the creature that had brought the girl had simply stepped into the block and vanished into its solid darkness.

‘I am here!’ shouted Heinz von Aist. ‘I am here to kill the monster that feeds upon the children of Szerach. I am here to put an end to the evil that rides the wind from the Northern Wastes. Come out of the darkness and face me.’

He did not know what to expect, but he could not believe that he could utter a challenge in a place of this sort and be ignored.

He was right.

A figure stepped out of the solid darkness of the black altar, rising as it emerged, as if it had climbed to the top of a flight of stairs. Perhaps it was the creature that had carried off the girl, but if so it must have undergone a considerable metamorphosis while it ascended from the depths. The footprints



Heinz had been following had not been made by boots or by bare human feet, but the creature that faced him now was not merely human in shape but clothed and shod. Shape was all it had of humanity, though; its flesh and clothing were mere likenesses sculpted in ice. The face it wore was not unlike Heinz's own, although it was no mere reflection. The blade it carried was very similar to his, save only for the fact that it gleamed lunar white instead of solar yellow, even in the lamplight.

Heinz set down his lantern, and placed himself on guard.

The man of ice attacked immediately, thrusting so powerfully that Heinz's parry almost failed. Heinz realised that although his opponent's blade was made of ice, it was ice as hard as laminated iron folded and shaped by a master forger – and although his opponent's body was made of ice, it was ice as lithe and muscular as the flesh of an athlete at the peak of his perfection.

The man of ice danced forward, raining blows which Heinz could barely turn and block. Every time he caught the silver-gleaming blade with his own he felt a shiver of cold run along his arm.

Heinz was a skilful swordsman, by the admittedly mediocre standards of his folk, and he knew well enough how to catch an opponent's blade on the blunt side of his own, conserving the keener edge for attack. Alas, knowing and doing were two different things. The man of ice seemed to have been tutored to a higher standard, and he knew how to attack a blade as well as a man. Time and time again Heinz had to catch the blade of ice on the vulnerable part of his own sword, whose edge was soon ruined. When he attempted thrusts of his own his point was intercepted, and was soon curled and blunted.

All this was very surprising to Heinz, who had expected to be faced with some kind of brute, like a white bear or a silver wolf, armed only with teeth and claws. He felt certain that he could have stabbed any mere beast with precision enough to puncture its heart – but a man of ice, armed and armoured as well as cleverly-trained, was a very different matter.

As he defended himself, Heinz searched hard for any exploitable weakness that his opponent might have, but he could see none. His enemy moved at least as freely as he did, and was at least as strong as he. His enemy's

eyesight seemed to be as keen as the blade of ice. Worst of all, while Heinz fought like a humble mountain man fortunate to number aristocrats among his remoter ancestors, his enemy fought like a true aristocrat and artist-at-arms.

It seemed that Heinz could not win.

There was, he eventually realised, only one possible advantage that he had, which his enemy had not. There was only one additional weapon that he had at his disposal, which his enemy might be quite unready to face.

No swordsman, however accomplished, finds it easy to dispossess his opponent of his weapon, for the one thing that even an untrained fighting hand has the instinct to do is hold tight to a hilt. For this reason, even the most skilful swordsman may be taken by surprise, if only momentarily, by the dispossession of his opponent. Knowing this, Heinz allowed himself to be driven hither and yon, until he was at the exact position he desired to take – and then he allowed his sword to be struck from his hand, surrendering to the momentum of an uncommonly savage blow.

The momentum of the unresisted blow carried his opponent's sword far away to the right, leaving his enemy's chest unguarded. Even though Heinz no longer had a blade, the man of ice had been schooled too well to leave himself open to a thrust, and he immediately stepped back in order to recover his guard.

Two seconds later he would have come forward again, to run Heinz through – but in the space of those two seconds, Heinz used his right hand to snatch the hood from the lantern which lay upon the ground between his feet, and his left hand to snatch the jar half-full of oil from his belt. Without troubling to remove the bottle's stopper, he threw it at his opponent's feet, where it shattered on the unforgiving rock, spilling oil over the cavern floor. Then Heinz took up the unshielded lamp and turned it very briefly, so that the flame above the wick caught the spilled oil, but was not itself extinguished.

Then he stepped back, cradling the unhooded lantern in his arms.

Flames leapt up around the man of ice.

The heat could not have been enough to melt the creature, except perhaps to turn the soles of his frosty boots to liquid – but that



was not necessary. The magical ice of which the monster was made was like the walls of the icy corridors. It contained a world: a world to which the light and heat of fire were utterly inimical. Contained within the lantern's glass, the tiny flame dancing above the lantern's wick had been easy enough to parry and ward off, but the fire spreading out like a liquid lake upon the cold dark floor was another matter. The man of ice could not keep his inner self free of dangerous reflections, and the golden tongues that licked the insides of his legs were shafts of pure agony that caused him to stumble and to fall.

Once he was fallen into the hot lake, the man of fire was possessed through and through by searing flickers in his head and eyes, in his breast and belly, and in all his limbs. Nor was his weapon immune; its blade was momentarily filled with rivulets of pure gold.

The man of ice was strong, and his blade was good, but for a few precious seconds there was nothing of him but a solid flood of pain, distress and liquid light.

Within those seconds Heinz von Aist was able to recover his own sword, blunted though it was. He swung it with all his might, bringing the unsharpened edge down upon his enemy's head.

That head split – and having split, it shattered.



**T**HE THING OF ice exploded into a thousand pieces, and Heinz knew that he had won his challenge, even though there was no severed daemon's head for him to carry home in triumph.

He also knew that he had no time to waste. He replaced the hood on his lantern and seized the body of Gretchen Grumann. He was glad to find that the child had not grown rigid, but he dared not pause to make a closer investigation of her condition. He bundled her limp body over his shoulder and he ran for the entrance of the corridor that had given him access to the cave.

There, by the light of his lantern and the grace of his lenses of ice, he found the footprints that would lead him back to the outer world. They were still clear and unmistakable, even though the creature that had made them was dead.

Heinz ran as fast as his feet would carry him, fearful that the light of his lantern would not last.

Multitudinous other selves ran with him, a separate host to either side, and armies of beasts that ran like men hurried after them, as if in wrathful pursuit – but all of that was in the world within the ice. In the tunnel itself, he was alone, save for the burden he carried.

In the world within the ice the giant lizards continued to mind their own business, while the deceptive fog swirled around them and the storm-clouds gathered above their heads.

For the first time, Heinz heard the screeching cries of the flying reptiles, but their fury was remote, incapable of panicking his thunderous heart. In the world within the ice the pale-coloured creatures that were neither entirely insectile nor entirely serpentine fluttered and slid according to their fashion, but the malign glare of their half-formed eyes had no power over him at all.

He ran and he ran, never faltering in his stride, keeping his eyes glued to the trail that he was following, trusting that he was beyond the reach of the creatures in the ice.

Had he not been running uphill, he might have regained the mountainside before his lamp gave out, but as the slope grew steeper his legs grew tired and his stride shortened by degrees. When the flame flickered he was abandoned to the baleful illumination of the light within the ice.

It was a faint light, no brighter than starlight, but the ice was still as clear as window-glass and whatever moved within the inner world was perceptible, if only as a starshadow.

The starshadows rushed upon him avidly, utterly uncertain as to shape but unmistakable as to their hostile purpose. There might have been a million reflections of himself among them, and a million unhuman monsters, but Heinz had not the slightest desire to wait until they were close enough to make themselves clear, and to overwhelm him.

He reached up to his face and snatched away the lenses of ice, hurling them against the invisible wall.

They shattered, and their flying shards swallowed up the host of shadows, leaving him to a darkness that was almost absolute. It would have been absolute had it still been night in the valley, but the sun was shining



down on Szerach now, and upon the glacier too. Deep-set as he was, enough sunlight reached Uric's naked eyes to let him see where the walls of ice were, and where the path between them led.

He could no longer see the monster's footprints, but he had the light of the sun to guide him now, and he was able to go on. He could no longer run, but he shambled along the corridors of ice as rapidly as he could, and when he came to the brink of exhaustion he cried out at the top of his voice.

The name he called was Rudolf Grumann's, and it was Rudolf Grumann who came to find him. Then Rudolf Grumann shouted in his turn, until more help arrived. While others helped Heinz von Aist down the mountainside Rudolf Grumann carried his daughter to his own house, where he wrapped her in blankets and laid her on the hearth, until the colour came back into her cheeks.

When they brought the news to Heinz that the child was alive, he felt such a surge of triumph flood his heart that he knew that he would never feel its like again.

'I have slain the monster,' he said. 'I have defeated the evil that rides the wind from the Northern Wastes. I have been to the heart of the glacier, into the world of black rock whose stars are primordial ice, and I have killed its champion with the lantern-fire of civilization. I have done what my father never dared to do. I am a von Aist, like the man who came with Mandred Skavenslayer and stayed behind to seal his conquests. I have proved that the Middle Mountains belong to the Empire, and always shall.'

But the moment was short-lived, and there was something lodged in his heart, like a sliver of ancient ice, which told him that he would never know its like again.



**G**RETCHEN GRUMMANN grew up tall and fair and very beautiful – so beautiful, in fact, that she caught the eye of a merchant who lived in Talabheim, and married him. Widowed at twenty, she made a better second marriage. Widowed again at thirty, she removed herself to Altdorf, where she married twice more, becoming very rich in the process – but she never bore a child, and it

was said by everyone who met her as an adult that her heart was as cold as her womb.

Heinz von Aist was as good as his word when Dietmar Fichte was hounded out of Leiswitz as a black magician, and gave him lodgings in his own house – but the crisp mountain air was not to Fichte's liking, and he only spent one winter in Szerach before leaving again. Because he feared to go south he chose to go north, towards the Sea of Claws, and was never heard of again.

The last thing Heinz said to the scholar before he went was: 'I shall always be grateful for the help that you gave me, and doubly grateful for the fact that your second warning proved unnecessary. When the time came for me to rid myself of the lenses, I did so easily enough.'

'I pray that you will never need another pair,' was Fichte's parting word.

It seemed that the scholar's prayer was answered, because winter returned to Szerach again and again, but no child was ever stolen while Heinz von Aist remained the village headman.

Heinz never had any cause to tell his fellows that sometimes, in the depths of winter, the palms of his hands became frosty and mirror-bright, and that when he stared into them he sometimes saw disembodied eyes staring back from within, as if they were his own eyes looking back at him from some other world. When summer came again and his hands were warm, such apparitions always ceased to haunt him, but he remained troubled nevertheless by the notion that ice can always enter into water, and be dissolved therein, until it emerges again when winter returns, stronger than before.

In spite of such apparitions, it was not until he grew old that Heinz finally realised the truth that had been concealed within the second warning that Dietmar Fichte had given him.

When his hair turned white and his hands became desiccated, Heinz von Aist realised that the time of his life had fled as water flows, cascading through his helpless frost-bitten fingers as they failed to cup and hold it. He realised, too, that while everything he had ever been and done had swiftly passed away into the past, the ancient ice and its inner world had remained unchanged, and would remain unchanged for a thousand or a million human lifetimes more, implacable and unforgiving. ☉







# FIRESTARTER

A Nathan Creed Adventure by Jonathan Green

**W**ELL, SOMEONE knows who it was!' Antrobus Vetch yelled at the cowering Gravalax Mune, his reedy voice becoming even more high-pitched as he berated his underling. 'Someone informed the Arbites that the cargo had been brought into Hive Primus. We've already established it was those whispering Delaque snakes from the Network who first found out about it, but it wasn't them who told the authorities, was it, hmm?'

'No, my lord,' Mune replied, 'we are certain of that. The Network are information-brokers. They sold the information about the deal on to a third party. Your spies have confirmed that much.'

'Yes, my agents are very thorough,' Vetch said, suddenly quietly conspiratorial. He fixed his servant with his beady, black pinpricks of eyes. 'Well some of them are,' he added, 'but that doesn't change the fact that someone else informed the Adeptus Arbites, does it, hmm?'

'No, my lord,' Mune responded weakly.

'Well how do you suggest we find out who did, hmm?' Vetch screeched, flecks of spittle flying from his thin lips.

Gravalax Mune averted his gaze from the enraged Guilder, unable to bear his piercing gaze. His heart pounding, Mune desperately tried to think of a solution to Vetch's problem but his mind with fogged with panic. All he could think of was what his master might do to him if he didn't come up with a decent suggestion, or rather what the Guilder would get his servitor slaves to do to him.

Antrobus Vetch wasn't an imposing man physically. He was tiny, well under two metres tall, with spindly limbs and a head that seemed slightly overlarge in proportion to the rest of his body. The overall effect made Vetch seem like an overgrown infant. The long, jade green robe that he wore did nothing to detract from this appearance: when he stood up it covered his feet and dragged along the ground behind him.

But it was the power he wielded that was terrifying. He controlled practically all the trade in the sector, from Tunnel Town and Steel Canyon as far as Toxic Sump and Mercury Falls. Several gangs, including the notorious Orlock Dangar's Dogs, were in his pay. He ran a mining operation at Downer's Deep and effectively owned the populace of Piston Broke. At his word previously prosperous gangs had been declared outlaw, whole mutant settlements had been razed to the ground and half the local Ratskin tribes paid him fealty. It seemed that there wasn't anyone in the sector who didn't either owe Vetch a favour or have good reason to want the Guilder dead, and in a fair number of cases both. But Vetch was rich and riches bought good protection.

But wealth wasn't enough for Antrobus Vetch. What he wanted was acceptance from those he saw as his equals in the Spire. He wanted out of the Underhive and the ork had been his ticket uphive, until person or persons, as yet unknown, had sabotaged the smuggling operation! The ork had been destined for the private zoo of the planetary governor, Lord Helmawr himself. Vetch had wasted thousands on bribing off-world contacts, not a credit of which he would ever see again, thanks to the interference of the Network's client. And now Gravalax Mune was facing the wrath of the thwarted Guilder.

His mind racing, trying to think of a way out of the apparent impasse they had reached in trying to uncover Vetch's betrayers, Mune took in the chamber around him, as if looking for inspiration from anywhere at all.

Vetch's lair was sumptuously decorated as befitted a Guilder of his power and influence. Turquoise velvet drapes jostled with colourful, spider-silk wall hangings for the eye's attention. The glittering, stained glass dome of the chamber – depicting the skull and portcullis badge of the Merchant Guild – was supported at regular intervals by Malvolion jade-marble pillars. To these were chained Vetch's veiled and voluptuous concubines,



none of whom wore any item of apparel that might detract from the beauty of their physical form.

The small man leaned forward in his throne, knuckles whitening as his talon-like fingers gripped the arms. 'Well if we were waiting for you to think of a plan we'd be here 'til the feast of the Emperor's Ascension,' Vetch ranted. 'So it's a good thing that I already have one, isn't it, hmm?'

Mune breathed a sigh of relief. 'Please would you enlighten your humble servant, my lord?'

'We already know of someone who knows the identity of our informer,' Vetch said, a thin smile spreading across his pale lips.

'We do?' Mune said, a glimmer of hope entering his consciousness. Maybe he wasn't bound for Vetch's prison mine after all. Concentrating, he tried to marshal his thoughts. Then it came to him and he was filled with a renewed sense of foreboding: 'You don't mean—'

'The Network! Of course I do!'

Mune looked anxiously from one servitor to the next and found himself wondering how he'd look with a rock drill in place of an arm. 'But the Network have been declared outlaws. You did it yourself for their part in ruining the deal. There's a bounty on all their heads. Every two-bit gang from here to the Effluous will be on their tail, hoping to get even a fraction of the reward you're offering.'

'Which is why you have to find them first,' Vetch snapped, the smile gone from his face, 'or to be more precise, their leader. What's his name? Sisken, isn't it, hmm?'

'I believe so, my lord.'

'Well then, what are you waiting for?' Vetch sank back into his throne. 'Hire someone to capture Sisken if you have to and then do whatever's necessary to extract the information we require.'

'Yes, my lord,' Mune replied without any sense of optimism.

Mune bowed, turned and walked sullenly towards the bulkhead doors at the end of the chamber, two servitors dropping into line behind him.

'Oh and Mune?'

Mune turned back to his spiteful employer: 'My lord?'

'No mistakes. It can get very cold at the bottom of Deep Three in Stalag Slag Hole, you know, hmm?'

**W**ITH RATTLING thuds three cylindrical metal objects landed in the centre of the compound of an old water treatment plant. The anxious Delaque gangers stationed around the compound turned to see what had made the noise. In a series of small explosions the photon flash flare grenades detonated. The effect was that of three small suns going supernova in the centre of the compound, bathing the treatment plant and the Delaques in blinding white light.

Photo-visor in place, Nathan Creed – downhive desperado, hired gun and sharp-shooting bounty hunter – grabbed the chain links of the fence in front of him and started to climb. In four heartbeats he was over the razor wire-topped fence. In another three he had crossed the compound. It took only one to drop the screaming, disorientated leader with a tensed, flat-handed chop to the back of the man's neck. Creed caught the unconscious man as he slumped forwards and hefted the Delaque's dead weight over his shoulder. Without even breaking a sweat he covered the twenty metres to the gate.

A wide-muzzled stub gun, held in one hand, barked twice and the stumbling gate sentries fell. A third shot shattered the padlock holding the gates shut. Kicking them open with a booted foot the bounty hunter was through and out into the wastes of the badzones.

From the moment the grenades had detonated the whole operation had all taken less than a minute.

By the time any of the gangers recovered, their blurred vision slowly returning, Sisken, their leader, and the bounty hunter were long gone.



**'H**ERE HE IS, boss,' the hairy scummer said, pushing the doctor roughly before Gravalax Mune.

The Guilder agent looked the scientist up and down, taking in the long lab coat buttoned to the neck, smeared with blood and engine oil. A shiny metal plate made up half the dome of the scientist's head, and long, straggly white hair hung down to his shoulders below it.

'Doctor Isaiah Haze, I presume,' the man said with a snide grin.



'That's right,' Haze said, wringing his bony hands nervously, 'but most people call me Doc.'

Haze in turn studied the gangling figure in front of him. He was as thin as a lashworm and, from the grim set of his features, Haze could easily believe he had the temperament to match. The man wore voluminous purple robes that billowed around his scarecrow-like form when he moved, like a face-eater caught in a vent-gale. Hung around his neck on a heavy chain was the skull badge of the Merchant Guild. But what stood out more than any of this was the crest of his employer, an entwined gothic A and V, tattooed onto his forehead, his slicked-back hair making it stand out even more. Two imposing servitors – each bearing powerful-looking robotic limbs with cruelly sharp claws and crushing vices in place of hands – flanked the Guilder agent.

'And you are?' Haze asked, turning his attention back to the scarecrow.

'Mune. Gravalax Mune. Bond-servant of Guilder Antrobus Vetch.'

Doc Haze felt decidedly uncomfortable. He had been removed from his lab by two Underhive scum, who he had taken for gangers in need of his considerable surgical skills and had then dragged him into the badzones to this place – the ruined shell of an Ecclesiarchy chapel – to bring him before an agent of one of the most feared and powerful men in the Underhive.

The doctor looked around him. Fractured pieces of soot-blackened stained glass windows still clung to the leaded rims of gothic window arches. A granite pulpit, the faces of the figures carved around its sides defaced by heretics long ago, stood before the broken plinth of an altar. Ten metres above it hung a dusty black marble Imperial eagle, its wings outstretched over the end of the nave, its two heads surveying the scene below with cold stone eyes. The place must have been abandoned centuries ago as the city-mountain of Hive Primus grew ever upwards, taking the righteous with it, leaving only the wretched, the dispossessed and vermin to worship at this shrine to the Emperor of humanity.

'What can I do for you, Mune?'

'I want you to perform an operation for me. A very delicate operation.'

'And why couldn't it have been performed in my lab?'

'How shall I put this?' Mune mused. 'It is a sensitive matter. You will be handsomely rewarded, of course.' There was never any

suggestion that Haze would refuse and the doctor knew better than to even try.

'Well, where am I supposed to work? Where are the tools I'll need? And where's the patient?' Haze asked irritably, continuing to wring his hands in anxiety.

'This way,' Mune said turning and walking towards an archway in one wall. His hulking cyborg bodyguards followed. Feeling the muzzle of an autopistol pressed against his back, reluctantly Haze followed, accompanied by his own foul-smelling, unshaven 'bodyguards', their feet crunching on the broken tesserae of the ancient mosaic floor.

Mune led the way down a flight of wide, shallow steps into a vaulted crypt. And then Doc Haze saw something which made his heart leap.

Standing in the centre of the chamber was a reclining chair of gleaming steel sections and brass attachments. Numerous telescoping arms emerged from the upper part of the chair, ending in magnifying lenses, cutting blades and syringes. The gothic piece of antiquated machinery was supported by a brass pedestal, which had yet more pedals and levers sprouting from it. Iron clamps at strategic places completed the ensemble. It looked as if the device had been designed with maximum discomfort in mind.

'I know it's not what you're used to,' Mune said, taking in the crypt with a wave of an arm.

'Amazing,' the Underhive surgeon gasped. 'It's beautiful. A work of art.'

'Sorry?' Mune looked at the doctor, his brow furrowing. 'Oh, I see. The chair. Yes, I suppose it is.'

'What I wouldn't give for one of these.'

'Doctor?'

'Huh?' Haze looked up, Mune's enquiry shaking him from his reverie. 'Um, what procedure was it you wanted me to perform, exactly?'

'A cerebral fluid extraction,' Mune stated. 'I believe that it's colloquially known as a "brain drain".'

Doc Haze looked at the stick-thin man in amazement.

'You have performed one before, haven't you?' Mune asked, a hint of concern creeping into his voice.

'Of course,' Haze lied, excited at the prospect of being able to use the arcane surgical device. He had never performed such an operation in all his long years in the Underhive, but he knew the principles of it.



The procedure had a near legendary status among the medical practitioners of the Underhive. The process was complicated but basically involved extracting, and then purifying, fluid from the brain of a subject. The resulting extract, once mixed with a cocktail of stims, could then be injected into the brain of another, giving the receiver the original subject's memories. It was rumoured that some uphive nobles utilised the process to relive the thrill of exciting, dangerous or even life-threatening experiences without ever leaving the safety of the Spire. Assuming that the operation was successful, the only side-effect of a brain drain for the subject was that it left them with large gaps in their memory. Those who injected the cerebral fluid of others into their own brains faced the prospect of a crippling addiction, culminating in a total lose of their own identity as the memories of others fractured their minds into a myriad split personalities.

'I'll need to test the equipment, of course,' Doc Haze said slyly, running a hand over the cold metal of the chair.

'No time for that,' replied Mune. 'Our "patient" will be here anytime now.'

As if on cue there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs and Doc Haze looked round. Pushing a bald, manacled ganger before him, a tall man, swathed in a long leather coat and wearing a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face in shadow, entered the crypt. At his hips were holstered two large stub guns and as the man moved Haze caught glimpses of the skull and crossbones bounty seals attached to the long tails of his coat.

'Creed,' he stated coldly.

'Hello again, Doc,' the bounty hunter replied in a downhive drawl, seeming just as pleased to see the Underhive surgeon as Haze was to see him. Grabbing hold of his manacled prisoner with a strong hand, Creed pushed the ganger to his knees in front of the Guilder agent. 'Here's your man, Mune.'

As the ganger looked up at Mune, Haze felt suddenly sick. He already knew this man and now he knew what Antrobus Vetch was after. Haze wanted to vomit.

'Ah, Sisken,' Mune addressed the ganger. 'How the mighty are fallen, the leader of the Network brought low before Gravalax Mune.'

Although his eyes were hidden by dark-tinted goggles it was obvious the ganger was glaring at Mune. 'I know what you want,' Sisken hissed, 'but I'll never tell you! You'll never get it out of me!'

'Never tell me?' Mune pondered. 'I'm quite sure of that but never get it out of you?' He turned his gaze towards the gothic contraption and the filthy scientist standing next to it. 'I wouldn't be so sure about that.' Sisken's face fell as he followed Mune's gaze and his already sallow complexion turned almost completely white. 'Strap him in.'

As the Delaque gang leader struggled and protested futilely, the two scummers removed Sisken's manacles and the servitor bodyguards forced him into the operating chair. Doc Haze secured the last restraint around the ganger's head.

'Work quickly, doctor,' Mune instructed Haze. 'But remember - no mistakes!'

Muttering something unintelligible to himself under his breath, the surgeon set to work.

The bounty hunter looked on, his face an emotionless mask. As the doctor positioned the syringe at the base of his prisoner's head Creed took a crumpled packet of smokes from a pocket. Putting a cheroot to his lips he began looking his lighter.

Haze looked up. 'You know I don't like people smoking when I'm operating.'

The bounty hunter shot him a dark look and, producing a gleaming lighter from another pocket, lit the cheroot.

'Just get on with it!' Mune snapped and the whirring of servos from one of the servitor's prosthetic claws encouraged Haze to put aside all thoughts of hygiene and proceed without further complaint.

But all the while his mind was racing. He knew Sisken, leader of the Delaque gang of information-brokers called the Network. It was they who had sold him the information about Antrobus Vetch's operation to bring an ork into Hive Primus for Lord Helmawr's private zoo. And it had been Haze who had leaked the same information to the authorities, forcing Vetch to dump the illegal alien in the Underhive. Haze had planned to study the ork's regenerative abilities so that he might apply them to his own surgical skills, making his services invaluable to any Underhive gang. And what could Antrobus Vetch want with the leader of the Network other than to find out who sold him out? Once Haze had carried out the brain drain on Sisken anyone injecting the man's cerebral fluid would discover Doc Haze was the culprit Vetch was after and he would be as good as dead!

But how could he get out of the inevitable? If he botched the brain drain on purpose Mune would have him killed on the spot! And even



if he could somehow dispose of Mune and all his bodyguards – not to mention Creed – Vetch would only send others to find out what happened. Whichever way he looked at it he was doomed! If only he had more time maybe he could tamper with the evidence but time was one thing he didn't have. Then he noticed the small phial of lubricant sitting on the tray next to the reclining chair and a smile spread across his lips as he began to formulate a plan.

There was the sudden roar of gunfire and shattering glass from the chapel above. Haze jumped, almost stabbing his patient with the syringe.

'We're under attack!' Mune squealed.

Unholstering his two wide-calibre stub guns, Creed ran up and out of the crypt, taking the steps two at a time.

'Now you'll be sorry,' Sisen hissed in a voice barely more than a sibilant whisper.

'Go!' Mune yelled at the two scummers who were now looking first at the Guilder agent and then at each other in agitated confusion. 'The operation must be completed!'

At a nod from Mune one of the hulking servitors herded the reluctant scummers out of the crypt.



**C**REED SPINTEED across the broken floor of the chapel as bullets and las-rounds impacted in the crumbling wall behind him. Ducking down beneath the glassless arch of one of the ruined chapel's windows he took a deep breath, letting it out in a long, controlled exhalation as he readied himself. 'Let's go, girls,' he muttered under his breath and then rose into a half-crouch, pointing his guns over the sill of the window.

Peering across the rubble-strewn plaza in front of the chapel, at first glance Creed picked out eight pale-skinned, bald-headed figures positioned behind the ruins of concrete walls thirty paces from him, although he suspected there were probably as many more hidden out of sight. Each of them wore a pale-brown leather coat, not unlike his own apart from the emblem of a sump snake on the lapels – the badge of House Delaque – and their eyes were protected by black-tinted goggles or implanted filter screens. They were armed with an assortment of autoguns, bolt pistols and las-weapons.

Another round of fire peppered Creed's position but this time he replied with two shots of his own, fired off in quick succession. A large Delaque wielding an autogun, exposed in a breach in the barricade, fell backwards, blood already oozing from two bullet wounds in his chest. Easy target, Creed thought.

There was the chatter of autogun fire as the ganger's trigger finger spasmed in his death-throes, cries of anger from the Delaques and a yelp of pain. Creed grinned to himself.

'Come on, fellas,' he muttered under his breath, 'it's no fun when you do it to yourselves!'

Then the bounty hunter was aware of the crunching of mosaic tiles under booted feet behind him and the scummers dashed into cover in the chapel, the threatening form of Mune's servitor bodyguard behind them.

Another fusillade of shots smacked into the crumbling chapel. Creed rose onto his haunches, fired off another couple of dumdum rounds and another Delaque dropped, blood dribbling from a hole in his filter screen. The bounty hunter ducked back into cover as the rest of the besieging gangers replied to his attack with more las-blasts and bolter rounds.

The two scummers looked at him in awed amazement and Creed heard one of them gasp, 'He's good!'

He glowered at them as a searing las-round gouged its way through the sill of the window. 'When you ladies are quite ready,' he drawled, 'maybe you'd like to earn the right to keep your stinking hides?'

In embarrassment the hired scum fumbled the safeties off their autopistols and aimed haphazard fire at the Delaque gang, hitting almost everything but the gangers. Creed made up for their waste of ammunition, making each one of his shots count. One dumdum round clipped a man's shoulder, sending the Delaque's own raking auto-fire streaking towards the roof of the dome. A second round took out another ganger's kneecap, the screaming man dropping his pistol as he clamped his hands over the ragged wound and his leg gave way under him. A third hit the lasgun gripped by a snarling Delaque, his face a mess of scar tissue, ruining its firing mechanism and sending the weapon flying into the ruins.

The explosive bark of Creed's point six-six calibre stub guns and the wild rattling chatter of the scummers autopistols was joined by a chugging roar as the servitor, its metal feet



planted squarely on the ground, opened fire with an autocannon attachment mounted on its grotesquely over-large robotic right arm.

Under the watchful eyes of the Imperial eagle, the chapel's defenders did their best to repel the Delaques.



**T**HE CONCUSSIVE force of an explosion rocked the crypt. Doc Haze's sweat-slicked hand slipped on the handle of a control lever. 'No mistakes, remember?' his Guilder overseer screeched as he almost rammed the syringe needle deeper into the Delaque leader's brain, rather than removing it.

'I'm doing my best,' Haze snapped back, 'considering the circumstances!'

Gravalax Mune said nothing else, merely indicating the monstrous slave-machine standing next to him, with a flick of his head. Cursing under his breath, the doctor withdrew the syringe from the silent, semi-lobotomised Sisken and disconnected the phial containing the sample of cerebral fluid. Haze gripped the phial tightly in his hand, lest it slip from his sweaty palms. He wasn't only sweating because he was working in a war-zone – more than anything it was due to his increasing sense of anxiety at how he was going to avoid giving Antrobus Vetch's agent the evidence that it was he who had scuppered his master's plans!

For a moment he actually considered dropping the glass container – he could make out it slipped from his grasp when the next explosion came from the chapel above – but he realised just as quickly that it would be futile. Mune would have him killed there and then, and ask questions later. He would have to think of another way out of this. And then it came to him.

'I just have to purify the sample,' Haze explained to the Guilder agent, 'then we'll be done.'

Placing his own body between Mune and the centrifuge device fixed to the back of the operating chair Haze emptied Sisken's brain drain sample into the purification chamber with one hand while he rummaged in the pocket of his grimy lab coat with the other.



**W**ITH A WHOOSH of super-heated air a second fireball streaked through the chapel window and impacted against the huge Imperial eagle. 'Helmawr's rump!' Creed cursed as he felt the heat-wash on his skin. Someone's using a flamer, he thought. Looks like things could get a little hot!

For the first time in a long time Creed felt outgunned. His initial assault on the Network had used up the last of his grenades. All he had left now were his two stub guns, with a couple of dozen rounds in total, and as a last resort his bootknife. Time I paid a long overdue visit to Hackbut's Arms House, he considered, if I make it through this.

There were only three of them left defending the chapel. The taller of the two scum had stupidly stuck his head around the side of a pillar to assess the situation only to have it blown off by a bolter shell. The fat scummer had gone to pieces after that, being possessed by a palsy that made his poor aim even worse.

The Delaques seemed to have called up some reinforcements. Through the smoke Creed caught glimpses of a man with a shock of orange hair moving among the bald gangers. Hired gun, the bounty hunter mused. Probably the one with the flamer.

At that moment a third ball of fire hurtled through the open archway like a comet and slammed into the servitor. The blast threw the hulking slave-machine backwards into the chapel's altar. The heat of the fireball melted cable-bundles and ignited the ammunition packed into the breach of its autocannon attachment. The resulting explosion shredded the organic parts of the servitor and tore apart its bionic implants.

Creed looked across at the remaining scummer to see the fat man lying in a puddle of his own pooling blood. Several shells from the servitor's exploding arm had hit him from behind. 'Friendly fire,' the bounty hunter muttered grimly to himself.

Two more shots took out two more gangers and emptied both stub guns. Ducking down again and pressing his back against the wall Creed reloaded both weapons with practised ease. He would have to make every round count: after this there weren't enough for another reload.

Taking a deep breath he flung himself sideways, rolling past the open doorway and taking out two Delaque juves who had been advancing while he reloaded. Back in cover he peered around the doorjamb and did a swift headcount.



'Well, girls,' he said, addressing his smoking guns. 'Three down and one to go in here. At least five of them still out there, along with the new hothead. My kind of odds!'

Creed brought down one Delaque after another while – compared to the crackshot gunslinger – all they seemed capable of was peppering the chapel walls with bolter shell impact craters.

And then Creed was suddenly aware of something else. The incessant gunfire had stopped. All he could hear was the crackling of the flames around him, the pinging of his own cooling stub guns and the sound of feet running away over the broken plaza. Cautiously the bounty hunter looked around the doorjamb to see the flapping coat tails of half a dozen Delaque gangers fleeing into the gloom of the wastezones beyond. But on the other side of the plaza the orange-haired man still moved between the fractured concrete walls, ignoring the fleeing gangers.

'Well, girls,' Creed said. 'One to go.'

With a scream like a discharging plasma cannon three fiery missiles crashed into the chapel. Creed was thrown to the ground by the force of the blasts and covered his head as he was showered with splinters of glass and burning shards of masonry.

'Looks like it's time for a change of plan,' the bounty hunter muttered, as the Imperial eagle burned.



**D**OC HAZE POURED the last drop of the scummer's brain drain sample into the centrifuge and with the practised sleight of hand of a sideshow con artist, slipped both phials into his pocket. At the flick of a switch the device started spinning. Yet another explosion shook the chamber, dust showering from cracks in the vaulted ceiling. 'How long?' Mune snapped.

'A couple of minutes,' Haze hazarded.

'That's about two minutes longer than you've got.'

Both the scientist and Guilder agent spun round on hearing Creed's distinctive drawl behind them.

'What do you mean?' Mune demanded.

'Work it out yourself,' the bounty hunter snarled, pointing at the unconscious Sissen. 'Your guest's friends have come to rescue him back and they've got some help. It's time we were out of here!'

'But how?' Doc Haze panicked, wringing his hands. 'The only way out of here is the way you just came in!'

'Oh, I don't think so,' Creed said, turning his piercing gaze on Mune. 'I doubt Antrobus Vetch's trained lashworm would have set all this up without including more than one escape route. Where is it?' Creed said, spinning round and pointing a stub gun at the tattoo on Mune's forehead.

Mune glanced towards his remaining bodyguard.

'Don't even think about it,' Creed hissed. 'I'll put a bullet between your eyes if you so much as blink.'

Yet another explosion from above rocked the crypt and the roof shook as something heavy crashed down onto the floor of the chapel above.

'First give me the sample,' Mune said, reaching out a hand.

Doc Haze looked to the bounty hunter. 'Do it,' Creed said.

The surgeon halted the spinning centrifuge and removed the phial containing the partially 'purified' extract. He tossed it to the Guilder who caught it with a grimace of annoyance.

'Now we go,' Creed stated, pulling back the hammer of the stub gun.

Saying nothing, Mune turned and moved swiftly towards a shadowy archway, previously hidden in the shadows of the far corner of the crypt. In a moment he was through it and gone, followed by the stomping servitor. The bounty hunter and the scientist crossed the crypt quickly towards the exit. When they were only metres away from the archway a ball of white-hot flame streaked over their heads, scorching the hairs on the back of Creed's neck. The fireball smashed into the roof above the archway, sending lumps of smoking rubble crashing down in front of it.

Creed spun round. Standing at the foot of the steps was the orange-haired man he had seen with the besieging gangers. Creed saw that as well as a shock of orange hair, the man had a nasty scar running along the side of his head, from his right temple down to behind his ear under the hairline. He was wearing a pair of black leather boots that covered his legs up to the knees. As well as a grubby pair of rat-hide britches and an unwashed, sleeveless undershirt the man wore a black sleeveless jacket, that looked like it could have been crudely stitched together



from spider-skin and that left his muscular arms bare. His features were set in an expression of fury or pain – Creed couldn't tell which – and he advanced with his hands open without a weapon in sight.

Questions crowded Creed's mind. Why was a hired gun, who had previously been wielding a flamer to such devastating effect only moments before now standing in front of him unarmed? Why was the hired gun still here when those who had hired him had fled?

Creed felt a tug on his arm and looked round to see the crazed scientist quaking behind him, his expression imploring him to move.

'What are you so scared of?' Creed asked Haze angrily. 'He's one man and he's unarmed!'

'Because the good doctor recognises me,' the man said, a cruel smile playing over his grimacing features. 'You do recognise me, don't you, Doc?' the man stated. 'No, don't bother answering, I can tell from the look of ashen-faced panic that you do.'

'I don't believe I've had the pleasure,' Creed snarled, levelling both stubbers at the stranger.

'The name's Ignus Mander,' the man said and then winced. 'My quarrel's not with you, bounty hunter, but if you get in my way I will kill you.'

'And anyone who gets in the way of Nathan Creed has got a whole heap of trouble coming!' Creed retorted, starting to squeeze both triggers.

'Have it your way,' Mander replied coldly.

'Creed!' hissed Doc Haze who was still cowering behind the tall, imposing figure of the bounty hunter. 'Just shoot him and then we can get out of here!' Despite his desperation to leave the doctor seemed rooted to the spot.

Creed increased the pressure from his trigger fingers. Suddenly he gave a yelp of pain and let go of both guns. Creed looked down at the palms of his hands. Both were covered in large red weals and blistering skin, which stung like a milliasaur bite. Inexplicably, in a matter of seconds the metal of the stubbers had become white-hot, as if they had been heated in a furnace. Creed hugged his hands to his sides in an attempt to dull the pain.

'Now we run!' Haze shouted, pulling sharply on Creed's arm.

The burning pain still overwhelming his senses, forgetting his precious guns the bounty hunter allowed himself to be dragged away by the desperate doctor, who now seemed to have found the motivation to flee.

The two of them stumbled through the archway and into the passageway beyond, following Mune's escape route. Vetch's agent and his heavy-duty bodyguard were gone and neither Creed nor the doc knew which ripperjack's nest the tunnel would lead them into next. All they knew was that it would lead them away from Ignus Mander and that was good enough for now.

As the two of them fled Creed heard Mander calling after them, 'You can run, Doc! You can run!' And run they did.



**D**OC HAZE WAS panting for air like a dying asthmatic, as he and Creed came to a halt behind a power relay station. The bounty hunter seemed to have recovered himself after the initial shock of Mander's attack but his hands were a mess of suppurating blisters. After gasping for air, doubled-up with his hands gripping his knees for a minute or two, he took a roll of bandage from a pocket and bound Creed's hands. 'How does it feel now?' Doc Haze asked.

'Like I washed my hands in a chem pool,' Creed grumbled, 'but I'll live. Look, we can't hang around here for long before this Mander catches up with us again, so when you're done let's get moving and maybe you can tell me exactly who you've skavved off this time!'

Doc Haze cast his mind back to the last time he had seen Ignus Mander and felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

'If I tell you the whole story, Creed, you must promise to protect me from him. The man's a lunatic! You must kill him! Help me now and I'll see you're well-rewarded.'

'Like last time?' the bounty hunter muttered sullenly.

'We came to an agreement.'

'Huh!' Creed grunted. 'It was the same after the Fester Hole incident.'

'I fixed your arm after your run-in with the Kaynn Clan Gang, didn't I?' the doc protested. 'This time I'll make it up to you. Any upgrade you want.' The doc faltered at these words as he considered what he was about to tell the bounty hunter. 'We'll think of something.'

Creed's face remained an inscrutable mask as he cast his eyes back over the area of wasteland they had crossed.



'All right, Doc,' he said at last. 'Although my better judgement tells me I'm a scavvy's uncle for doing so, it looks like we're in this together now so it's in my best interests if I know as much about this scavver as possible if I've got to take him out.'

Quelling the sickening fear that gripped him, Doc Haze began to relate the whole sorry tale to his would-be protector. 'It was a couple of years ago. I tended to Mander after he was shot in a gunfight out at Steel Canyon. I pulled seven pieces of lead out of him but one remained: a bullet lodged in his brain. By rights it should have killed him, only it hadn't. I tried to remove it but something went wrong.'

Haze looked at Creed guiltily and saw at once that the bounty hunter's previously emotionless features were now contorted in a grimace of horror. 'How many times have you fixed me up, Doc?'

'It was a one-off. Honestly! To this day I still don't know what went wrong,' the doc gabbled. 'The more I picked at the bullet the further I ended up pushing it into his cerebellum. You know what some tech-biologists believe about that part of the brain?'

'No, Doc, but something tells me it's got something to do with how Mander made my girls give me the kiss-off.'

'It is popularly held in scientific circles that the cerebellum is the source of psychic powers.'

'Wyrds,' the bounty hunter said with a scowl.

'Exactly,' Haze confirmed. 'Only in some people these powers lie dormant in their subconscious. In most cases these powers never reveal themselves, but then in others some catalyst awakens these latent powers – the onset of adolescence, a sharp blow to the head—'

'Having a bullet pushed into your brain by some lunatic surgeon!'

Haze looked away from Creed rubbing his hands together nervously.

'And how do these powers manifest themselves?' Creed pressed.

'Some psykers can control others by willpower alone, others can move objects physically with their minds and some can manipulate the molecules in objects or even the air around them to heat them to boiling or melting point.'

'So Mander's a pyro.'

'Looks like it.'

'How come Mander's never come after you before? I sure as hell would've done!' Creed said darkly.

'I was based down in Perdition back then. Once I'd patched Mander up as best I could and handed him back to his gang-friends heavily-sedated, Veral and I packed up and moved out. I suppose it was only a matter of time before he caught up with me.' Haze looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Thinking about it, once the Network got involved it was inevitable. Those information-junkies and their "Father" don't miss a trick, unfortunately! This way it looks like Mander got the chance to have his revenge and get paid for it at the same time.'

'Whatever,' the bounty hunter drawled. 'Let's face facts. Mander's going to catch up with us sooner or later, I haven't got my guns and that wasn't a flamer he was using during the assault on the chapel at all.'

'Sounds like a pretty concise summary of the situation.' Grimacing, Ignus Mander stepped out from behind the transformer station, fists clenched in front of him.

'How long have you been standing there?' Haze squealed.

'Long enough,' Mander said and winced again. 'I think the only bit you missed out, Doc, was the fact that the bullet you left inside my head means I live in a state of perpetual agony that even drugs can't suppress!'

'I know the perfect cure for a headache,' Creed snarled. 'It's just a shame I haven't got my pain-killers with me.'

'I've already told you once, you're not my enemy,' Mander said, addressing the bounty hunter, 'but if you keep on like this you soon will be.'

'We'll see about that,' Doc Haze retorted, displaying a little more bravado now he knew that Creed was fighting for him. 'You'll rue the day you came after Doc H – aargghhh!' the doc screamed, and doubled up in crippling, burning agony.

'Doc?' Creed half-whispered. 'What are you doing to him?' the bounty hunter demanded, turning back to Mander. The pyromaniac was staring intently at the doc and Creed was sure he could see wisps of flickering flame dancing around the psyker's clenched fists. 'Oh no you don't,' Creed hissed and charged at the wyrd.

Mander immediately turned his piercing gaze on the running bounty hunter. Creed was sure he could see distant fires, burning like cold stars within the pyro's unblinking eyes. Creed faltered, feeling his whole body



flush with heat, as if he had run five kilometres rather than five metres. He blinked as sweat ran into his eyes.

Putting a hand to the slick-wet skin of his forehead he wiped the sweat from above his eyes. His brow felt like it was burning up as his body temperature soared. It was as if he was suffering from the worst case of sewer-swamp fever ever recorded. He could feel his soaking undershirt clinging to his back. Then he realised that even his bandages were becoming damp as sweat ran down his arms. He began to feel dizzy as the unbearable heat threatened to overcome him.

Without his guns and in danger of becoming totally incapacitated as he was, Creed reacted instinctively. Turning, through sweat-blurred eyes Creed saw Doc Haze's horrified face mere metres away. Forcing his legs to move, overheating muscles protesting bitterly, the bounty hunter staggered forward, bundling the panicking scientist in front of him. His head spinning, Creed saw the black ellipse of an open shaft ahead of them. As they closed the distance between themselves and the hole Creed heard the sound of running water growing ever louder over the pounding of his own heart. At the same moment the smell of scorched leather assaulted his nostrils.

Looking down at his coat as he ran, Creed could see smoke rising from the battered material. With a whoomph the flapping coat tails burst into flame. Without a moment's hesitation the bounty hunter pulled the coat off and flung it aside, losing his hat at the same time. Then the black gulf was before them and, shoving the doc ahead of him, Creed half jumped and half fell in the cold, enveloping darkness.

He hit the fast-flowing stream next to the dazed doc and a cloud of steam rose from the water around him. At once Creed could feel his body temperature dropping to a more healthy level. He sat up and let out a long sigh. Doc Haze was sitting stunned in the middle of the watercourse, the effluent stream, which glowed with faint phosphorescence, swirling past him.

'I never want to feel like that again,' Creed said, running a wet hand through his close-cropped greying hair.

Doc Haze looked at him for a moment, his mouth open in amazement.

'How can you be so calm?' he managed at last. 'Mander just tried to make you spontaneously combust!'

'Come on, doc,' Creed said grimly, ignoring the scientist's question. 'We've got to keep moving. That bastard isn't going to stop now until both of us look like the main course at a scavvy barbeque.'

The pipe was almost large enough to stand upright in. Following the flow of the polluted water downstream, crouching slightly, the bounty hunter and the scientist jogged into the gloom



**G**RAVALAX MUNE stood in front of the heavy bulkhead door, dusting off his robes and tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for security clearance. The servitor stood statue-still behind him, no concept of 'being kept waiting' or 'impatience' within its programmed brain.

There was a sudden click followed by an electronic whirr and a port opened within an eye-socket of the Guilder skull badge that formed an integral part of the steel door. An optical probe, looking like an iron and glass eyeball, emerged from the hole on a telescopic armature. It stopped centimetres from Mune's face. The Guilder agent glared at the probe. The probe whirred and clicked as its camera eye focused and then jerked back abruptly.

The artificial eye descended on its metal stalk so that it could scan the Guild badge hung around Mune's neck. After a few seconds there was an electronic chirrup and the probe retracted back into the port, which closed behind it. Hinges groaning, with a hiss of compressed air the bulkhead door swung slowly open.

'Access granted,' the tinny voice said in a metallic monotone. Taking a deep breath Mune stepped through the doorway into Antrobus Vetch's lair, the silent servitor clunking after him.



**C**AUTIOUSLY CREED peered over the edge of the pipe while the panting doc hung back. The pipe had twisted and turned, like so many other conduits between the domes of Hive Primus, until it came to an abrupt end in the side of another derelict dome. 'Well?' Haze shouted over the background roar. 'How far down is it?'



The phosphorescent liquid swirling around Creed's booted feet ran out of the end of the sluice pipe and fell several metres before joining the hundreds of gallons of muddy brown water pouring out of a much wider opening below them. The stench of hydrogen sulphide assailed Creed's nostrils as an endless stream of pollutants thundered into the effluent lake twenty metres below.

'Put it this way, doc, the fall won't kill you,' the bounty hunter said with no trace of humour in his voice. But whatever's in that lake might, he added to himself.

'Do you know where we are?'

'Yes. The local chem-prospectors call it the Bilgespill Drop, although you won't find many of them out here without gasmasks and protective suits because of the toxins constantly being pumped into the dome. The air-recyclers aren't that reliable down here.'

'So where do we go from here?'

Creed looked back along the shaft: 'Well, back that way is our friendly pyromaniac. So I guess our only real option is down.'

Clinging onto one side of the pipe's mouth, the bounty hunter leaned out over the end and scanned the surrounding area for another way down. A ripperjack's-swing away was a rusted ladder that descended to a grilled walkway that was sprayed by the waterfall. Creed pulled himself back into the pipe and looked the scientist up and down. 'Doesn't look good,' he sighed.

'Could we lower ourselves down?' Haze asked, obviously not relishing the prospect of jumping.

'You got a rope?'

The doc edged closer to the bounty hunter and dared a glance over the edge of the pipe. 'By the Spire!' he gasped.

'Doc!' Creed yelled over the deafening roar of the water. 'Can you swim?'

The bounty hunter was suddenly aware that he was heating up again. Wishing that his worst fears would prove unfounded he turned around slowly. Standing in mid-stream ten metres away, his grimace of pain and anger illuminated by the phosphorescence in the water, was Ignus Mander. As his body temperature began to rise it seemed to Creed that Mander's orange hair was aflame at the tips.

Mander relaxed his hands, the wisps of flame dissipated and the bounty hunter was freed of the unbearable burning sensation that was gripping his body. 'Caught between a rock and a hard place,' the pyro taunted. 'Or

should that be a drop and a hot place?'

Quickly, Creed weighed up the various options. He could try and take Mander now: he was sure he could beat him in a fistfight, despite the pyro's obvious upper body strength. But would he be able to reach Mander before he cooked him from the inside out?

'Do you know what it's like, Doc, living in constant pain?' Mander asked walking slowly towards them. 'A thousand white-hot needles lancing every nerve ending whenever you move?'

'It was an accident!'

'I suppose I should be grateful though,' Mander said, ignoring Haze's plea. 'If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be able to do this!'

The pyro's fists bunched. Creed and Doc Haze doubled up in agony as they were assaulted by a blast of pyro-kinetic energy.

Nothing else for it, the bounty hunter decided as his head began to swim. Gritting his teeth against the building pain Creed threw himself bodily out of the end of the pipe grabbing the doc by the collar of his lab coat as he did so. Then there was nothing but air beneath them. Semi-conscious from Mander's assault the two men dropped like stones, only dimly aware of the rotten egg stink of the torrent of the effluent waterfall buffeting them until with a tremendous splash they hit the roiling surface of the lake below. Oily waters closed over them and they sank into the murky grey depths.



**N**ATHAN CREED opened his eyes, which immediately started to sting in the polluted waters. Freed from the agony of his own body overheating by the enveloping waters of the lake Creed's natural survival instinct took over. From the light of glowglobes above permeating the turbid waters he could see the doc only a matter of metres away, dragging himself towards the surface of the lake with unpractised strokes. Not many inhabitants of the Underhive could swim at all – there weren't many bodies of water this close to Hive Bottom that were safe to swim in, for one reason or another – but from Creed's long years of experience in the badzones he would have drowned long ago if he hadn't been able to swim.



The two men clambered out of the stinking green pool and began the unpleasant task of cleaning themselves off. Doc Haze wiped a mass of sludgy suds from the metal dome of his head and then, grimacing, doubled up as he vomited polluted water from his protesting stomach.

'You don't want to swallow too much of that stuff, Doc,' Creed said, trying to remove glistening jelly-slime from his numbed right arm.

'I didn't intend to,' Haze coughed before retching again.

'We can't hang around here,' the bounty hunter said, matter-of-factly. 'Mander will find a way down sooner or later.'

Creed was suddenly overwhelmed by unfamiliar emotions. Here was an opponent who would not stop, driven by pain and hatred to exact his vengeance no matter what. Creed had never been in such a situation before and he didn't like it. For the first time in his life in the Underhive he felt utterly helpless.

The bounty hunter looked out across the broken landscape of the dome.

Or perhaps I'm not so helpless after all.

In the distance, glowing chlorine-green gas vented into the toxic atmosphere of the dome and amongst the others acrid smells assailing his nose Creed could pick out the distinctive reek of methane. They were standing at the edge of a gas-geyser field: pockets of flammable gas produced by various industrial processes and life-support systems elsewhere in the Hive collected here, issuing forth in blasts at regular intervals when the pressure became too great. Creed smiled. It was time to use this inhospitable terrain to his advantage.

Haze spat the last of the muck from his mouth: 'Where do we go from here?'

'That way,' Creed said, pointing with his left arm towards the cracked plain and the venting gas-geysers.



**W**HERE ARE YOU going to run now, bounty hunter?' Ignus Mander asked, his tone derisive.

The bounty hunter stood only a metre away from the edge of a precipice that ran a hundred metres in either direction. Doc Haze was slumped against a rockrete boulder close

by, coughing violently. It looked like the doc hadn't got long to go in this toxic environment. Mander had the two of them cornered at last. There was no more running for them now, not unless they wanted to save Mander the trouble of killing them – but where would be the satisfaction in that?

The bounty hunter looked a mess, his close-cropped greying hair wet with oily water, his undershirt stained brown by slime and effluent, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side, covered in angry red weals, and grubby bandages, oozing pus, wrapped around both hands. The doc had called him Creed, Mander considered.

'So, which one of you shall I kill first?' Despite the white-hot needles lancing his brain, Mander savoured the moment, looking first to Creed, then to the doc, then back to—

The bounty hunter sprang forward, rapidly closing the distance between them. The pyro hit him with a bolt of energy but in his arrogant complacency he had given the man the time he needed.

Creed bowled into Mander, and sent them both sprawling in the carbon-black dust. Instinctively, Mander threw out his hands to break his fall and his psyker power was broken.

'Not so tough now, are you?' the bounty hunter spat, wrestling Mander to the ground by the shoulders.

'We'll see about that,' Mander retorted and brought his knee up into Creed's stomach. The bounty hunter doubled up, winded, and Mander pushed his opponent away. Faster than any ordinary man, the grizzled gunslinger was up and at him again, each punch he landed like the pounding of a sledgehammer. Mander retaliated, his muscles bunched.

The two men traded blows, marking each other hit for hit. Creed was determined to keep Mander occupied with his fists so that he wouldn't have the opportunity to use his pyro-kinetic powers. However, despite the bounty hunter's resilience, it was obvious that Creed had been weakened by the hunt.

Slowly but surely, Mander was winning. Finally, in a skilfully executed move, the pyro kicked Creed's legs out from under him and as his knees buckled, delivered a double-handed blow to his chin. The bounty hunter collapsed into the dirt, his sides heaving as he gasped for air in the polluted atmosphere.



Mander clenched his fists, ready to deliver a killing blast of pyro-kinetic energy. 'Well, do you have anything to say before I roast you like a spitted swine?'

'Yes,' Creed said, spitting a mouthful of ash from his bleeding mouth. 'Can a condemned man have one last smoke? You've won, Mander, so let me die with good, honest tobacco smoke tarring my lungs.'

Flushed with exhilaration, having won the fight, Mander felt the magnanimity of the victorious. He was even almost able to forget about the continual splitting headache he lived with every minute of his life. 'Why not?'

With his left hand Creed pulled a sodden, crumpled packet of cheroots from a pocket in his britches.

'They're a bit wet,' he said, almost apologetically.

'Not a problem,' Mander replied.

The pyro leant over the stricken man, bringing his hand close to the tip of the soaking cheroot Creed placed between his lips. With a flick of Mander's fingers the end of the cheroot sizzled into glowing life, the tightly wrapped tobacco drying in seconds.

'Thanks,' Creed said, 'idiot!'

Complacency had been his enemy again. Mander hadn't seen Creed clasp the piece of broken pipe in his strengthening right hand. The improvised maul connected with the side of Mander's head with a crack. The blow sent him reeling. Suddenly unable to maintain his balance, or to use his legs properly, Mander collapsed heavily over of a small rent in the ground.

His head ached but, it slowly dawned on him, not with the lancing needle-pain of the bullet lodged in his brain. This was a dull throbbing ache at the side of his head that blurred his vision. My skull's probably fractured, he thought, almost happily, but the bullet's been dislodged, maybe only slightly, but no more constant agony!

In the same instant Mander realised – without having to test the fact – that his powers were gone along with the agonising pain.

His eyes swimming in and out of focus, the stunned Mander looked towards the figure of Creed advancing towards him. The bounty hunter still gripped the rusted iron pipe in one bandaged hand and the now-lit cheroot was held between the thumb and forefinger of the other. There was a hiss of gas escaping under pressure and Creed was silhouetted against a glowing green jetting cloud. Moving

his head slightly Mander could see other cracks in the floor of the dome and, with his ear pressed to the ground, he could hear the rumble of erupting gas pockets.

Released of the pain he had lived with ever since Doc Haze botched the operation to remove the bullet from his brain, Mander was suddenly filled with a moment of clarity: Creed had lured him right into the midst of the gas geysers.

Mander was caught in a sudden blast of gas, with the force of a compressed-air hose, as the geyser he was sprawled across vented. Through the distortion in the air around him and his owned blurred vision he saw Creed flick the cheroot, saw it tumble end over end towards him and then there was nothing but an acetylene white flare and the heat of a smelting furnace swept over him.



**A**NTROBUS VETCH sat perched as regally as he could manage on his throne-like chair and fixed Gravalax Mune with a hungry stare. 'So, you have it,' the Guilder acknowledged, looking to his agent's open hand and the prepared syringe resting within it.

'Yes, my lord,' Mune simpered. 'The sample has been purified and is ready for insertion.'

'Excellent, excellent!' Vetch was almost giggling in excited anticipation. 'Well then, what are we waiting for, hmm? Give the syringe to Three-Six-Four.' Mune placed the syringe within the proffered pallid hand of the waiting servitor. 'Then close your eyes.'

Mune felt his erstwhile bodyguard's metallic claw clamp down hard on his shoulder. 'My lord?'

'I'm told it's easier to make sense of the newly-implanted memories if you block other sensory input.'

A cold chill passed down Mune's spine and sweat beaded on his forehead.

'There's also a period of disorientation but that isn't supposed to last for long.'

'But, my lord!' the panicking agent spluttered.

'You didn't think I'd inject the sample into myself, did you, hmm?' Vetch snapped, cutting off Mune's imminent protest. 'There could be anything in that syringe! And anyway, have you not heard the expression, why have a pit slave and dig yourself? Now



we'll find out who was responsible for fouling up the biggest operation we've ever set-up!

The excitedly leering Vetch nodded to the slave-machine holding Mune. The man felt a sudden stab of pain in the base of his skull that made him gasp and then the plunger was depressed.

Mune's mind was suddenly filled with a torrent of images as the fluid from Sisken's brain and the lubricant were injected directly into his brain. Mune's retinas burned and he screwed his eyes tight shut in an attempt to stop the stinging sensation. One after another the memories poured through his cerebral cortex.

He was standing before an accident cogitator engine in a red lit chamber listening to the instructions of 'Father'. He was drinking in Snake Eye Sam's gambling den. He was in the centre of a wire-fenced compound when suddenly everything went white. He was standing before himself, Gravalax Mune, and was listening to his own voice telling him to bring Doctor Isaiah Haze to him. He was half-conscious being carried over a man's back – a man who wore a long leather coat.

The images continued. Gradually his scrambled consciousness began to make sense of the rush of memories. He 'remembered' being in Snake Eye Sam's. He 'remembered' assisting in planning the operation that would bring an ork into Hive Primus for Lord Helmawr's zoo. He 'remembered' speaking with Doc Haze... And at last Mune came to a terrible conclusion.

'Well?' he heard Antrobus Vetch's reedy whine as if he were a long way away. 'Who sabotaged the operation, hmm?'

Mune began to speak, neurotransmitters racing at the influx of serotonin, unable to censor what he was saying. 'I-I-It was me,' he spluttered, saliva dribbling from the corner of his mouth. 'I betrayed you!'



'GOING SOMEWHERE, Doc?' Haze spun round, his heart pounding. Standing in the wrecked doorway of the scientist's ransacked lab was Nathan Creed. He looked more like his old self compared to the last time Haze had seen him. He had recovered his hat and coat, although the later was rather singed around the edges, and the bounty hunter's

stub guns hung holstered at his waist. His undershirt, however, was still almost black with grime and he had acquired some gloves from somewhere to protect his scolded hands.

'Much as I'd like to make idle chit-chat I have to pack!' Haze growled, scooping the contents of an instrument drawer into a large bag. The doc's servitor, One-Eight-Seven, was already holding two full packs.

'Why?' Creed drawled, taking a long drag on a smouldering cheroot.

'Because, in case you hadn't worked it out yet, Antrobus Vetch now knows that it was me who sabotaged his ork-smuggling operation, and any minute now a whole host of pit slaves and hired scum are going to descend on this place so that that vindictive bastard-son-of-a-ripperjack can extract more than his pound of flesh! That's why!'

'Oh, I don't think that's very likely,' the bounty hunter said, still smiling. 'Not since Vetch thinks that it was actually Mune who betrayed him.'

'What?'

'Our mutual friend Gravalax Mune is at this moment being prepared for "reassignment" to Stalag Slag Hole.'

Doc Haze strode over to the bounty hunter and clasped his shoulders, giving him a friendly shake. 'Then I'm free! I don't need to leave! I owe you one, Creed. You saved my life from than maniac Mander and now I'm free to live it out in peace!'


'Until the next time,' Creed muttered, 'and you actually owe me two.'

'Two?' Haze let go of his saviour and took a step back, eyeing the downhive desperado suspiciously. 'What do you mean, two?'

'I know why Vetch thinks it was Mune who betrayed him. I saw you mix the brain fluid with the lubricant when I entered the crypt the second time. I'm sure Vetch would like you to explain it all to him, as well as who really sabotaged the ork smuggling operation. I always suspected it was you, doc.'

Haze felt the blood drain from his cheeks. 'So, what do you want in return, Creed?' he asked sourly.

The bounty hunter took another long drag on his cheroot and exhaled a great cloud of blue-grey smoke. 'I'll let you know,' he said and, tipping his hat to Haze, Nathan Creed turned and strode out of the lab.

And as the bounty hunter left, Haze was sure he could hear him laughing. 



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

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...

WHILE OTHERS JUST RETURN FOR ONE LAST VISIT.

# The Messenger's Tale

SCRIPT: JASPRE BARK

ART: TIERNEN TREVALION

TALES FROM THE  
TEN-TAILED CAT

WHAT'S THE MATTER MESSENGER BOY, MY TALE NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU?

SORRY, JOHAN, I WAS SOMEWHERE ELSE COMPLETELY FOR A MINUTE THERE.

WE ALL WERE, YOU WON'T WIN ANY PRIZES WITH STORIES THAT POOR, JOHAN.

TELL US WHERE YOU WERE THEN, MAYBE YOU'LL NAB THE FLAGON OF MEAD FOR BEST STORY.

IT WAS THE MEAD THAT REMINDED ME ACTUALLY, I WAS THINKING OF THE TIME I SPENT IN THE GLADE OF WOE.

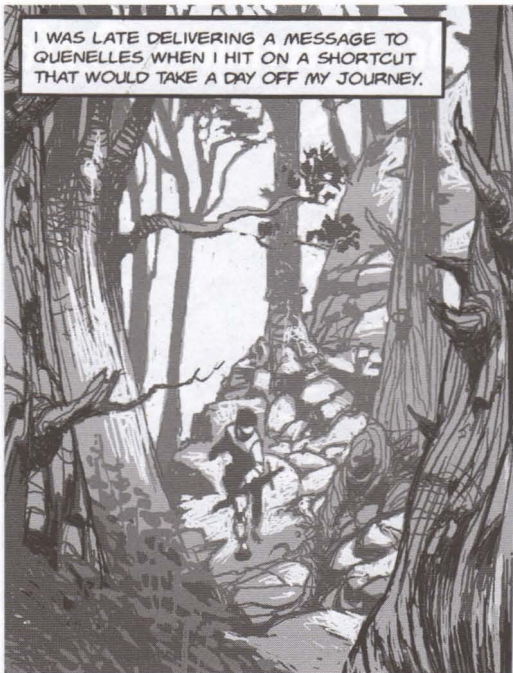
YOU WERE NEVER THERE, THERE'S NO SUCH PLACE.

HAH, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO WIN ANYTHING WITH A FAIRY TALE.

DON'T PAY THEM ANY MIND, YOU CARRY ON.



I WAS LATE DELIVERING A MESSAGE TO QUENELLES WHEN I HIT ON A SHORTCUT THAT WOULD TAKE A DAY OFF MY JOURNEY.



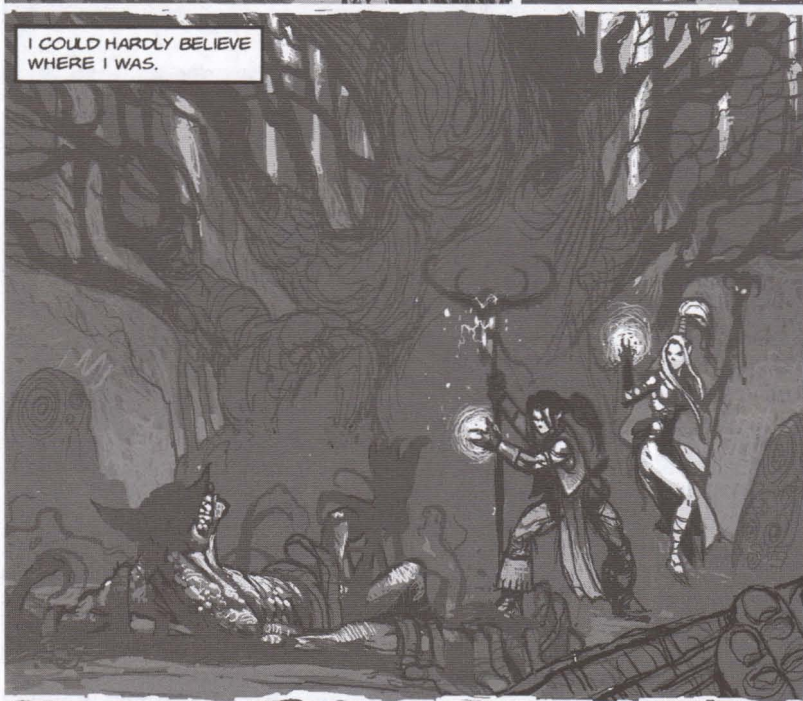
BUT THE WOODS I FOUND MYSELF IN WASN'T ON ANY MAP I'D EVER SEEN.



I STUMBLED THROUGH THE FOREST FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE AN AGE, TRYING TO FIND MY BEARINGS UNTIL FINALLY I HAPPENED UPON A STRANGE GLADE.



I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE WHERE I WAS.



I HAD THOUGHT, LIKE YOU, THAT THIS PLACE WAS A MYTH, BUT HERE I WAS A WITNESS TO SIGHTS NO MAN HAD EVER PREVIOUSLY BEHELD.





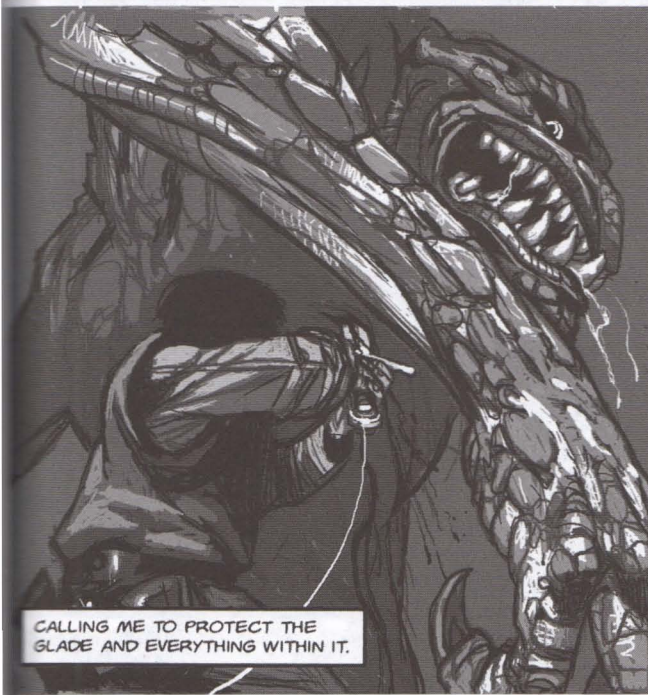


RRAAAAARRR



I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY I STEPPED IN...

BUT IT FELT AS THOUGH EACH TREE, EACH STONE AND EVEN EVERY BLADE OF GRASS WAS CALLING OUT TO ME:



CALLING ME TO PROTECT THE GLADE AND EVERYTHING WITHIN IT.



LIKE A PRIMAL FORCE COURSING UP FROM WITHIN THE EARTH...



...AND GUIDING MY BLADE TO VICTORY.





POOR CREATURE, IT'S SUFFERING.

HERE, DRINK THIS IT WILL STEAL THE PAIN FROM YOUR LIMBS.



THAT'S WHEN I TASTED THE LEGENDARY MEAD OF LOREN.

BREWED FROM BERRIES NO HUMAN HAS EVER SEEN BEFORE, LET ALONE TASTED.



IT HAS A FLAVOUR THAT TRANSPORTS YOU, LIFTING YOU OUT OF YOURSELF...



...AND TAKING YOU TO A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PLACE.



UNLIKE *THIS* MEAD WHICH IS MAKING ME FEEL DROWSY...







DID HE REALLY HAVE TO DIE? HIS VALOUR DID PROVE OUR SALVATION.

THE POTION CAUSED HIM NO PAIN, IT MERELY GAVE HIM A PLEASANT DREAM WITH WHICH TO ENTER THE NEXT WORLD.



THE DEATH HIS WOUNDS MIGHT HAVE BROUGHT WOULD HAVE TROUBLED HIM FAR MORE THAN THAT OF THE POTION.



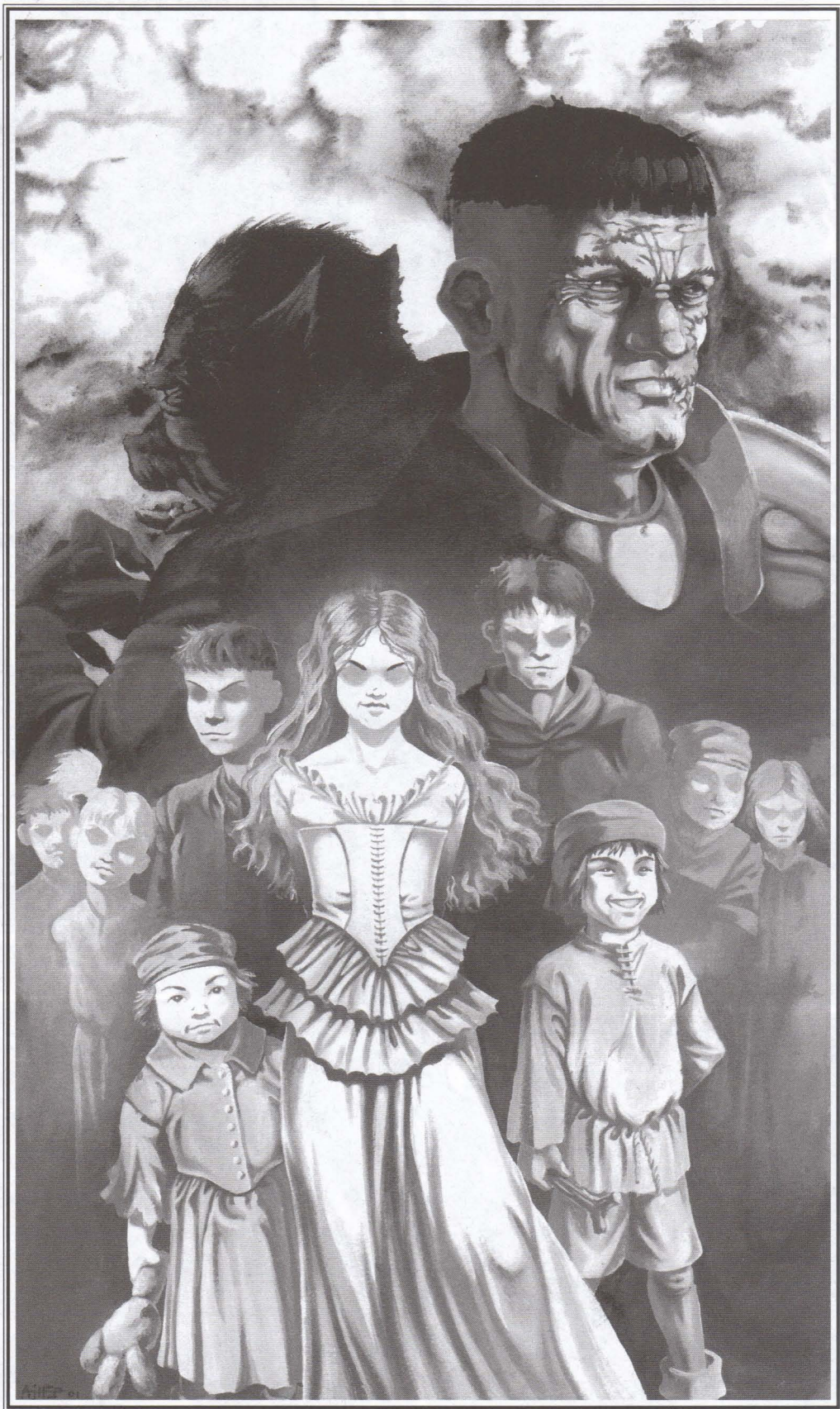
BESIDES, HE WAS COAXED TO ACTION BY THE POWER OF OUR RITUAL, HE COULD NOT HELP ACTING BRAVELY.



WHAT IS THIS PLACE CALLED THE TEN-TAILED CAT OF WHICH HE SPOKE?

A FAVOURITE HAUNT FROM HIS PAST. A FOND MEMORY HE WISHED TO REVISIT ONE LAST TIME.







# The Small Ones

by C.J. Werner

**T**HE SOUND OF squealing laughter echoed across the northernmost of Eugen Duhring's wheat fields. The wide patch of barren ground had been left fallow this season to allow the soil to replenish and revivify itself. Duhring was known as a miserly and mean-spirited man, hateful and bitter about his station in life. Some in the village of Marburg called the wheat farmer 'the Badger' because of his fierceness regarding trespassers on his property. Had Duhring heard the laughter and seen the small shapes scampering across his field, he would have set his brace of dogs on them. If the farmer happened to see who one of the shapes was, the children could have expected a swift and physical reprimand courtesy of a switch broken from one of the nearby trees.

Keren laughed even as she gasped for breath and danced away from the outstretched arms of her pursuer. She was a young girl, long locks of golden hair dancing in the bright sunlight, her white blouse and black dress offsetting the rich colour of her arms and face. The girl's face was pretty, her button nose placed above a pair of pouting lips that were well-versed in the art of forestalling a scolding by means of a simple downward tremble. Her eyes had a slightly mischievous cast to them, the faintest arching of her brow that hinted at a cunning mind. She carried herself with an air of pride, and it would have been apparent to any observer that she considered herself better than her companions, a sense of station more befitting a great lady of some Bretonnian house than the daughter of Marburg's miller.

Still, perhaps the girl was not to blame for her superior attitude. Her father, Bernd Mueller, considered himself something of a petty noble, the closest thing the village of Marburg had to an actual burgomeister. The prosperous miller was banker, landlord and, some would confess in confidence, robber baron to the farmers who made their living in the vicinity of Marburg. His was the only mill for many leagues in any direction, and Mueller made certain that his monopoly paid

well. True, a farmer could take his wheat to some other village, perhaps Fallberg to the north or Giehsehoff to the east, but the expense and time to do so would cost the farmer more than it would to swallow his pride and pay Mueller's extortionate rates. Mueller openly mocked his patrons, treating them as little better than indentured servants. It was small wonder then that the girl should hold herself as superior to the children of her father's customers and deal with them in a manner befitting her eminent position.

Keren laughed again as Paul lunged for her and she danced away from his clumsy attempt to catch her. Paul was a tall, gangly boy, his face still bearing the moon-shaped depressions from the pox that had struck Marburg many years ago. He swore one of the colourful curses he often overheard in his father's tavern and turned to again try and catch his quarry. A safe distance away from the hunter, Therese blushed when she heard the words leaving her playmate's mouth. Beside her, the brawny figure of Kurt remained wary, lest the hunter turn his stumbling steps in his direction.

Keren started to dart away from Paul's clutching hands once more, when suddenly a bright flash of pain tore at the back of her head. A hand slapped the small of her back and Paul's figure pranced away from the girl in triumph.

'Ha, now you have to try and catch us,' the boy laughed as he sauntered toward the advancing Therese and Kurt. Keren dropped to her knees and stroked her long golden locks.

'You pulled my hair, you stupid toad!' the girl snarled in her most indignant tone.

'I caught you,' corrected the boy, noting with some concern the sullen look that had crawled across Kurt's face.

Keren rose from the ground, glaring at Paul, venom in her eyes. 'Doesn't your family teach you any kind of manners? Just because you look like a monster doesn't mean you have to act like one.' The words left the girl's mouth like daggers, her target visibly wilting at the assault.



'Show your betters some respect,' Kurt said in a low, menacing voice as he pushed Paul with a meaty hand. Kurt often helped his brothers in their profession as foresters and his size was quite beyond his years. He was entirely devoted to Keren, and many of the village children had received a beating at his hands when offence or her own malicious spite made Keren call upon the devotion of her brawny protector.

'But I caught her,' protested Paul, retreating from Kurt's glowering form. Therese came to her brother's aid.

'Try and catch us!' she cried, racing away into the woods that bordered the wheat field. Paul took that as an excuse to run away from Kurt and the threat of a short and one-sided fight. Kurt cast a confused look at Keren before deciding that he should hide as well or risk being tagged himself. Devoted or not, the young woodsman had no desire to bear the stigma of playing the hunter, even for Keren's sake. In the matter of a few seconds, Keren was left standing alone in the barren field.

The girl let a few moments pass, trying to compose herself rather than actually intending to give her friends time to conceal themselves. It was humiliating for her to be the hunter. When she had proposed this game, she had never thought that she would ever have the shame of being the searcher. Indeed, if everyone had not already run off, Keren would have haughtily declared that the game was stupid and that they play something else. Now she would have to show these farmers' brats that she was much better at playing the hunter than any of them.

Keren entered the shadowy stand of trees and tried to pierce the dark bushes and bracken with her youthful gaze. She listened carefully for any aberrant sound that her quarry might make in seeking to elude her. Only the chirping of a few birds and the frightened scrambling of a startled squirrel rewarded her efforts. She continued to walk along the narrow game trail, her annoyance rising with every step. How dare these peasants force her down to their level? It was enough that she deigned to play with them at all, why should she endure this indignity? The girl loathed the role of hunter, playing alone, struggling through the bushes whilst having to endure the taunting elusiveness of the others. It was not for the daughter of Bernd Mueller to have to chase for friends, she thought, as if she really wanted to find a rabble of dirty

peasants anyway. Keren had almost made up her mind to leave the others to their stupid play and go home when she heard the rustle of dead leaves behind a patch of bushes a few yards away. A crafty smile crept upon Keren's face as she stalked toward the noise. She had found them much faster than Paul had and she would not be reduced to chasing them out into Duhring's wheat field either. Slowly, with as much silence as she could manage, the girl made her way to the bushes. With a yell of victory, she jumped around the closest of them. Abruptly, her yell became a shriek as the girl realised what she had found.

It was not one of her friends lying behind the bush; indeed, it was no such creature as Keren had ever seen in her short, isolated life. It looked like a little man, certainly not more than five feet tall had it been standing. Its overall shape was that of a man but where human features should have rested there was the porcine countenance of a farmyard swine, its brutish flesh covered in a soft golden down, almost like the fur of a duckling. The creature was wearing a dark robe and Keren could see that one of its legs was twisted beneath the black fabric at an unnatural angle. As she watched, pale blue eyes stared at her from the swinish head with an almost human look of alarm.

Keren was still staring into those pale orbs when Kurt ran to her side, alarmed by the girl's scream. When he saw the strange creature lying almost at Keren's feet, he halted abruptly, his mind seized by fear. The two still stood there, frozen to the spot, when Paul and his sister joined them. Therese let out a shriek when she saw the beast, the sound seeming to jar the other children out of their paralysed fright. They all ran away from the bestial form, far enough to be out of its reach should it decide to lunge at them. The children were silent, not one daring to speak, though one and all peered through the bush, to make certain that the strange beast was truly there.

Keren caught a hint of the creature's gold fur and looked away in disgust, the memory of the creature in its entirety refreshing itself in her mind. She regarded the other children, noting the faces of her playmates as she did so. They all bore expressions of horror tinged with childish fascination, yet none had the courage to take the lead. Keren forced her own face to curl into a haughty and disdainful sneer, adopting the expression she



had seen the elder Mueller adopt on many occasions when addressing some cowed villager. She was not afraid, not like these farm whelps. She would show them what true superiority was.

Keren pushed Kurt toward the bush. The boy resisted her efforts, scrambling back to his original position. The girl glared at the brawny youth. 'Don't tell me you're afraid of a dying pig,' the girl scolded in her most imperious and high-handed tone. Kurt's face reddened and the boy stomped toward the bush, determined to redeem himself. Keren followed the boy, at what she judged to be a safe enough distance. A glare brought Paul and Therese hurrying to be at her side. By degrees, the timid gang advanced upon the bush. At last all four children stood over the twisted, brutish shape once again. Kurt bent down and picked up a large stick. Timidly, the boy poked the tip of his improvised weapon into the creature's side. A human-sounding groan emerged from the porcine snout.

'Is it a monster?' asked Kurt, his voice trembling.

Keren looked intently at the gruesome, bestial thing. It was hideous, certainly, but as she looked into its gentle, pleading, strangely human eyes, the girl was not so very certain that it was actually dangerous. It was very obviously hurt and weak. She knew, if she wished, she could have it crushed as a beetle. The other children gawped, fearfully, and Keren knew that they were unconsciously waiting for her judgement.

'That's stupid,' she declared, 'monsters are big and fierce. This poor little thing doesn't look like it could scare anybody.' She chose to ignore the sudden shock she had experienced when she had stumbled upon the creature. The others were afraid of it, and that made it all the more important that she showed them that she was not.

'Goblins aren't big,' Paul protested, 'and they're monsters.'

Keren scoffed at the tavern boy's argument. 'Stupid, everybody knows goblins are just baby orcs. That is why they're little.' Keren returned her attention to the little creature, fascination overcoming her lingering horror. The little creature moved one of its delicate, long-fingered hands feebly as she watched it.

'I am going to go get my father,' Paul decided, pulling on his sister's hand. Keren turned on the boy with her most venomous glare.

'Paul Keppler, if you do that I will hate you!' Keren screamed as the boy started to pull his sister away. Paul looked at the girl with an apprehensive gaze. Keren decided to press the attack. 'If you go telling about this, you won't be playing with me or any of my friends ever again!'

The threat was a dire one for any of the children of Marburg. Keren Mueller was the most popular child in the village; her whims of friendship and dislike decided the hierarchy among the children. Those she did not like, like the young bell-ringer at Marburg's Sigmarite chapel, were virtual pariahs, teased and tormented by all the other children at every opportunity. With his scarred features, Paul was already the object of her ridicule; only his sister's close relationship to Keren kept him from being an object of complete scorn. Paul looked at his sister for a moment and then released her hand. Keren's bullying threat had been enough to cow the boy.

'What are you going to do with it?' Paul asked as he returned his gaze to the swine-headed creature.

'He's hurt, maybe sick,' the girl declared. 'If we help him get better, maybe he'll get us presents.' She was now certain that the creature was a bewitched prince and surely a prince would be able to give her gifts if she helped him recover.

'But where will we take him?' Paul asked, hoping yet to foil Keren's plans with reason. There was something horrible about the creature; he could not understand why Keren was not frightened of it. 'What will we do with it? We can't very well take it home; mother would never let that thing sleep in the house!'

Keren thought about the problem for a moment before the light of an idea gleamed in her eyes. 'I know a place!' she declared. The girl swatted Kurt's stomach with one of her dainty hands, rousing the boy from his embarrassed silence. 'Help Paul pick the prince up and follow me,' the girl commanded.

As the boys grabbed his arms and legs, a smile split the porcine features of the sorcerer Thyssen Krotzig. None of the children noticed that smile, nor its malevolent twisting at the corners of his mouth.



**K**EREN LET another distinctly unladylike oath escape her lips as the underbrush grabbed at her dress and scratched at her legs for the umpteenth time. She had not figured on the disused path to the old mill being in such a sorry state. Had she known that getting there would be such a chore, she would never have suggested the ruin. The girl looked over at the two boys, struggling to keep the creature's body high enough to escape the clutching brambles. Their legs were even more scratched and bruised than her own. An impish smile graced Keren's face as she saw the boys enduring their discomfort simply because she had told them to. Keren looked away from the gasping, sweating pair and looked again at the crumbling wooden structure which was their destination. Once, it had been the business place of Ludwig Troost, the man who had dared to try and end her father's monopoly. Herr Mueller had begun a campaign of sabotage and slander to destroy Marburg's other miller. In the end, friendless and destitute, Troost had crushed himself beneath his own mill wheel. Keren's father liked to talk about his vanquished rival, and he had shown his daughter Troost's abandoned mill many times since the man's suicide. Few other people would come here, believing the place to be haunted. It was the perfect place to hide their strange secret.

The inside of the mill was as decrepit as its exterior. Over the years some of the supporting beams had toppled from the roof to repose in angled pillar-like positions. The floor appeared to be the final resting-place for every dead leaf in the forest, filling the building with a rotting ankle-deep carpet. A brace of crows cawed from the shadowy top of the monstrous mill wheel. A rusted chain dangled from the end of the wooden yoke Troost had once hitched his mule to when working the wheel, swaying slightly in the breeze. Under Keren's direction the children carried their patient to a raised wooden platform that was slightly less debris-laden than the floor proper. They set him down beside a pair of neglected barrels and quickly stepped away.

'Kurt, go and see if you can get some blankets from your brothers,' Keren told the burly boy. Kurt hesitated a moment and then made his way through the ruinous mill to the clean air outside. Keren turned her attention to Paul and Therese.

'He needs some food. Why don't you get some from the tavern?' Keren said to Paul.

'You mean steal it?' the boy's voice was almost incredulous. Keren's eyes narrowed.

'Your father owns the tavern. How can that be stealing?' she demanded.

'I don't know,' Paul confessed.

'Maybe I should just have Therese do it, if you are too scared,' sighed Keren.

'No, I'll do it, I'll get some bread,' Paul hastily agreed. It was one thing if he got into trouble, but he did not want his younger sister to suffer their father's wrath. Keren smiled at the boy's easy submission.

Thyssen Krotzigk listened to the children squabble, the smile again crossing his swine-like face. Truly the Dark Gods were watching over him, the sorcerer thought. It had taken only the slightest suggestion to the girl's mind to bend her to his intent. She was a naturally bullying and haughty soul, full of pride and arrogance, such easily manipulated qualities. It was indeed fortunate that they ran so strong in the girl's make-up, for, if Krotzigk admitted the truth to himself, in his present condition, he was beyond any but the most minor of evocations. The little sorcerer shifted his weight, trying to relieve the pressure from his twisted leg. Krotzigk bit down on the sudden pain, refusing to cry out and alarm his newfound patrons.

Memories flooded the sorcerer's mind as his hands tried to massage the torment from his mangled limb. Memories of Talabheim and his initiation into the priesthood of Morr. Krotzigk smiled at the recollection. Even at an early age he had been what most people considered morbid. He had always been drawn to the dark side of things. It was this quality which had led him to the rites and rituals of the God of Death and then, in time, to the forbidden study of the ultimate darkness, Chaos itself. He could not remember now how he had come upon the book, a vague treatise on all the dark and forbidden cults that lurked in the shadows of man's great kingdoms. The book had told of the foul worship of Morr's brother Khaine, the Lord of Murder, and Malal the Fallen. More, it had told of the great Ruinous Powers – Khorne, Nurgle, Tzeentch and Slaanesh, the Dark Gods who were the chief aspects of Chaos. That simple book, meant to warn, to outrage its studious reader with such blasphemous and heretical rites,



instead had ignited a sinister passion within Krotzig's already morbid heart. Perhaps his superiors at the temple had sensed the change in their colleague for it was shortly thereafter that he received his transfer to an isolated way temple in the back-country of Stirland. It was little more than a shrine and a cemetery really, serving the scattered villages and towns for a dozen miles around when one of their denizens was called to Morr's kingdom. But if his new situation did not bring with it prestige and advancement, it brought with it something far more important to Krotzig's darkening soul – seclusion.

Krotzig could not remember for how many years he had practised the profane rites of Chaos in his blasphemously re-consecrated temple. From the peasants who sometimes visited the temple, he carefully recruited followers, more souls for the Dark Gods. He led them in the dark worship of Chaos in its most pure and absolute form, conducting them in blood rituals on Geheimnisnacht, sacrificing travellers his loyal following provided. More, he conducted them in sacrilegious rites on Death Night, twisting the rites of Morr into a celebration of the Great Powers.

And his zeal was rewarded, not with the paltry powers of one of Morr's adepts but with true sorcerous might. Krotzig found that his aptitude in the magical arts had increased to a degree far beyond his wildest desires. True, there was a price to pay: a necessary humbling which the Chaos Gods inflicted upon Krotzig even as his magical powers grew. His once handsome face twisted and distorted itself into that of a swine; a soft golden fur covered most of his body. His tongue had split like a serpent's and his body had shrivelled and shrunk into an almost dwarf-like state. If Krotzig needed any proof of the awful power of Chaos, he had only to stare at his own reflection. Worse would befall him, he knew, if he ever betrayed his new lords. They would not remain silent and inactive like Morr. To offend Chaos was to invite worse than death.

After years of isolation, there came an inspector from the temple in Talabheim. The wily old priest had at once detected the hideous rededication of the temple. It had not preserved his life, however, but it had been the beginning of the end for Krotzig. In response to the vanishing of an aged and

respected scion of the temple, the High Priest of Morr had despatched not another band of priests but the cult's templar knights, the feared Black Guard of Morr.

Krotzig had been fortunate to escape with his life; none of his followers had been so lucky. The power of Chaos had delivered him, even if it had not spared him the agony of a broken leg. Perhaps it had been another lesson in humility, the sorcerer considered. And now, after weeks of dragging himself painfully across the wilds, almost at the very brink of death, the Ruinous Powers had again delivered their faithful servant from his suffering. Krotzig turned his pale eyes on the squabbling children.

They had delivered him, that he might deliver unto the Chaos Gods a dark harvest of souls.



**T**HE WIND howled through the boughs that lined the small dirt road. It was the chill wind of late autumn that stirred the fallen leaves on their way, the chill cousin of the icy gales of winter. It was a time when travel was all but absent from the back-roads of Stirland, when only the few cities of that lonely province still drew wanderers to their gates. Still, a shadowy apparition made its way down the disregarded path.

Had anyone else been roaming along the lane, they would have been impressed by the sinister horseman that shared the road, and made the sign of Sigmar as they passed the silent wanderer. The steed was a magnificent warhorse, dark as the dead of night, a swarthy shroud-like caparison clothing the animal almost from head to hoof. The man mounted upon the horse's back was also garbed in black, ebony armour of forged obsidian over which he wore a heavy, monk-like habit of coarse sombre fibre. Etched upon the breast of the habit was a raven in flight, the sign of the grim god of death. The silent rider was no mere sellsword or freelancer, but one of the dread Black Guard of Morr.

The templar's head lay upon his chest as his horse slowly trotted down the path. The caparison and habit, which clothed the two, were torn and muddy, the man's armour



soiled with the dust and grime of many weeks of travel on the back-roads of the Empire. A sudden bolster of the wind's strength caused the templar's hood to fall away from his head, revealing the hard, toughened visage of a veteran warrior. The man's nose was broad and splayed, the result of being broken one time too many. Between his brow and his close-cropped black hair there was the grey furrow of an old knife wound. His left cheek had puckered into a vile patch of withered flesh, through which his cheekbone and even his jaw and rearmost teeth could easily be seen. The withered edge of the templar's lip trembled and the napping guardsman awoke with a start. Immediately his right hand released the reins and clutched at his left arm, only to close upon the empty sleeve of his habit.

Ernst Ditmarr grimaced as his mind roused itself to full wakefulness. He released the empty sleeve that had once clothed his left arm and wiped beads of perspiration from his brow before awkwardly shifting his body in order to recover the discarded reins. The same dream, always the same dream. The templar had not passed an hour in slumber without suffering from its baleful intrusion.

He saw himself, once again leading his command of Black Guard to the way temple of Curate Krotzigk. Once again he saw the deranged Chaos cultists attack them, throwing themselves upon the guard's swords with a maniacal fervour. And once again he saw the hideously twisted thing that had at one time been a priest of Morr. He saw the monster hurl unholy power upon his knights, reducing men and horses to ash and slime. He saw himself charge the filthy sorcerer, leaping from his saddle to tackle the vile creature. He saw it writhe from his grasp, fleeing up the rough-hewn steps that led to the roof of the small temple. Finally, he saw himself, his great sword clutched in his hand, his skull-shaped shield held before him as he advanced upon the cornered cult leader. Power danced about the bestial mutant as it summoned its last reserves of sorcerous might. Ditmarr raised his shield to protect his face even as he struck out at the beast with his sword. Searing agony enveloped him as a blast of green flame seared through his shield, knocking him on his back. The dark shape strode triumphantly towards his prone

body, unholy power crackling in its hands, utterly unfazed by the templar's savage attack. The swinish head glared down at him and the sorcerer laughed as it sent a second blast of dark magic into Ditmarr's body.

No, that was not how it was. The sorcerer had not gloated over the templar as he lay writhing on the roof of the shrine. Dimly, Ditmarr seemed to recall seeing a black shape topple over the side of the roof even as he himself fell. Clearer memories provided the rest. His awakening in the back room of a healer's, the gruesome sight of his left arm, withered down to the elbow, every bone showing through the sorry parchment-like skin. He could see his second, Sergeant-Acolyte Ehrhardt, nodding grimly to the healer. He could see the serrated blade in the old man's hands as Ehrhardt held down the withered arm...

Ditmarr clenched his teeth against the memory of that pain; a dead arm cut from a living body. If it took him a hundred years, he would find the blasphemer who had taken his arm, his honour and his life. And when he did, Krotzigk would discover that the vengeance of a god betrayed was terrible indeed.



**E**DUARD THREW the stick across the small yard that adjoined Marburg's tiny chapel. The little brown dog yipped with glee as it tore across the grass and damp earth in pursuit of the fleeing stick. Eduard watched the little dog race away, the smile fading from his face. The boy's breath came hot and short, his hands clenching and unclenching in a fit of nervousness. As the puppy ran still farther away in pursuit of the stick, Eduard began to tremble, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The dog reached the stick and hesitated a moment. Eduard knew that the animal was just getting a better grip with its mouth, but he could not fend off the utter terror that brought tears to his eyes, the horror that the little dog would not come back. The dog always did, but Eduard could not overcome his fear that it would not. His parents had left him after all, left him alone. He had only himself to blame, it was true, for he had been such a sickly little boy. Perhaps they had been afraid that he would make



them sick. He knew that many grown-ups were like that, avoiding the ill so that they would not fall prey to the same infirmity. The only one in the village who had been kind enough to take him in was the priest, Father Hackl, but the old cleric was too dour and demanding to make a real parent for the boy, and did little to ease his loneliness.

It did not help that none of the other children seemed to like him. None of them would play with him. Keren Mueller in particular seemed to despise the boy. Whenever she saw him, she said the most horrible things. She called him names like 'worn' and 'pig's slop' and told him horrible lies about his parents being dead because he had made them sick. It was because of her that no one else liked him, Eduard was sure of that. Although Father Hackl had taught him that such thoughts were wrong, sometimes he secretly wished that Keren would die for saying such mean things.

The boys were almost standing next to Eduard before he saw them. The young orphan turned as they approached prepared to run away from a new barrage of taunts and small stones. To his surprise, the boys were smiling at him, wide friendly smiles.

'Do you want to play with us?' Paul asked the bell-ringer. Eduard stared at the boy, almost refusing to believe his ears.

'We found a great new place to play,' added Rudi, the shifty eyed son of Marburg's wainwright. Eduard just continued to stare. Paul stepped forward to grip his hand.

'Come on, I bet we beat you there,' the boy challenged Eduard. He waited a moment before racing away, Rudi following him. Eduard continued to stare at the pair of boys.

'Wait for me!' Eduard cried, hurrying after Paul and Rudi, all thoughts of dogs and sticks abandoned.

The boys led Eduard on a merry chase through the paths and game trails in the woods. Eduard joined in their laughter; running and giggling just like a real little boy. He could not believe how good it felt to be playing with other children, to have friends. The boy did not dare to question his good fortune, to ponder the sudden change that had come over two members of Keren's mob. Some distance ahead, Paul called out for Eduard to hurry. They were almost at the secret place.

It was an old, run down building, larger than the chapel but smaller than Marburg's tavern or town hall. It was almost hidden by the trees

and undergrowth that surrounded the derelict structure. The sight of the eerie building brought Eduard's run to a sudden halt.

'Th..there?' the boy stammered. Paul grabbed his hand and started to pull him toward the yawning, cave-like door of the old mill.

'Come on, Eduard, don't you want to play?' The criticism had its desired effect, and Eduard's resistance slackened and Paul led him through the doorway and into the dark, shadowy interior of the building.

There were many children inside the mill, all of them wearing garlands of flowers and smiling faces. Most of them were watching the doorway as Paul and Eduard entered, but others were looking up at the wooden platform that rose from the earthen floor. Eduard followed their gaze and his eyes grew wide with fright.

The figure on the platform was imposing, despite its short stature. It was a monstrous creature garbed in a robe of black. The beast's hands were horribly human in shape, though covered in a soft golden fur, each finger tipped by a brown claw-like nail. The monster's head was like a young boar's, a pinkish snout rising from the centre of the face. To either side of the snout, sunken deep in the monster's skull, a pair of pale blue eyes gleamed. There was intelligence in those eyes, evidence of knowledge forbidden, corrupt, and unholy. Indeed, a malevolent energy seemed to emanate from the twisted beast as it looked at Eduard. The monster rose from its sheepskin-cushioned chair and walked toward the boy. One of its legs was crippled, but it served well enough to allow the beast to hobble down the few steps separating the platform from the floor. The limping, scuttling gait only added to the creature's unnatural image. Eduard's body trembled as the monster stopped a few paces away from him.

'Welcome, Eduard,' the monster said with a soft, soothing voice. 'We've been waiting for you.'

Eduard let out a piercing scream, turned and ran for the door.





**D**ITMARR EMERGED from the small ranger's hut, his armoured boots sinking into the soft mud outside. He awkwardly began to redress his black steed in its midnight-hued caparison when a sound arrested his motion. The Black Guardsman of Morr spun around, caparison discarded, his hand on the hilt of the sword at his side. Standing not twenty paces away was a figure in black.

'You are far from where you should be, Kaptain-Justicar,' the voice behind the great helm that enclosed the man's head intoned.

'That depends upon how far from me my prey is lurking,' Ditmarr replied, his eyes covering the other Black Guardsman with an icy gaze.

'You know the decision of the Temple,' the other templar said, reaching up and removing his helm. The face revealed was weathered, hardened beyond its years by a life spent roaming from battle to battle.

'You were there, sergeant,' Ditmarr stated. 'You saw the thing that did this to me.' The templar flicked the hem of his empty sleeve with a steel finger. 'You saw the heresy and sacrilege it committed in the house of Morr itself.'

'Yes, and I was there long ago when you and I sold our swords to whichever Border Prince or Tilean merchant paid the best. I was there when we fought the orcs in Mad Dog Pass, when you pledged your sword to Morr if he would delay your death and allow us victory over the greenskin horde,' Sergeant-Acolyte Ehrhardt returned.

'Then you understand why I cannot abide by the Temple's decision,' Ditmarr stated. 'I pledged to fight the enemies of Morr. It is all I have.'

'I too made that oath,' Ehrhardt reminded his old comrade. 'Are you so certain that priests do not fight their own battles to honour Morr?' Ditmarr laughed at the templar's argument. It was a dry, sardonic sound, lacking in joy or merriment.

'Can you see me living the life of a cloistered priest? Ministering to the souls of the dead and ensuring their entry into the gardens of Morr?' Ditmarr sighed. 'No, I know only the path of the sword. That is how I can best serve Morr.'

'You pursue this Krotzigk for yourself, for revenge,' Ehrhardt sneered. Ditmarr was silent for a moment.

'Perhaps I do this for both of us.'

'You have been declared apostate by the Temple,' Ehrhardt said with a grave voice. 'For what? Because you hunt a monster that has probably already crawled into a hole somewhere and died?'

'It is my choice, even if it be a fool's errand.' Ditmarr stared closely at Ehrhardt. 'You have come to take me back? I have seen your swordarm in battle, many times. I will conduct you to Morr before you conduct me to his priests.'

Ehrhardt returned his helm to his head and nodded sadly. 'I did not find you this day. You were not here.' The Black Guardsman turned and started to walk away. 'I hope you find what you are looking for, Ernst. I hope it brings you peace.'



**T**HYSSEN'S PORCINE tusks noisily cracked the sheep bone in his mouth and his supple tongue began to probe the fissure in search of marrow. Almost absently the sorcerer patted the head of the little shepherdess who had undergone a beating to bring one of her father's flock to the sorcerer's cooking pot. The sorcerer considered the child's devotion, favouring her with his most benign smile before returning his attention to the cowering boy who thought to report him to the village priest.

'My dear, dear Eduard,' the swine-headed creature clucked. 'You have been very bad, haven't you?' And I ought to blast your filthy carcass into a thousand pieces and hand feed them to the crows, Thyssen thought. But that would not be good. Such a display of discipline might upset his other young followers. After all, flight from the stern discipline of their parents was what had brought most of them to him in the first place. The boy was young; his impressionable mind still a thing capable of being moulded into Thyssen's desire. Yet, the children needed to be reminded that it was no light thing to try and run off, to let an adult know about him and their little sanctuary in the woods. Thyssen cast his gaze about the old mill as he pondered how best to proceed.



Already the children were gathering, the dozen who had completely broken away from the village, spending day and night with Thyssen at the ruin and the twenty or so others who lived still with their parents. They were the biggest threat to Thyssen, these transient disciples who came only when they could slip away unseen and left when they would be missed by their elders. It was necessary; they were Thyssen's sole source of supplies and information about the village beyond the mill. It was also dangerous: there was always the chance that one of them would betray the sorcerer, as little Eduard had thought to do.

Thyssen watched as the last few children returned from playing outside. True Chaos, the sorcerer thought. No concern for labour or stricture, only the pleasure of the moment. It was a testament to how greatly the children enjoyed his lessons that he did not have to collect them from their romps but that they came of their own accord. They sat, mostly quiet, mostly still, awaiting the beginning of Thyssen's story of the day. Thyssen noted the eager young faces and a cruel smile played about the edges of his porcine mouth.

'You have been bad,' the sorcerer said softly, 'and for that you will not be allowed to listen to the story today.' A twinkle of malicious mirth gleamed in Thyssen's eye as he noted the sudden look of loss that masked the boy's features. One of the many lessons of Slaanesh, the ecstasy of experience and the torment of its denial. Thyssen waved Kurt and Paul forward. The boys lifted Eduard from the floor and carried the boy over to a large wooden barrel resting in the farthest corner of the mill. He should be just out of earshot, the sorcerer mused as he watched the boys force Eduard into his small prison. He was certain that this blatant exclusion of Eduard from the other children would have the desired effect, upon both the would-be turncoat and the other children. Still, it would pay to ensure his strategy.

'Keren,' the sorcerer hissed softly. The girl took her place at his side and Thyssen whispered into her ear.

'I understand that young Eduard has a little dog,' Thyssen smiled as he saw the wicked grin growing on Keren's face. What an eager student. 'When we let him out of the barrel, tell him that if he ever runs off again, something bad will happen to his

dog.' Thyssen waved away the girl and hobbled his way to the front of the platform.

'Today, children, I will tell you a story about Sigmar.' A hush of excitement crept across the assembly. Thyssen choked on the loathing their excitement evoked, reminding him that he had much nonsense still to remove from their young minds. Let them have their heroic delusions, I will correct them soon enough. And until then, I will exploit their naive faith.

The sorcerer began his tale, telling of great and noble Sigmar and his struggle to found the Empire. He told of how hordes of orcs forced Sigmar and his mighty army away from the places known to men, past even the icy lands of Kislev, until Sigmar came upon the border of a land of wonder and magic. The sky sparkled like diamond and the ground was paved with gold. And, just as Sigmar would have entered this land of fantastic beauty, he found the way barred by four mighty figures. One was a massive man encased in a suit of ruby armour, a blazing axe in his powerful hand. The second was a beautiful woman, her armour sparkling like the diamond sky so that whenever the eye fell upon it, it was a different colour. The third was a tall, keen-eyed wizard garbed in a brightly coloured robe and the air around him shimmered with magic. The last was a great fat warrior, whose coughing laugh boomed across the horizon. They were the Four Princes and Sigmar recognised them as his equals, beings worthy of his respect. He knew that it would be best to not raise arms against them and turned to return and face the overwhelming orc hordes. But the Four Princes would not allow the armies of men to fall, and they returned with Sigmar and together they scoured the land until all the orcs had been driven beyond the mountains.

It was late in the evening when Thyssen finished his tale. Not one of his young audience had lost interest, not one youthful head bowed in slumber despite the late hour. The sorcerer was pleased with his success. Soon, soon I will teach you more than fables. Soon I will show you the Four Princes and you will love them.





**T**HE OLD FOOL!' Thyssen roared, throwing the clay cup across the mill, spilling goat's milk on his black robe. A young girl hurried forward and began to sop the milk from his robe with the hem of her dress. Thyssen smiled at her and turned his head to look at the boy who had brought him the news. He should have expected something. More and more of the children had been coming to him, his permanent base now consisting of thirty with only another eleven still acting as his eyes and ears in the village. It had been a month since that fat idiot Bassermann had convinced the village leaders to hire a hunter to discover the beast that was carrying off their children. Thyssen smiled as he recalled the hunter's demise, how he had fixed it to look as if the man had fallen into his own steel-jawed trap. Kurt had helped him with that. Sometimes the boy's bloodlust alarmed even the sorcerer. Still, all gods looked with favour upon the zealous.

'So, the old priest wants to send a petition to Altdorf and bring witch hunters to Marburg?' Thyssen snarled. Rudi nodded his head with a bird-like bobbing motion.

'The village elders don't want him to, though. They say that witch hunters find witches even when there aren't any around.' The boy grinned at Thyssen. 'So it isn't really bad, because they told him not to.'

The smile Thyssen directed at Rudi was not a friendly one, though the boy foolishly took it to be. It was the same ignorant naivety that made the boy think Hackl would listen to what the village elders had to say. Truthfully, he was surprised that the old priest had taken this long to act. He had certainly been upset enough two months ago when Eduard had 'disappeared' to join Thyssen's full-time students. No, the old priest would be sending for witch hunters. Which meant that it was time to attend to the meddling fool.

'Keren,' the sorcerer said, 'bring the others inside. Today, I will tell you all about the Four Princes a little earlier than usual.'

The girl raced outside to bring the children from their play. Thyssen knew it would not be long before his little students were assembled before him, their attentive faces looking up at his own as he continued the epic tale he had started so many weeks ago. Thyssen had achieved much in that time. Sigmar had gone from the equal of the Four Princes to their exploiter, cravenly allowing

the Four to fight his battles for him. Thyssen told of how it was the Four Princes who defeated the Great Enchanter Drachenfels and brought to an end the savage dragon Mordrax, how it was they who truly conquered all the horrible enemies the children had once been told Sigmar himself had vanquished. Slowly, carefully, Thyssen had recast Sigmar in their imaginations, changing him from hero and saviour to coward and manipulator. Now, today, it would be time to add a new sin to Sigmar's crimes, a new title to attach itself to his name. It was time for Sigmar to become the betrayer.

Thyssen looked out on the hastily assembled children. He smiled as he saw their eager faces. Tonight he would put that eagerness to use. Tonight he would allow some of them to show their devotion to the powers of Chaos.

The sorcerer began his tale, relating how a numberless army of the undead had arisen in the blighted south, slaughtering all in their path, adding their victims to the host of death. Their tireless advance brought the army of skeletons and wraiths to the very edge of the Empire the Four Princes had conquered for the sons of men. A great army of men had been assembled; no household in the Empire did not fail to send at least one of its number to face the terrible invasion. Yet large as it was, before the tide of undead it was nothing. Sigmar saw the mammoth force of his enemy and was seized with dread. He turned to the Four Princes and ordered them to lead the attack on the undead, claiming that here was a foe unworthy of an Emperor. Sigmar retreated to a nearby hill to watch the battle while the Four Princes led the mortal army against the overwhelming numbers of the dead.

It was a fierce and horrible struggle. Not one in ten of those who fought the undead survived. The battle looked hopeless until the Four Princes forced their way to the very heart of the undead host. Before them stood a hideous giant encased in magic armour black as the darkest pit, his face a leering skull. He was the general of the terrible army, the Supreme Necromancer, Nagash the Black. The Four Princes did not hesitate before the terrifying foe, for they knew that without Nagash, the evil army would return to their graves and the lands of men would be saved. It was a terrific fight, even for the powerful Princes and when at last they broke the evil necromancer's body and cast his



black soul to the wind, they were weary and wounded.

From his hill, Sigmar had watched the battle progress. Seeing Nagash defeated, he descended to the battlefield, striking down the remaining skeletons and zombies as he found them, rallying the tattered remnants of his army to his sparkling banner. At last Sigmar found the Four Princes, half-dead from their terrible battle. Sigmar saw their weakened state and seized upon their infirmity. He turned to his soldiers and told them the Four Princes were evil daemons, that it was they who had brought the undead up from the Southlands to destroy them all. The men heard his lies and believed them, driving the weakened Princes from the Empire and making of their names the vilest of curses.

Thyssen listened to the whispers of outrage that slithered amongst his assembly, the muttered oaths against a name they had once worshipped. His porcine lips pulled away from his fang-like teeth. Yes, tonight would be the night to deal with a priest of such a loathsome being.



**F**ATHER HACKL awoke with a start. The old priest looked about the darkened cell which held his bed and the few possessions the cleric allowed himself, his mind trying to accustom itself to the benighted surroundings. What had intruded upon his slumber, the priest could not recall. He wiped the crust of sleep from his eyes, and coughed as the chill night air flowed into his lungs. Then Father Hackl's head slowly turned toward the door of his room. Yes, he had heard a sound that time, a furtive scabbling in the temple room itself.

Eduard's little dog must have got loose, the old priest decided. The priest had been taking care of the puppy in the weeks since the boy had disappeared. It was an act of denial, the priest reasoned, a refusal to accept Eduard's disappearance. Father Hackl thought it strange that he had not realised how much the orphan had come to mean to him until the boy was no longer around. The old priest missed the boy greatly; with him gone, there was an empty spot in Father Hackl's life. Perhaps that was why he kept

Eduard's little dog. By keeping the puppy, he was defying whatever evil had befallen the boy, declaring to the darkness that the boy would return. A tear welled in the priest's eye as the thought crossed his mind that he was clinging to an impossible hope.

Still, whatever his reasons for attending the animal, he could not have it scampering about in Sigmar's holy shrine. He would have to catch the dog and return it to the anteroom. He doubted if the dog would bother to chew through its rope twice in a single evening. With the tired weariness of age, Father Hackl rose from his bed, letting the chill air shock his body into full wakefulness before opening the door and entering the dark hall of the chapel. The old priest made his way along the ranks of rough, wooden pews, softly calling for the dog, as though he did not wish to wake Sigmar at this lonely hour with any undue noise. Father Hackl's eyes swept the expanse of the temple, seeing little beyond shadows. Then his gaze strayed to the altar itself. It took the old priest a moment before he could recognise the change that had taken place there.

With an impious oath and a quickness in his step, Father Hackl made his way down the empty ranks of pews toward the altar. The hammer, the holy symbol of Sigmar, had fallen from the altar, lying like a piece of refuse on the floor. The priest could not imagine how the little dog had managed to topple the heavy iron hammer from its place, but he would not have it lying in so disrespectful a state. Father Hackl bent over to retrieve it from the floor, ignoring the creaking of his old bones, ignorant of the dark shape which rose from the pews behind him.

A thick, animal stench struck Father Hackl a moment before the attack. The cleric's head rose ever so slightly as he detected the foul odour. Then the sinew cord wrapped itself around his throat. Once, twice, thrice, the Chaos worshipper wound the grey strangler's cord about the priest's neck. Thyssen's porcine jaws clamped down on his tongue as the sorcerer drew the cord tight, pushing his body back and pulling the old priest to his feet as the noose did its work. Father Hackl's hands rose to the garrotte, feebly trying to thwart the restricting cord. After a moment, as the priest's face grew flush and a hideous gargling noise began to form in his throat, the man's arms flailed about wildly, striking the swine behind him.



For an instant, the crippled sorcerer lessened the tension, allowing the priest to draw breath into his starving lungs.

Father Hackl did more than simply draw air into his lungs, however. With the momentary respite, the priest sent his elbow smashing into the throat of his unseen attacker. The attack did more than damage the assassin's windpipe; the crippled monster's twisted leg gave way, spilling the sorcerer on the cold stone floor, dragging the priest down with him.

Thyssen kept a death grip on the garrotte, even as he gasped and hawked on the phlegm building in his own damaged throat. The small, twisted creature desperately tried force the priest's body around, that he might plant his one good knee in the cleric's back. The priest resisted with all of his being, his aged frame contesting with Thyssen's crippled one. In the course of the struggle, Father Hackl nearly succeeded in forcing the sorcerer's furred fingers away from the constricting sinew cord. It was a very near thing when Thyssen at last managed to bring his knee crashing into the small of the priest's back. The monster began to pull with all his might, the extra support of his knee adding to the choking pressure. The fiend could feel the life leaking away from his prey with every moment. But the fight was not yet decided, and Thyssen could feel the body beneath him beginning to roll onto its side, threatening to spill the sorcerer once more on the stone floor.

From the shadows came small figures, figures Father Hackl was horrified to recognise. As the cord continued its deadly labour, a huge boy Hackl remembered as the brother of some foresters grasped his left arm, restraining it completely. Keren, the miller's daughter, and another boy gripped his right arm, allowing him to move it only with the greatest of efforts. Father Hackl struggled to raise the arm to his throat, succeeding by the slightest of degrees, when his fading vision settled upon another small figure standing behind the altar. Father Hackl tried to read the expression on Eduard's face, but he could not decide if it was a look of shock, concern or simmering hatred. The priest's eyes were still locked with those of Eduard when Thyssen Krotzigk finished choking the life from the cleric's body.

'Such very good children,' Thyssen said as he released the sinew cord and let the corpse's head strike the floor with a dull

thud. The sorcerer rose to his feet and then sank into one of the pews to recover from the strain of his efforts. He noted with pride the hate and loathing with which his pupils regarded the expired priest.

'Paul has everything ready in the bell tower,' Keren offered, looking pleased with herself. The boys looked proud as well, their eyes straying from Thyssen to the sorcerer's handiwork. They had every right to be, the Chaos worshipper decided. As much as any soldier, this had been their first battle, and they had performed valiantly.

'Then let us take this filth there,' Thyssen said, rising from his seat and resting a furry hand on Keren's shoulder. Kurt and Paul lifted the corpse and followed Thyssen into the bell tower. Thyssen reached out and tugged on the noose at the end of the bell rope. He smiled as he imagined the spectacle when the villagers discovered their priest hanging in his own temple, dead by his own hand. He was still smiling when he noticed that one of his pupils was missing.

'Where is Eduard?' the sorcerer hissed, twisting Keren's arm in his sudden terror. The girl winced from his grasp, alarmed by her master's harsh tone.

'He was with us,' she protested. Thyssen turned from her angrily, roaring at the boys to leave their macabre chore.

'Find him! Now!' Thyssen hobbled after the children as they raced back into the temple. Thyssen watched them as they rushed through the double doors of the anteroom, visions of witch hunters lending speed to his limping gait.

Thyssen found the children standing in the anteroom, all of them staring at the gory spectacle strewn across the floor. Eduard rose from the butchery, smiling at Thyssen Krotzigk. The sorcerer returned the smile and placed an arm around the boy. He looked again at the gruesome offering, the sigils drawn in blood upon the walls and floor. Such zeal, but Eduard's initiative was inappropriate just now. Thyssen turned to Keren.

'Clean this up,' he said in a soft, low voice. 'This is not a fitting place for an offering to the Four Princes.' Thyssen turned away from the girl and led Eduard away from the profaned temple. He looked down at the boy.

Soon, I will let you make another offering to the Dark Gods. A proper offering.



**T**HERE WERE THOSE in the village of Marburg who had believed their suffering was a punishment visited upon them by the gods, that they were paying for their prosperity with their own children. Yet even these pious individuals were at a loss to explain the horrible suicide of Father Hackl. In this time of crisis, many had come to rely upon the priest for both leadership and comfort. A menacing pall had settled over the village, and none could say when the dawn would come.

A week had passed before another omen of doom presented itself to the simple people of Marburg. A shadowy horseman slowly stalked down the narrow lane through the village; a silent twisted figure on a midnight steed, man and beast clothed in black. Men watched the horseman pass and made the sign of Sigmar before retreating behind the shutters of their cottages. The horseman's gaze strayed neither left nor right, seemingly oblivious to the very existence of the small community until he drew abreast of the tavern.

Ernst Ditmarr turned his head and regarded the plain building for a moment before the one-armed man awkwardly dismounted. The Black Guardsman advanced upon the tavern, pushing open its oaken door with his armoured fist. The tavern was nearly empty at this early hour; only the blacksmith Rudel was keeping Otto Keppler company at present.

The two men watched the templar stride across the room, seating himself at one of the rearmost tables. A deep sepulchral voice addressed Otto, asking for water and bread as the black-garbed figure situated itself. Otto continued to stare at the Black Guardsman for several heartbeats before remembering his business and hurrying into the back room to comply with his strange patron's request.

'Father, who is that man?' Keppler's son asked as the elder Keppler opened the small larder and removed a loaf of dark-coloured bread and a wedge of cheese.

'A templar,' the tavern keeper explained over his shoulder. 'One of the Black Guard of Morr.' Otto Keppler hurried back into the main room of his establishment, concerned by the grim figure occupying one of his tables. The dark templar was not the sort of patron Otto wished to keep waiting. He did not see the crafty look which entered his son's eyes. Nor did he hear the opening and closing of the rear door of the tavern.

**T**HYSSEN'S BESTIAL face split as a peal of malevolent laughter wracked his wasted form. Truly, none could predict the Chaos gods. First, they spared the man who had destroyed his former cult, allowed him to strike down their trusted and loyal servant. Then they delivered the same man into his power. A gift from the Realm of Chaos. Thyssen laughed again.

'You have done well, Paul, very well.' Thyssen grasped the boy's shoulder as he praised him. The sorcerer spun around and addressed his assembled cult.

'Tonight, I will teach you how to truly honour the power of Chaos! I will show you how to make an offering to the Four Princes, a testament of your undying love and loyalty to them. They have delivered into our hands a worthy and fitting sacrifice to anoint you in the service of Chaos!' Thyssen turned from the excited mob of children and spoke into Paul Keppler's ear.

'As we did with Bassermann's hunter,' the sorcerer chortled. 'Lead the guardsman here, to the mill.' A fire of madness blazed within Thyssen Krotzig's eyes as he contemplated the execution of his commands. 'Bring the cripple to me,' the fallen priest hissed.



**W**HAT BRINGS you to Marburg, lord templar?' Bernd Mueller nervously asked the seated knight. As Marburg's chief citizen, it had fallen upon the miller to act as spokesman to the village's sinister guest. The wealthy man did not relish the appointment.

The black-garbed knight looked up from his simple meal, the living side of his mouth still working on a sliver of cheese. Mueller retreated a few steps from the lifeless gaze of the Black Guardsman. The eyes remained fixed upon the retreating villager.

'Have you come to claim the priest's body?' Mueller asked, desperately hoping Ditmarr would lose interest in him. Instead the templar's gaze became even more penetrating.

'I came because of rumours of missing children,' Ditmarr's hollow voice stated. The templar rose from the table, causing Mueller and the half-dozen villagers at his back to tense and cast sidelong glances at the



tavern's door. Ditmarr took a step towards Mueller, his armoured footfall echoing on the wooden floorboards. 'What is this about a priest?' There was venom behind the dirge-like tone, a fire slowly creeping into the templar's dead eyes. The Black Guardsman took another step towards Mueller.

'Our priest hung himself seven nights past,' Mueller said, raising his hand to wipe sweat from his brow. Some of the fire seemed to leave the templar's eyes as the miller spoke.

'Where is the body? I would see it.'

'We left it in the chapel,' stammered the fat wainwright Bassermann from over Mueller's shoulder. Ditmarr did not waste further words on the villagers, turning on his heel and striding from the tavern. All of the tavern's denizens took a deep breath as the sinister knight departed. The sense of dread which had gripped them seemed to have lifted, and the unnerving stench of the grave that had impressed itself upon them had finally cleared away.



**D**ITMARR WALKED with purpose toward the small chapel devoted to Sigmar. He had nearly reached the small path that wound its way to the isolated shrine when a soft voice called to him from the shadowy space between two of the closely packed villager huts. The guardsman spun around, his hand grasping the hilt of his sword. A young boy greeted the templar's gaze.

'Thank Sigmar I have found you!' Paul Keppler said, his pockmarked face smiling at the templar. 'I have seen one of the missing children.'

'Have you?' Ditmarr asked, his hand releasing the hilt of his weapon.

'Yes, not far from here. In the woods,' Paul elaborated. He began to step back into the alley, motioning for Ditmarr to follow. The templar did as the boy asked, following him across the field behind the huts and towards the stand of trees beyond. The templar studied the boy's bright, excited face.

'How is it that you are not afraid?' Ditmarr asked, drawing closer to the boy.

'I am brave, like you,' the boy answered. The hunter had asked the same question and been satisfied by the same answer. The templar manoeuvred still closer to the boy.

'Why didn't you tell your father or the other men in the village?' Ditmarr's eyes zeroed on the boy's back as the youth stopped and stood still.

Paul hadn't expected that question. With the hunter he had said he wished a part of the reward, but even his young mind knew the templar was not motivated by greed and would be suspicious of anyone with such desires. Paul decided it would be better to lead the knight into Thyssen's trap a different way. If he ran, the templar would be certain to give chase, and that pursuit would lead him straight to the sorcerer.

The boy started to bolt, to race away from the templar. Only one thing prevented his flight – the heavy, black-clad hand that closed upon the neck of Paul's jerkin at the first sign of motion. The boy was pulled off his feet and Ditmarr lifted him from the ground.

'Suppose we tell your elders about what you have seen?' Paul's furious kicks impacted harmlessly against the knight's armour as the Black Guardsman carried the struggling boy back to Marburg's tavern.



**T**HE MEN OF Marburg stood in the common room of the tavern, silent, all eyes focused upon the small door which led to the tavern's kitchen. No disquieting sounds came from behind the door now, and somehow their absence was even more unsettling. The door slowly opened and the ashen-faced figure of Otto Keppler emerged, followed closely by the black-garbed templar of Morr.

'There is corruption here,' the Guardsman's grim voice declared. 'Chaos has touched your town.' The templar's malformed face regarded each of the silent men in turn. 'Now you must be strong. Now you must deny the Darkness its victory.'





**E**RNST DITMARR pushed open the rotten door of the decrepit mill. Within all was darkness and shadow. A smell like that of a kennel overcame the faint traces of burnt kindling in the air. Furtive, creeping sounds rustled from the shadows, suggesting much but revealing nothing. That someone was here, Ditmarr knew, but in what numbers, the darkness kept to itself. Slowly, sword in hand, the templar made his way into the building, his vision struggling to pierce the all-encompassing gloom. The templar had advanced nearly to the centre of the structure before any sign of life manifested itself.

'It is you!' a soft voice chortled from the darkness. Ditmarr turned to face the unseen speaker. A small globe of blue flame sprang into life, illuminating the bestial creature standing upon the flimsy platform. The witch fire danced in Thyssen Krotzig's hand, shaking with the sorcerer's every laugh.

'I have come to fulfil my duty,' Ditmarr's cold voice intoned. The Black Guardsman of Morr took a step towards the Chaos worshipper.

'Ah, still serving feeble old Morr?' Thyssen sneered. 'I fear you will once again disappoint your god.' A stone raced out of the darkness, smashing the sword from Ditmarr's hand. A horde of small, wiry figures leapt upon the knight, forcing the man to his knees through sheer weight of numbers. As Ditmarr struggled against the assault, Thyssen sent the witch-fire speeding from his hand to put to light the wood and bracken piled at the centre of the old millstone.

The sudden dispelling of the darkness revealed a mob of dirty children clutching and punching the templar. Their young faces wore expressions of savagery as they leeches the strength from Ditmarr's struggling limbs. At last the templar sagged limp and helpless in their grasp. When the fight had left his foe, Thyssen Krotzig slowly hobbled down from the platform.

'Refusing to defend yourself against innocent children?' The beast's mouth yawned as he shook with laughter.

Thyssen leered into Ditmarr's face. 'Shall I tell you of that innocence? Can you imagine the ecstasy of corrupting such fertile fields as these?' Thyssen gestured to include the frenzied throng gathered about the two old adversaries. He crooked a clawed finger and motioned for one among them to come forward. Ditmarr looked at the young, blank

faces of the sorcerer's fold. Even the huge boy who broke away from the other children had about him an air of confusion. The children knew that they were changing, but they had no understanding of what they were becoming. At once, the Black Guardsman's loathing of their corrupter increased tenfold.

'This is Kurt,' Thyssen beamed. 'A more worthy instrument of the Blood God has never been seen by these old eyes.' The sorcerer reached into his dark robe and withdrew a filthy, blood-encrusted knife. He handed the weapon to Kurt. Ditmarr stared into the boy's expressionless face, his eyes a soul-less window into Khorne's domain of carnage.

'You are just in time to witness Kurt's devotions to the Blood God,' a vile grin spread across the sorcerer's face. 'Or participate in them, as the case may be.' The sorcerer's words were answered by a rasping, choking sound. It took Thyssen a moment to realise that the templar was laughing at him. 'You will scream for me, cripple, when your blood feeds Khorne!' Thyssen snapped, glaring at Ditmarr. The templar raised his head, letting his cold eyes stare into the sorcerer's own.

'I wonder how Morr will receive you,' the Black Guardsman said. 'What is the justice earned by a heretic priest?' Thyssen continued to glare at Ditmarr, a snarl upon his face. Suddenly, the sorcerer's eyes grew wide with alarm.

'Where is Paul?' the sorcerer roared, his head bobbing about trying to spot the boy he had sent to lure his enemy here. Thyssen had been too lost in gloating over his enemy to notice the flaw in his plot. Now the alarmed sorcerer was trying to recover the situation.

'Keren!' Thyssen shouted. 'Look outside. Our guest may not have come alone.' The girl released Ditmarr's shoulder and ran to the doorway of the mill.



**I**T'S KEREN!' gasped Bernd Mueller from his position in the trees outside the ramshackle mill.

'Aye,' agreed Otto Keppler. The tavern keeper lit the torch in his hand and made ready to cast it. Mueller grabbed the man's arm before he could cast the firebrand.



'You know the guardsman's orders,' Keppler said, his voice as cold and lifeless as that of the templar himself. He tore his arm free of Mueller's and threw the torch at the mill's rotting roof.

'But my daughter is in there,' sobbed Mueller.

'As is mine,' Keppler whispered.



**T**HEY'RE SETTING the mill on fire!' Keren's shrill voice shrieked as she retreated away from the door. The other children stared at her for a moment, as if uncertain how to react to Keren's cries when the first crackling flames licked downwards from the ceiling and the first tendrils of fire danced at the mill's broken windows. Panic gripped the coven and they disintegrated into a frantic mob, racing about the mill, seeking refuge from the growing flames.

Thyssen shouted at his followers, trying to calm them. He did not see how few had retained their hold upon the templar, or how, their numbers lessened, Ditmarr seized the opportunity to free himself of their clutching grasp. His arm free, the Black Guardsman groped within the seemingly empty sleeve of his habit. A small silver dagger appeared in the knight's hand. As Thyssen Krotzigk turned to observe the templar's sudden motion, Ditmarr lashed out with the dagger. The blade passed cleanly through the sorcerer's left eye.

Thyssen recoiled, a furred hand clutching at his face in a vain attempt to staunch the flow of blood and jelly. Ditmarr brought an armoured boot crashing into the sorcerer's twisted leg, pitching the villain to the floor.

'Rot in the gardens of the damned,' Ditmarr snarled, crouching over his enemy. As the templar raised his dagger to slit the throat of the heretic, a powerful grip closed around his wrist and jerked him off the sorcerer's body.

Ditmarr swung at his attacker, arresting his weapon when he found himself looking into the youthful face of the boy Thyssen had called Kurt. The boy stared back with eyes that were pools of crimson, windows into the gore-soaked domain of the Blood God. A slight smile tugged at the boy's lips as he backhanded Ditmarr and sent the knight flying across the mill. Ditmarr struck his head

hard against the floor. As he raised himself from the ground, he shook his head groggily from side to side, trying to clear his vision.

Something was not right. Amid a rain of blazing thatch, the boy was slowly walking towards him. But with every step the child seemed to be growing larger, rippling muscles swelling on his arms and chest. The boy's flesh was turning leathery, taking on a red sheen. When Kurt reached the stunned templar, his features had grown sharp and inhuman; the teeth within his smirking mouth were long ivory fangs. Again the boy struck Ditmarr, crumpling his breastplate, the dented metal stabbing into the flesh beneath and sending the knight hurtling across the burning mill.

Ditmarr landed, his back striking the burning hulk of a fallen beam. The templar's habit caught fire and Ditmarr hurried to tear it from his armoured body. As he freed himself of the blazing garment, Ditmarr felt a monstrous hand close about his neck. Like a rag doll his armoured body was lifted from the floor.

There was no trace of Kurt in the thing that held Ditmarr. The daemon that had entered the boy had now completely possessed Kurt's body. The hands that held Ditmarr ended in long, razor-sharp claws. Monstrous black horns protruded from the abomination's elongated head while a stink of old blood oozed from the daemon's scarlet hide. The Bloodletter licked Ditmarr's face with a long, sinuous tongue. The obscenity's free hand touched itself to Ditmarr's chest and slowly raked its claws downwards, slicing through armour and flesh as though both were made of butter.

Ditmarr screamed against the searing agony of the daemon's touch. With a tremendous effort, he took his hand from the claw choking him and smashed the daemon's grinning mouth. The fiend's head snapped back and it dropped Ditmarr to the ground. The Bloodletter worked its jaw for a moment and then snarled at the templar.

Blood streamed from the gaping wounds in his chest, flowing through the rents in his armour like a cataract of gore. Despite the hideous wounds and his own fast failing strength, Ditmarr lunged at the Bloodletter. The Black Guardsman's armoured body struck the daemon of Khorne head on, knocking beast and man through the weakened wall of the fiery mill.



The daemon rose first, grabbing Ditmarr by the leg and hurling the templar a dozen yards, the warrior landing with a crack that bespoke of broken bones and internal injuries. The monster hissed and strode away from the inferno that blazed behind it, intent upon the filthy creature that sought to deny its bloodlust. At one point, the Bloodletter stopped in mid-step, its body frozen. For a moment, it seemed to shrink, to wither, before a sudden surge of unholy power caused the beast to swell again and continue its advance.

Ditmarr crawled through the brush, every motion heralding unspeakable agony. Somewhere in his body a rib had shattered, its bony shrapnel skewering the knight's lung. Blood trickled from his mouth and nose with every breath. The Black Guardsman could barely feel the familiar inhuman grip that closed about his arm and wrenched his body from the ground. His bleary vision could barely discern the leering daemoniac face that leered into his own. But he heard the cry of terror that sounded from behind the fiend.

The Bloodletter turned, still retaining its grip upon the templar and regarded the obese man with the rusty axe who had been fool enough to attack it. The daemon reached out towards Bassermann even as the wainwright struck at it again. The blade failed to pierce the fiend's flesh, a fact which caused the fat man's eyes to grow even wider with fear. The Bloodletter licked its fangs at the prospect of still more blood to satisfy its hunger.

Suddenly, the monster's form began to tremble. Ditmarr found himself falling to the ground as the Bloodletter's arm began to wither and fade. The daemon let out a howl of rage and fury as its body shrivelled. Soon only the echoes of its scream and a pile of smouldering ash remained as testament of the daemon's intrusion upon the realm of man. Ernst Ditmarr coughed weakly as Bassermann rushed to the templar's side.



**D**ITMARR STIRRED weakly as one of the villagers drew near. Blood seeped through his bandages as he moved. Try as they might, there seemed to be no way to stop the wounds inflicted by the daemon of Khorne from bleeding. It had been a marvel to the villagers that the templar had endured through the night.

'Have you found him?' the Black Guardsman asked, his voice the barest of whispers. Bernd Mueller looked down at him.

Ever since the fire had settled, the templar had been asking them to find the twisted remains of the Chaos sorcerer. In the darkness and now, in the light, the men of Marburg had undertaken the hideous task. Now Bernd Mueller stared at the dying templar.

'Aye, we found his filthy carcass,' the miller declared. 'Pinned beneath a fallen support. He must have burned to death in the fire.' The templar sighed as Mueller finished his report. The sigh slowly trailed off into the knight's death rattle. The taverner and miller watched as the mangled body twitched for a moment and was still. Otto Keppler leaned down and pulled the heavy wool blanket which had been wrapped about the dying knight and drew it over Ditmarr's sightless eyes.

'We found nothing,' the tavern keeper whispered. Mueller smiled feebly at the man.

'If it allows him to pass the portal of Morr easier, of what harm is that?' Mueller did not await an answer, but slowly started the long, lonely path home.



**T**HE BLACK-CLOAKED figure rose from the shadows and limped to the corpse lying on the other side of the hedge. Carefully, a furred hand pulled the crude stone knife from the forester's still warm body. The creature's single eye studied the simple blade for a moment. He did not give any sign that he heard the furtive sounds of motion at his back. Slowly he rose, turning to observe the even more twisted and grotesque figures emerging from the trees.

Thyssen Krotzigk smiled as the beastmen began to circle him. The swine-headed sorcerer dropped the knife in his left hand and the blood-caked dagger in his right. He studied the malformed, animal faces, their brute eyes gleaming with hate, their fanged mouths dripping saliva as their bloodlust rose. The beastmen began to grip their crude weapons more tightly, testing their weight with practice swipes, displaying brutal strength capable of crushing skulls.

And all is the laughter of the Four Princes, thought the sorcerer, as the beastmen closed upon him. \*



# CHAINS OF COMMAND

by **Graham McNeill**

**C**ONCEALED AT the edge of the jungle, Veteran Sergeant Uriel Ventris stared through the pouring rain at the grey, rockcrete bunker at the end of the bridge and tallied off the number of sentries he could see. There were four rebel troopers in the open, but they were sloppy, unconcerned, and that was going to kill them. They sheltered in the lee of the bunker's armoured door, smoking and talking. It was unforgivable stupidity, but Uriel always gave thanks whenever his enemies displayed such foolishness. The hissing of the warm rain falling through the canopy of thick, drooping fronds and bouncing from the rocks muffled all sounds. The roaring of the mighty river in the gorge below only added to the noise.

Moisture glistened on his blue shoulder guards, dripping from the inlaid chapter insignia of the Ultramarines. He slipped from his hidden position and ghosted through the drizzle, the actuators in his powered armour hissing as the fibre-bundle muscles enhanced his every movement. Uriel slid clear his combat knife and tested its edge, even though he knew it was unnecessary. The gesture was force of habit, learned at the earliest age by the people of Calth. The long blade was triangular in section, its edges lethally sharp and designed to slip easily between a victim's ribs, breaking them as it penetrated.

It was a tool for killing, nothing more.

Thanks to the heavy rain, the visibility of the guards was cut to less than thirty metres. Uriel's eyesight was far superior to a normal human's, he could clearly see the outline of the men he was about to kill.

He felt no remorse at the thought. The enemies of the Emperor deserved no mercy. These men had made their choice and would now pay the price for making the wrong one. Uriel slipped behind one of the bridge's adamantium stanchions, moving incredibly

quietly for such a bulky figure. He was close enough to his victims for his enhanced hearing to pick out the individual sounds of their voices.

As was typical with soldiers, they were bemoaning their current assignment and superior officers. Uriel knew they would not complain for much longer. He was close enough for his superior senses to pick out the smell of their unwashed bodies and the foetid dampness of stale sweat ingrained into their flesh after weeks of fighting. His muscles tensed and relaxed, preparing for action. The rune on his visor display that represented Captain Idaeus flashed twice and with a whispered acknowledgement Uriel confirmed his readiness to strike. He waited until he heard the scraping footfall of his first target turning away and twisted around the stanchion, sprinting for the bunker.

The first guard died without a sound, Uriel's knife hammering through the base of his skull. He dropped and Uriel wrenched the blade clear, spinning low and driving it into the second guard's groin. Blood sprayed and the man shrieked in horrified agony. A lasgun was raised and Uriel lunged forwards, smashing his fist into his foe's face, the augmented muscles of his power armour smashing the man's head to shards. Uriel spun on his heel, dodging a thrusting bayonet, and thundered his elbow into the last guard's chin, taking the base of his skull off. Teeth and blood splattered the bunker door.

He dropped into a defensive crouch, dragging his knife clear of the corpse beside him and cleaning the blade on its overalls. The killing of the guards had taken less than three seconds. He glanced quickly around the corner of the bunker to the sandbagged gun positions further down the bridge. There were two, set in a staggered pattern to provide overlapping fields of fire. The dull glint of metal protruded from the glistening, tarpaulin covered positions and Uriel counted three heavy bolters in each emplacement. The rain and thundering river noise had covered his stealthy approach to the bunker, but there was nothing but open ground before the gun nests.

'Position secure,' he whispered into the vox-com, removing shaped, breaching charges from his grenade dispenser. He worked quickly and purposefully, fastening the explosive around the locking mechanism of the bunker's armoured door.



'Confirmed,' acknowledged Captain Idaeus. 'Good work, Uriel. Squads Lucius and Daedalus are in position. We go on your signal.'

Uriel grinned and crawled around to the front of the bunker, making sure to keep out of sight below the firing slit. He drew his bolt pistol and spun his knife, holding it in a reverse grip. He took a deep breath, readying himself for action, and detonated the charges on the door.

The bunker's door blasted inwards, ripped from the frame by the powerful explosion. Choking smoke billowed outwards and Uriel was in motion even before the concussion of the detonation had faded. He heard the crack of bolter fire from the jungle and knew that the remainder of the Ultramarines detachment was attacking. By now the enemies of the Emperor would be dying.

Uriel dived through the blackened doorway, rolling to a firing crouch, his pistol sweeping left and right. He saw two heads silhouetted by the light at the firing slit and squeezed the trigger twice. Both men jerked backwards, their heads exploding. Another soldier was screaming on his knees, blood flooding from his ruined body. His torso was almost severed at the waist, razor-edged metal from the door's explosion protruding from his body. A las-blast impacted on Uriel's armour, and he twisted, kicking backwards in the direction the shot had come from. His booted foot hammered into a rebel guardsman's knee, the joint shattering. The man shrieked and fell, losing his grip on his weapon and clutching his ruined knee. The remainder of the bunker's complement crowded around Uriel, screaming and stabbing with bayonets.

Uriel spun and twisted, punching and kicking with lethal ferocity. Wherever he struck, bones crunched and men died. The stink of blood and voided bowels filled his senses as the last soldier fell. Blood streaked his shoulders and breastplate. His eyes scanned the dimness of the bunker, but all was silent. Everyone was dead.

He heard sounds of fighting and gunfire from outside and moved to the door, ducking back as heavy bolter shells raked the inside face of the doorway. He glanced round the edge of the bullet-pocked wall, watching with pride as the Ultramarines assault squad now joined the fray, their jump packs carrying them high over the bunker.

They dropped from above, like flaming angels of death, their chainswords chopping heads and limbs from bodies with shimmering, steel slashes. The first gun emplacement was in tatters, sandbags ripped apart by bolter fire and tossed aside by the attacking Space Marines. The poorly trained defence troopers broke in the face of such savagery, but the Ultramarines were in amongst them and there was no escape. The assault troopers hacked them down with giant, disembowelling strokes of their swords. The battle became a slaughter.

The staccato chatter of massed bolter fire echoed from the sides of the gorge, explosions of dirt rippling from the bullet-ridden sandbags of the second gun emplacement. But even under the constant volley, Uriel could see the gunners within were realigning their heavy bolters. Hurriedly, he voxed a warning.

'Ventriss to Idaeus. The second gun position has re-sited its weapons. You will be under fire in a matter of moments!'

Idaeus's rune on Uriel's visor blinked twice as the captain acknowledged the warning.

Uriel watched as the captain of Fourth Company barked a command and began sprinting towards the second gun position. Idaeus charged at the head of five blue-armoured warriors, and Uriel swore, leaping forwards himself. Without support, the assault troops would be prime targets! Tongues of fire blasted from the heavy bolters, reaching out towards the charging Ultramarines. Uriel saw the shells impact, bursting amongst the charging Space Marines, but not a single man fell, the blessed suits of powered armour withstanding the traitors' fire. Idaeus triggered his jump pack and the rest of his squad followed suit, streaking forward with giant powered leaps.

Las-blasts filled the air, but the Ultramarines were too quick. Idaeus smashed down through the timber roof of the gun nest, a fearsome war cry bursting from his lips. He swung his power sword, decapitating a rebel trooper, and backhanded his pistol into another's chest, smashing his ribcage to splinters. Uriel's long strides had carried him to the edge of the gun nest and he leapt, feet first, into the sandbagged position. He felt bone shatter under the impact and rolled to his feet, lashing out with his armoured gauntlet. Another rebel died screaming. The sound of gunshots was deafening. Uriel felt a shot impact on his shoulder, the bullet



ricocheting skywards. He turned and fired a bolt into his attacker's face, destroying the man's head. He sensed movement and spun, pistol raised. Captain Idaeus stood before him, hands in the air and a broad grin on his face. Uriel exhaled slowly and lowered his weapon. Idaeus slapped his hands on Uriel's shoulder plates.

'Battle's over, sergeant,' he laughed.

Idaeus's grizzled face was lined with experience and his shaven skull ran with moisture and blood. Four gold studs glittered on his forehead, each one representing a half-century of service, but his piercing grey eyes had lost none of the sparkle of youth. Uriel nodded, scowling.

'It is, yes, but the Codex Astartes tells us you should have waited for support before charging that gun nest, captain,' he said.

'Perhaps,' agreed Idaeus, 'but I wanted this done quickly, before any of them could vox a warning.'

'We have heavy weapons with us, captain. We could have jammed their vox units and blasted them apart from the cover of the bunker. They sited these gun positions poorly and would not have been able to target us. The Codex Astartes says—'

'Uriel,' interrupted Idaeus, leading him from the charnel house of the gun nest. 'You know I respect you, and, despite what others say, I believe you will soon command your own company. But you must accept that sometimes it is necessary for us to do things a little differently. Yes, the Codex Astartes teaches us the way of war, but it does not teach the hearts of men. Look around you. See the faces of our warriors. Their blood sings with righteousness and their faith is strong because they have seen me walk through the fire with them, leading them in glorious battle. Is not a little risk to me worth such reward?'

'I think I would call charging through the fire of three heavy bolters more than a "little risk" though,' pointed out Uriel.

'Had you been where I was, would you have done it differently?' asked Idaeus.

'No,' admitted Uriel with a smile, 'but then I am a sergeant, it's my lot in life to get all the dirty jobs.'

Idaeus laughed. 'I'll make a captain out of you yet, Uriel. Come, we have work to do. This bridge is not going to blow up on its own.'

AS THE ASSAULT troopers secured the bridge, the remainder of Captain Idaeus's detachment advanced from the jungle to reinforce them. Two tactical squads occupied the bunkers at either end of the bridge while Uriel organised the third repairing the sandbagged gun nests. In accordance with the Codex Astartes, he ordered them re-sited in order to cover every approach to the crossing, rebuilding and strengthening their defences.

Uriel watched as Idaeus deployed their scouts into the hills on the far side of the ridge above the gorge. They wouldn't make the same mistake the rebels had made. If the traitors launched a counter-attack, the Ultramarines would know of it. He stepped over a dead guardsman, noting with professional pride the bullet hole in the centre of his forehead. Such was the price of defeat. The Ultramarines' victory here had been absurdly easy, barely even qualifying as a battle, and Uriel felt curiously little pleasure at their success.

Since the age of six, he had been trained to bring death to the Emperor's enemies and normally felt a surge of justifiable pride in his lethal skills. But against such poorly trained opposition, there was no satisfaction to be gained. These soldiers were not worthy of the name and would not have survived a single month in the Agiselus Barracks on Macragge where Uriel had trained so many years ago. He pushed aside such gloomy thoughts and reached up to remove his helmet, setting it on the wide parapet of the bridge. Thousands of metres below, a wide river thundered through the gorge, the dark water foaming white over the rocks. Uriel ran a hand over his skull, the hair close cropped and jet black. His eyes were the colour of storm clouds, dark and threatening, his face serious. Two gold studs were set into his brow above his left eye.

The bridges were the key to the whole campaign. The Emperor's warriors had driven the poorly armed and trained planetary defence troopers of Thracia back at every turn and now the rebel-held capital, Mercia, was within their grasp. Despite horrendous losses, they still had the advantage of numbers and, given time, they could pose a serious threat to the crusade. The right flank of the Imperial Guard's push towards Mercia was exposed to attack across a series of bridges, one of which Uriel now stood upon. It was imperative the bridges were destroyed, but the Imperial Navy had



demanded days of planning for the missions to destroy the bridges, days the crusade could ill afford to waste. Therefore the task of destroying the bridges had fallen to the Ultramarines. Thunderhawk gunships had inserted the assault teams under cover of darkness, half a day's march from the bridges, and now awaited their signal to extract them after the crossings had been destroyed.

The rebellion on Thracia was insignificant but for one thing: reports had filtered back to the crusade's High Command that Traitor Space Marines of the Night Lords legion were present. So far, Uriel had seen nothing of these heretics and, privately, believed that they were phantoms conjured by the over-active imagination of guardsmen. Still, it never paid to be complacent and Uriel fervently hoped the reports would prove to be true. The chance to bring the wrath of the Emperor down on such abominable foes could not be passed up.

He watched a Techmarine wiring the bridge supports for destruction. Melta charges would blast the bridge to pieces, denying the traitors any way of moving their armoured units across the river and flanking the Imperial attack. Uriel knew that the same scene was being repeated up and down the enormous gorge as other Ultramarine detachments prepared to destroy their own targets. He scooped up his helmet and marched towards a mud-stained Techmarine hauling himself over the parapet and unwinding a long length of cable from his equipment pack. The man looked up as he heard Uriel approach and nodded respectfully.

'I suppose you're going to tell me to hurry up,' he grumbled, bending awkwardly to hook the cable into a battery pack.

'Not at all, Sevano. As though I would rush the work of a master craftsman like yourself.'

Sevano Tomasin glowered at Uriel, searching his face for any trace of sarcasm. Finding none, the Techmarine nodded as he continued wiring the explosives, moving with a lop-sided, mechanical gait as both his legs and right arm were heavier, bionic replacements.

The apothecaries had grafted these on after recovering his body from the interior of a wrecked Land Raider on Ichar IV after a rampaging carnifex had ripped it apart. The horrifying creature's bio-plasma had flooded the interior of the armoured fighting vehicle, detonating its ammo spectacularly. The

carnifex was killed in the blast, but the explosion sheared Tomasin to the bone and, rather than lose his centuries of wisdom, the chapter's artisans had designed a completely new, artificial body around the bloody rags of his remains.

'How long until you and the servitors are finished?' asked Uriel.

Tomasin wiped the mud from his face and glanced up the length of the bridge. 'Another hour, Ventris. Possibly less if this damned rain would ease up and I didn't have to stop to talk to you.'

Uriel bit back a retort and turned away, leaving the Techmarine to his work and striding to the nearest gun nest. Captain Idaeus was sitting on the sandbags and speaking animatedly into the vox-com.

'Well make sure, damn you!' he snapped. 'I don't want to be left sitting here facing half the rebel army with only thirty men.'

Idaeus listened to the words that only he could hear through the comm-bead in his ear and cursed, snapping the vox unit back to his belt.

'Trouble?' asked Uriel.

'Maybe,' sighed Idaeus. 'Orbital surveyors on the *Vae Victus* say they think they detected something large moving through the jungle in our direction, but this damned weather's interfering with the auguries and they can't bring them on-line again. It's probably nothing.'

'You don't sound too convinced.'

'I'm not,' admitted Idaeus. 'If the Night Lords are on this world, then this is just the kind of thing they would try.'

'I have our scouts watching the approaches to the bridge. Nothing is going to get close without us knowing about it.'

'Good. How is Tomasin getting on?'

'There's a lot of bridge to blow, captain, but Tomasin thinks he'll have it done within the hour. I believe he will have it rigged sooner though.'

Idaeus nodded and rose to his feet, staring into the mist and rain shrouded hills on the enemy side of the bridge. His face creased in a frown and Uriel followed his gaze. Dusk was fast approaching and with luck they would be on their way to rejoin the main assault on Mercia before nightfall.

'Something wrong?'

'I'm not sure. Every time I look across the bridge I get a bad feeling.'

'A bad feeling?'



'Aye, like someone is watching us,' whispered Idaeus.

Uriel checked his vox-com. 'The scouts haven't reported anything.'

Idaeus shook his head. 'No, this is more like instinct. This whole place feels wrong somehow. I can't describe it.'

Uriel was puzzled. Idaeus was a man he trusted implicitly, they had fought and bled together for over fifty years, forming a bond of friendship that Uriel found all too rarely. Yet he could never claim to truly understand Idaeus. The captain relied on instinct and feelings more than the holy Codex Astartes, that great work of military thinking penned ten thousand years ago by their own Primarch, Roboute Guilliman. The Codex formed the basis of virtually every Space Marine chapter's tactical doctrine and laid the foundations for the military might of the entire Imperium. Its words were sanctified by the Emperor himself and the Ultramarines had not deviated from its teachings since it had been written following the dark days of the Horus Heresy.

But Idaeus tended to regard the wisdom of the Codex as advice rather than holy instruction and this was a constant source of amazement to Uriel. He had been Idaeus's second-in-command for nearly thirty years and, despite the captain's successes, Uriel still found it hard to accept his methods.

'I want to go and check those hills,' said Idaeus suddenly.

Uriel sighed and pointed out, 'The scouts will inform us of anything that approaches.'

'I know, and I have every faith in them. I just need to see for myself. Come on, let's go and take a look.'

Uriel took out his vox unit, informing the scouts they would be approaching from the rear and followed Idaeus as he strode purposefully to the end of the bridge. They passed the far bunker, the one the rebels should have occupied, noting the glint of bolters from within. The two Space Marines marched up the wide road that led into the high hills either side of the gorge and for the next thirty minutes inspected the locations Uriel had deployed the scouts to watch from. The rain deadened sounds and kept visibility low and there was enough tree cover to almost completely obscure the jungle floor. There could be an army out there and they wouldn't see it until it was right on top of them.

'Satisfied?' asked Uriel.

Idaeus nodded, but did not reply and together they began the trek back to the far bunker where they could see Sevano Tomasin.

The warning came just as the first artillery shell screamed overhead.

Almost as soon as Uriel heard the incoming shell, the comm-net exploded with voices; reports of artillery flashes in the distance and multiple sightings of armoured personnel carriers and tanks. A blinding explosion in the centre of the bridge, followed by half a dozen more in quick succession, split the dusk apart. Uriel shouted as he saw the servitors and two Space Marines blasted from the bridge, tumbling downwards to the rocks below.

The two officers sprinted down towards the bridge.

Uriel dialled into the vox-net of the Scouts as he ran and yelled, 'Scout team Alpha! Where in the warp did they come from? Report!'

'Contacts at three kilometres and closing, sergeant! The rain held down the dust, we couldn't see them through the dead ground.'

'Understood,' snapped Uriel, cursing the weather. 'What can you see?'

'Can't get an accurate count, but it looks like a battalion-sized assault. Chimeras mainly, but there's a lot of heavy armour mixed in - Leman Russ, Griffons and Hellhounds.'

Uriel swore and exchanged glances with Idaeus. If the scouts were correct, they were facing in excess of a thousand men with artillery and armoured support. Both knew that this must be the contact the auguries on the *Vae Victus* had detected then lost. They had to get everyone back across the bridge and blow it right now.

'Stay as long as you can Alpha and keep reporting, then get back here!'

'Aye, sir,' responded the scout and signed off.

More shells dropped on the bridge, the echoes of their detonations deafening in the enclosed gorge. Each blast threw up chunks of the roadway and vast geysers of rainwater. Some were air-bursting above the bridge, showering the roadway with deadly fragments.

Uriel recognised the distinctive whine of Griffon mortar shells and gave thanks to Guilliman that the PDF obviously did not have access to the heavier artillery pieces of the Imperial Guard. Either that or they realised that to use such weapons would probably destroy the bridge.



Most of the Space Marines who had been caught in the open were in cover now and Uriel knew they were lucky not to have lost more men. He cursed as he saw the lumbering shape of Sevano Tomasin still fixing explosive charges and unwinding lengths of cable back towards the last bunker. The Techmarine's movements were painfully slow, but he was undaunted by the shelling. Uriel willed him to work faster.

'One and a half kilometres and closing. Closing rapidly! Dismounted enemy infantry visible!' shouted the scout sergeant in Uriel's comm-bead.

'Acknowledged,' shouted Uriel over the crash of falling mortar shells and explosions. 'Get back here now; there's nothing more you can do from there. Sword squad is waiting at the first bunker to give you covering fire. Ventris out.'

Uriel and Idaeus reached the bunker and splashed to a halt behind its reassuringly thick walls. Idaeus snatched up his vox-com and shouted, 'Guard command net, this is Captain Idaeus, Ultramarine Fourth company. Be advised that hostiles are attacking across Bridge Two-Four in division strength, possibly stronger. We are falling back and preparing to destroy the bridge. I say again, hostiles are attacking across Bridge Two-Four!'

As Idaeus voxed the warning to the Imperial Guard commanders, Uriel patched into the frequency of the Thunderhawk that had dropped them in position.

'Thunderhawk Six, this is Uriel Ventris. We are under attack and request immediate extraction. Mission order Omega-Seven-Four. Acknowledge please.'

For long seconds, all Uriel could hear was the hiss of static and he feared something terrible had happened to the gunship. Then a voice, heavily distorted said, 'Acknowledged, Sergeant Ventris. Mission order Omega-Seven-Four received. We'll be overhead in ten minutes. Signal your position with green smoke.'

'Affirmative,' replied Uriel. 'Be advised the landing zone will in all likelihood be extremely hot when you arrive.'

'Don't worry,' chuckled the pilot of the gunship. 'We're fully loaded. We'll keep their heads down while we extract you. Thunderhawk Six out.'

Uriel snapped the vox-unit to his belt and hammered on the bunker's door. He and Idaeus ducked inside as it slid open. The five

Space Marines within were positioned at the bunker's firing step, bolters and a lascannon pointed at the hills above, ready to cover their brothers' retreat. Uriel stared through the anti-grenade netting, watching the scouts falling back in good order towards the bridge.

'As soon as the scouts are past you, fall back to the first gun nest and take up firing positions,' ordered Idaeus. 'The other squads are already in position and they'll cover you. Understood?'

The Space Marines nodded, but did not take their eyes from the ridge above the approaching scouts. Idaeus turned to Uriel and said, 'Get across and see how close Tomasin is to blowing this damned bridge. We'll join you as soon as we can.'

Uriel opened his mouth to protest, but Idaeus cut him off, 'Stow it, sergeant. Go! I'll join you as soon as Alpha Team are safe.'

Without another word, Uriel slipped from the bunker. Another series of thunderous detonations cascaded across the bridge and impacted on the sides of the gorge. Uriel waited until he detected a lull in the firing then began sprinting across the bridge, weaving around piles of rubble, debris and water filled craters left by the explosions. He could still see Sevano Tomasin behind the sandbagged gun nests, working on the detonators.

He heard gunfire behind him, the distinctive, dull crack of bolter fire and the snapping hiss of lasguns. He glanced over his shoulder as a terrible sense of premonition struck him.

Twin streaks of shrieking projectiles flashed overhead, one landing behind him and another before him with earth shaking detonations. The first shell exploded less than four metres above the men of Alpha team, shredding their bodies through the lighter scout armour leaving only a bloody mist and scraps of ripped flesh. The shockwave of the blast threw Uriel to the ground. He coughed mud and spat rainwater, rising in time to see Sevano Tomasin engulfed in blinding white phosphorescent fire.

The Techmarine collapsed, his metal limbs liquefying and the flesh searing from his bones. A second melta charge ignited in his equipment pack, also cooked off by the mortar shell's detonation. Tomasin vanished in a white-hot explosion, the rain forming a steam cloud around his molten remains.



Uriel pushed himself upright and charged towards the fallen Space Marine. Tomasin was dead, there could be no doubt about that. But Uriel needed to see if the detonator mechanism had gone up with him. If it had, they were in deep, deep trouble.



DAEUS WATCHED the first squadron of enemy vehicles crest the ridge above, hatred burning in his heart. Even in the fading light, he could clearly make out the silhouette of three Salamander scout vehicles and Idaeus vowed he would see them dead.

He could smell the acrid stench of scorched human flesh from the blasted remains of the scouts. They had died only ten metres from the safety of the bunker. Idaeus knew he should fall back to the prepared gun positions further along the bridge; if they stayed here much longer, they'd be trapped. But his thirst for retribution was a fire in his heart, and he was damned if he would yield a millimetre to these bastards without exacting some measure of vengeance for his fallen warriors.

'Nivaneus,' hissed Idaeus to the Space Marine carrying the lascannon. 'Do you have a target?'

'Aye, sir,' confirmed Nivaneus.

'Then fire at will. Take down those traitorous dogs!'

A blinding streak of las-fire punched from the massive weapon. A Salamander slewed from the road, its hull blazing and smoke boiling from its interior. The vehicles' supporting infantry squads fired their lasguns before the Space Marines' bolter fire blasted them apart with uncompromising accuracy. But Idaeus knew they were inconsequential. Killing the tanks was all that mattered.

Nivaneus calmly switched targets and another Salamander died, its crew tumbling from the escape hatches on fire. The last tank ground to a halt, stuttering blasts from its autocannon stitching across the bunker's face. Idaeus felt the vibrations of shell impacts. He smiled grimly as the Salamander's driver desperately attempted to reverse back uphill. Its tracks spun ineffectually, throwing up huge sprays of mud, unable to find purchase. Dust and an acrid, electric stench filled the air as Nivaneus lined up a shot on the struggling tank.

Before he could fire, a missile speared through the rain and smashed into the immobilised tank's turret. It exploded from within, wracked by secondary detonations as its ammo cooked off.

'Captain Idaeus!' shouted Uriel over the vox-net. 'Get out of there! There will be more tanks coming over that ridge any moment and you will be cut off if you do not leave now! We have you covered, now get back here!'

'I think he's got a point, men,' said Idaeus calmly. 'We've given them a bloody nose, but it's time we were going.'

The Ultramarines fired a last volley of shots before hefting their weapons and making for the door.

'Uriel!' called Idaeus. 'We are ready to go, now give me some fire.'

Seconds later a withering salvo of bolter fire and missiles swept the ridge top, wreathing it in smoke and flames. Idaeus shouted, 'Go, go, go!' to the Space Marines and followed as they sprinted through the rain. The mortar fire had ceased; probably due to the Griffon tanks being moved up into a direct firing position, thought Idaeus. Whatever the reason, he was grateful for it.

He heard a teeth-loosening rumble and a squeal of tracks, knowing without looking that heavy tanks had spread out across the ridge, moving into a firing position behind them. He saw two missile contrails flashing overhead and heard the ringing clang of their impact. A crashing detonation told him that at least one enemy tank was out of action, but only one.

'Incoming!' he yelled and dived over a pile of debris into a crater as the thunder of two battle cannons echoed across the gorge. He felt the awesome force of the impacts behind him, even through the ceramite of his power armour. His auto senses shut down momentarily to preserve his sight and hearing as the massive shell exploded, the pressure of the blast almost crushing him flat. Red runes winked into life on his visor as his armour was torn open in half a dozen places. He felt searing pain and cursed as he yanked a plate-sized piece of sizzling shrapnel from his leg. Almost instantly, he could feel the Larraman cells clotting his blood and forming a protective layer of scar tissue over the wound. He had suffered much worse and shut out the pain.

The two surviving Leman Russ tanks rumbled downhill, smashing the smoking remains of the Salamanders aside with giant



dozer blades. Furious gunfire spat from their hull-mounted heavy bolters, sweeping across the bunker's face and the bridge, throwing up spouts of water and rock. None hit the Ultramarines and Idaeus shouted, 'Up! Come on, keep moving!'

The Space Marines rose and continued running towards the comparative safety of the far side of the bridge. More tanks and infantry spilled over the ridge, following in the wake of the Leman Russ battle tanks. Las-blasts fired at the Space Marines, but the range was too great.

Then, at the edge of his hearing, Idaeus heard the welcome boom of a Thunderhawk gunship's engines and saw the angular form of the aerial transport sweep from the above the jungle canopy. Rockets streaked from its wing pylons, rippling off in salvos of three and the ridge vanished in a wall of flames. Heavy cannons mounted on the hull and wings fired thousands of shells into the rebels, obliterating tanks and men in a heartbeat.

Idaeus punched the air in triumph as the Thunderhawk swept over the ridge and circled around for another strafing run. He jogged leisurely into the sandbagged gun nest, the Space Marines who had followed him taking up firing positions.

'Uriel,' voxed Idaeus. 'Are you ready to get out of here?'

'More than ready,' replied Uriel from the bunker behind Idaeus. 'But we have a problem. Tomasin was killed in the shelling and he had the detonators. We can't blow the bridge.'

Idaeus slammed his fist into a sandbag. 'Damn it!' he swore, teeth bared. He paced the interior of the gun nest like a caged grox before saying, 'Then we're going to have to hold here for as long as possible and pray the Guard can realign their flank in time.'

'Agreed. The Emperor guide your aim, captain.'

'And yours. May He watch over you.'



**U**RIEL SHUT OFF the vox-com and slid a fresh magazine into his bolt pistol, staring out at the flame wreathed hillside. The distant Thunderhawk had circled around, guns blazing at something Uriel could not see. Fresh explosions

blossomed from behind the ridge as more traitors died.

Suddenly shells burst around the gunship and streams of fire, bright against the dark sky, licked up from the ground. Uriel swore as he realised the traitors were equipped with anti-aircraft weapons. The gunship jinked to avoid the incoming fire, but another stream of shells spat skyward and seconds later the gunners had the Thunderhawk bracketed. Thousands of shells ripped through the gunship's armour, tearing the port wing off. The engine exploded in a brilliant fireball. The pilot struggled to hold the aircraft aloft, banking to avoid the flak, but the gunship continued to lose altitude, spewing black smoke from its stricken frame.

Uriel watched with horror as the Thunderhawk spiralled lower and lower, its wobbling form growing larger by the second.

'By the Emperor, no!' whispered Uriel as the gunship smashed into the ground just before the bridge, skidding forwards and trailing a brilliant halo of sparks and flames. The wreckage crashed into the unoccupied bunker, demolishing it instantly and slewing across the bridge towards the Ultramarines with the sound of shrieking metal. The remaining wing sheared off, spinning the flaming gunship upside down and tearing up the roadway. The gunship ground onwards, finally coming to a halt less than two hundred metres from the gun nests.

Uriel let out the breath he had been holding. Movement caught his eye and he saw more enemy vehicles rumbling through the swirling black smoke towards the bridge.

'Targets sighted!' he shouted. 'Enemy tanks inbound. Mark your targets and fire when you have a clear shot!'

The lead rebel armoured column consisted of dozens of Chimeras, daubed in blasphemous runes. Uriel snarled as he recognised the winged skull motif of the Night Lords crudely copied onto the Chimeras' hulls. There could be no doubt now. The taint of Chaos had come to Thracia. Each vehicle mounted a powerful searchlight, sweeping blindingly back and forth in random patterns across the bridge as they charged. Missiles and lascannon blasts pierced the darkness, and the night was illuminated by scores of exploding tanks. No matter how many the Ultramarines killed, there were more to take their place. Soon the bridge was choked with burning wrecks. Hundreds of screaming soldiers dismounted



from their transports, working their way forward through the tanks' graveyard.

Uriel fired shot after shot from his pistol. It was impossible to miss, there were so many. The darkness of the gorge echoed to the sounds of screams and gunfire. But Uriel was not fooled by the slaughter they were wreaking amongst the ranks of the traitors. Their ammunition was finite and soon the battle would degenerate into bloody close quarters fighting and, though they would kill many hundreds, they would eventually fall. It was simply a question of numbers.

He reloaded again and wished there was something else he could do, cursing Sevano Tomasin for dying and condemning them to this ignoble end. He pictured again the image of the Techmarine incinerated by the chain-reacting melta charge in his equipment pack.

Something clicked in Uriel's head and he stopped.

No, it was insane, utterly insane and suicidal. But it could work. He tried to remember a precedent in the Codex Astartes, but came up with nothing. Could it be done? A frag wouldn't do it and only the assault troops had been issued with kraks. He checked his grenade dispenser. He had one breaching charge left.

His mind made up, he grabbed a Space Marine from the firing step, shouting to be heard over the bolter fire. 'I'm heading for the captain's position. Give me covering fire!'

The man nodded and passed on his order. Uriel ducked out the ragged doorway and crouched at the corner of the bunker. Streams of las-blasts and bolter rounds criss-crossed the darkness causing a weirdly stroboscopic effect.

Volleys of sustained bolter fire blasted from the bunker and Uriel leapt from cover, sprinting towards Idaeus's position. Instantly, lasgun fire erupted from amongst the burning tanks. Each shooter was silenced by a devastatingly accurate bolter shot. Uriel dived behind the gun nest and crawled inside on his belly.

Idaeus, bleeding from a score of gouges in his armour, directed disciplined bolter fire into the traitors' ranks. Two Space Marines lay dead, the backs of their helmets blasted clear and Uriel was suddenly very aware of how much less protection there was in the gun nest than the bunker.

Idaeus spared Uriel a glance, shouting, 'What are you doing here, Uriel?'

'I have an idea how we can blow the bridge!'

'How?'

'The assault troops have krak grenades. If we can attach some to one of the melta charges on the bridge supports it could set off a chain reaction with the others!'

Idaeus considered the idea for a second then shrugged. 'It's not much of a plan, but what choice do we have?'

'None,' said Uriel bluntly. Idaeus nodded and hunkered down in the sandbags, snatching out his battered vox. Hurriedly, he explained Uriel's plan to the sergeant of the assault troopers, receiving confirmation as to its feasibility of execution.

Idaeus raised his head and locked his gaze with Uriel. 'You picked a hell of a time to start thinking outside the Codex, sergeant.'

'Better late than never, captain.'

Idaeus smiled and nodded. 'We'll have about thirty seconds from the first detonation to get clear. If we're not off the bridge by then, we're dead. I've already called for another Thunderhawk, but it will not arrive before morning at the earliest.'

The captain opened a channel to the remaining Space Marines in his detachment and said, 'All squads, as soon as the assault troops move, I want enough firepower laid down on these bastards to blow apart a Titan. Understood?'

Shouted confirmations greeted Idaeus's order. He reloaded his pistol and motioned for Uriel to join him at the edge of the gun nest.

From the second gun nest, flaring jets of light erupted as the assault squad fired their jump packs.

'NOW!' yelled Idaeus and the Ultramarines fired everything they had. Volley after volley of bolter shells, missiles and lascannon shots decimated the rebel troopers. The swiftness of death was unbelievable. The Space Marines pumped shot after shot into their reeling mass.

It began with a single rebel turning his back and fleeing into the night. An officer shot him dead, but it was already too late. Others began turning and fleeing through the maze of wrecked tanks, their resolve broken in the face of the Emperor's finest.

And then it was over.

Uriel could not recall how long they had fought for, but it must have been many hours. He checked his visor chronometer and was



surprised to find it had been less than two. He knelt and counted his ammo: six clips, not good. Risking a glance over the top level of sandbags, their outer surfaces vitrified to glass by the intense heat of repeated laser impacts, Uriel saw the bridge littered with hundreds of corpses.

The tension was palpable, every Space Marine ready to move the instant they heard the first detonation of a krak grenade. Long minutes passed with nothing but the hiss of the vox, the crackle of flames and moans of the dying outside. Everyone in the gun nest flinched as they heard the crack of rapid bolt pistol fire. The shooting continued for several minutes before dying away.

Uriel and Idaeus exchanged worried glances. Both sides were using bolt pistols.

Uriel shook his head sadly. 'They failed.'

'We don't know that,' snapped Idaeus, but Uriel could tell the captain did not believe his own words.



**W**EAK SUNLIGHT shone from the carcasses of the crashed Thunderhawk and smashed tanks on the bridge, their black shells smouldering fitfully. The rain had continued throughout the night. Thankfully, the rebels' attacks had not. There was no detonation of krak grenades and Idaeus was forced to admit that the assault squad had been thwarted in their mission.

Uriel scanned the skies to their rear, watching for another Thunderhawk or perhaps Lightning strike craft of the Imperial Navy. Either would be a welcome sight just now, but the skies remained empty.

A sudden shout from one of the forward observers roused Uriel from his melancholy thoughts and he swiftly took his position next to Idaeus. He saw movement through the burnt out shell of the Thunderhawk, flashes of blue and gold and heard a throaty grinding noise. The sound of heavy vehicles crushing bone and armour beneath their iron tracks. Darting figures, also in blue and gold, slipped through the wrecks, their movements furtive.

With a roar of primal ferocity that spoke of millennia of hate, the Night Lords Chaos Space Marines finally revealed themselves. Battering through the wreckage came five ornately carved Rhino armoured personnel

carriers, coruscating azure flames writhing within their flanks. Uriel was speechless.

They resembled Rhinos in name only. Bloody spikes festooned every surface and leering gargoyles thrashed across the undulating armour, gibbering eldritch incantations that made Uriel's skin crawl.

But the supreme horror was mounted on the tanks' frontal sections.

The still-living bodies of the Ultramarine assault squad were crucified on crude iron crosses bolted to the hulls. Their armour had been torn off, their ribcages sawn open then spread wide like obscene angels' wings. Glistening ropes of entrails hung from their opened bellies and they wept blood from blackened, empty eye sockets and tongueless mouths. That they could still be alive was impossible, yet Uriel could see their hearts still beat with life, could see the abject horror of pain in their contorted features.

The Rhinos continued forwards, closely followed by gigantic figures in midnight blue power armour. Their armour was edged in bronze and their helmets moulded into daemonic visages with blood streaked horns. Red winged skull icons pulsed with unnatural life on their shoulder plates.

Idaeus was the first to overcome his shock, lifting his bolter and pumping shots into the advancing Night Lords.

'Kill them!' he bellowed. 'Kill them all!'

Uriel shook his head, throwing off the spell of horror the spectacle of the mutilated Ultramarines had placed upon him and he levelled his pistol. Two missiles and a lascannon shot punched towards the Night Lords. Uriel prayed the tortured souls crucified on the Rhinos would forgive them, as two of the tanks exploded, veering off and crashing into the side of the bridge. The prisoners burned in the flames of their destruction and Uriel could feel his fury rising to a level where all he could feel was the urge to kill.

The Space Marine next to Uriel fell, a bolter shell detonating within his chest cavity. He collapsed without a sound, and Uriel swept up his bolt gun, emptying the magazine into the traitor legionnaires. A handful of Night Lords were dead, but the rest were closing the gap rapidly. Two more Rhinos died in fiery blasts. Disciplined volleys of bolter and lascannon fire from the Ultramarines in the bunker kept hammering the ranks of Night Lords as they attempted to overrun the gun nests. But few were falling and it was only a matter of time until the traitors reached them.



The Space Marines across the bridge from Uriel and Idaeus perished in a searing ball of white-hot fire as Night Lord warriors unloaded plasma guns through the firing slit of their gun nest. The backblast of the resultant explosion mushroomed into the dawn, incinerating the killers. Still they came on.

Uriel yelled in fury, killing and killing. An armoured gauntlet smashed into the gun nest.

Idaeus chopped with his power sword and blood sprayed.

Uriel yelled, 'Grenade!' as he saw what was clutched in the severed hand. He kicked the hand into the gun nest's grenade pit and rolled a dead Space Marine on top. The frag blew with a muffled thump, the corpse's ceramite back-plate absorbing the full force of the blast.

'Thank you, brother,' muttered Uriel in relief.

Another Night Lord kicked his way into the gun nest, a screaming axe gripped in one massive fist. His blue armour seemed to ripple with inner fires and the brass edging was dazzling in its brightness. The winged skull icon hissed blasphemous oaths and Uriel could feel the axe's obscene hunger for blood. Idaeus slashed his sword across his chest, but the blade slid clear. The warrior lunged, slashing his axe across Idaeus's shoulder and blood sprayed through the rent in his armour. Idaeus slammed his elbow into his foe's belly and spun inside his guard, hammering his sword through the Night Lord's neck.

He kicked him back outside as more enemies pushed themselves in. Uriel fired his pistol and rolled beneath a crackling power fist. He drove his combat knife into the gap between his enemy's breastplate and helmet, wrenching the blade upwards. Blood fountained and he yelled in sudden pain as the warrior fired his bolter at point blank range. The shell penetrated Uriel's armour and blasted a fist-sized chunk of his hip clear. He stabbed his opponent's neck again and again, stopping only when his struggles ceased completely.

Idaeus and the last Space Marine in the gun nest fought back to back, desperately fighting for their lives against four Night Lords. Uriel leapt into the combat, wrapping his powerful arms around one Chaos Space Marine's neck. He twisted hard, snapping his spine.

Everything was blood and violence. The Space Marine fighting alongside Idaeus fell, his body pulverised by a power fist. Uriel

dragged his blade free from the Night Lord's helmet and beheaded the killer, blowing out another foe's helmet with a bolter shell. Idaeus drove his sword through the last Night Lord's belly, kicking the corpse from his blood-sheathed blade. The two Space Marines snatched up their bolters and began firing again. The gun nest stank of blood and smoke. The last Rhino was a blazing wreck, the prisoner on its hull cooking in the fires.

He tossed aside the bolter as its slide racked back empty and grabbed Idaeus by the shoulder.

'We need to get back to the bunker. We can't hold them here!'

'Agreed,' grimaced Idaeus. Grabbing what ammo they could carry, the two warriors ducked outside into the grey morning and ran back towards the bullet scarred bunker. The attack appeared to be over for now.

As they ran, Idaeus's vox crackled and a voice said, 'Captain Idaeus, do you copy? This is Thunderhawk Two. We are inbound on your position and will be overhead in less than a minute. Do you copy?'

Idaeus snatched up the vox and shouted, 'I copy, Thunderhawk Two, but do not over-fly our position! The enemy has at least two, but probably more, anti-aircraft tanks covering the bridge. We already lost Thunderhawk Six.'

'Understood. We will set down half a kilometre south of the bridge,' replied the pilot.

Uriel and Idaeus limped inside the bunker and dropped the bolter magazines on the floor.

'Load up. This is all we have left,' ordered Idaeus.

The Ultramarines began sharing out the magazines and Uriel offered another bolter to Idaeus, but the captain shook his head.

'I don't need it. Give me a pistol and a couple of clips. And that last breaching charge of yours, Uriel.'

Uriel quickly grasped the significance of Idaeus' words. 'No, let me do it, captain,' he pleaded.

Idaeus shook his head, 'Not this time, Uriel. This is my mission, I won't let it end like this. The seven of us can't hold the Night Lords if they attack again, so I'm ordering you to get the rest of the men back to that Thunderhawk.'

'Besides,' he said with a wry smile. 'You don't have a jump pack to get down there.'



Uriel could see there was no arguing with the captain. He dispensed the last breaching charge and reverently offered it to Idaeus. The captain took the charge and unbuckled his sword belt. He reversed the scabbard and handed the elaborately tooled sword to Uriel.

'Take this,' he said. 'I know it will serve you as well as it has served me. A weapon this fine should not end its days like this, and you will have more need of it than I.'

Uriel could not speak. Idaeus himself had forged the magnificent blade before the Corinthian Crusade and had carried it in battle ever since. The honour was overwhelming.

Idaeus gripped Uriel's wrist tightly in the warrior's grip and said, 'Go now, old friend. Make me proud.'

Uriel nodded. 'I will, captain,' he promised, and saluted. The five remaining Space Marines in the bunker followed Uriel's lead and came to attention, bolters held tightly across their chests.

Idaeus smiled. 'The Emperor watch over you all,' he said and slipped outside into the rain.

Uriel was gripped by a terrible sense of loss, but suppressed it viciously. He would ensure that Idaeus's last command was carried out.

He loaded a bolter and racked the slide.

'Come on, we have to go.'



**I** DAEUS WAITED until he saw Uriel lead the five Space Marines from the bunker towards the jungle's edge before moving. He had a chance to do this stealthily, but knew it wouldn't be long before the Night Lords realised the bridge was now undefended and the rebels drove their forces across. He would not allow that to happen.

He crawled through the mud and rubble, keeping out of sight of the enemy lines, eventually reaching the pitted face of the rockcrete sides of the bridge. He grabbed a handful of mud and ash, smearing it over the blue of his armour, then slithered onto the parapet. The river was thousands of metres below and Idaeus experienced a momentary surge of vertigo as he looked down. He scanned the bridge supports, searching for one of the box-like melta charges Tomasin had placed only the day before. He grinned as he

spotted one fixed to the central span. Muttering a prayer to the Emperor and Guilliman, Idaeus pushed himself over the edge.

He dropped quickly, then fired the twin jets of his jump pack, angling for the central span. The noise of the rockets' burn seemed incredibly loud to Idaeus, but he could do nothing about it. It was all or nothing now.

He cursed as he saw his trajectory was too short. He landed on a wide beam, some twenty metres from the central span and crouched, waiting to see if he had been detected. He heard nothing and clambered through the multitude of stanchions, beams and tension bars towards the central column.

Suddenly, a shadow passed over the captain and he spun in time to see dark winged creatures in midnight black power armour swoop down alongside him. Their helmets were moulded in the form of screaming daemons and ululating howls shrieked from their vox units. They carried stubby pistols and serrated black swords that smoked as though fresh from the furnace. Idaeus knew the foul creatures as Raptors, and fired into their midst, blasting one of the abominable warriors from the sky. Another crashed into him, stabbing with a black bladed sword. Idaeus grunted as he felt the blade pierce one of his lungs, and broke the Raptor's neck with a blow from his free hand. He staggered back, the sword still embedded in his chest, taking refuge in the tangle of metal beneath the bridge to avoid the howling Raptors. Two landed between him and the melta charge as dozens more descended from the bridge. Three more swooped in behind him, their wings folding behind them and they landed on the girders. Idaeus snarled and raised his pistol as they charged.

Idaeus killed the first with his pistol. A second shot killed another, but he couldn't move quick enough to avoid the third. White heat exploded in his face, searing the flesh from the side of his skull as the Raptor fired its plasma pistol. He fell back, blind with pain, and didn't see the crackling sword blow that hacked his left arm from his body. He bellowed with rage as he watched his arm tumble down towards the river, Uriel's last breaching charge still clutched in the armoured fist.

The Raptor closed for the kill, but Idaeus was ready for it. He dragged the smoking sword from his chest and howled with battle fury as he hammered the sword through the



Raptor's neck. He collapsed next to the headless corpse, releasing his grip on the sword hilt. Dizziness and pain swamped him. He tried to stand, but his strength was gone. He saw the Raptors standing between him and the melta charge, their daemon-carved helmets alight with the promise of victory.

He felt his lifeblood pumping from his body, the Larraman cells powerless to halt his demise and bitterness arose in his throat. He reached out with his arm, propping himself upright as weariness flooded his limbs. He felt a textured pistol grip beneath his hand and grasped the unfamiliar weapon tightly. If he was to die, it would be with a weapon in his hand.

More Raptors hovered in the air, screeching in triumph and Idaeus could feel a bone-rattling vibration as hundreds of armoured vehicles began crossing the bridge. He had failed. He looked down at the pistol in his hand and hope flared. The flying abominations raised their weapons, ready to blow him away.

Then the Raptors exploded in a series of massive detonations and Idaeus heard a thunderous boom echo back and forth from the sides of the gorge. He twisted his dying body around in time to see the beautiful form of Thunderhawk Two roaring through the gorge towards the bridge, its wing mounted guns blasting the Raptors to atoms.

He smiled through the pain, guessing the fight Uriel must have had with the pilot to get him to fly through the flak of the Hydras and down the gorge. He raised his head to the two Raptors who still stood between him and his goal. They drew their swords as Thunderhawk Two screamed below the bridge. Lascannon fire chased the gunship, but nothing could touch it.

Idaeus slumped against a black stanchion and turned his melted face back towards the two Raptors. Between them, he could see the melta charge. He smiled painfully.

He would only get one shot at this.

Idaeus raised the plasma pistol he had taken from the dead Raptor, relishing the look of terror on his enemy's faces as they realised what must happen next.

'Mission accomplished,' snarled Idaeus and pulled the trigger.



URIEL WATCHED the unbearably bright streak of plasma flashing towards the central span of the bridge and explode like a miniature sun directly upon the melta charge. The searing white heat ignited the bomb with a thunderclap and it detonated in a gigantic, blinding fireball, spraying molten tendrils of liquid fire. The central support of the bridge was instantly vaporised in the nuclear heat, and Uriel had a fleeting glimpse of Idaeus before he too was engulfed in the expanding firestorm.

The echoes of the first blast still rang from the gorge sides as the remaining charges detonated in the intense heat. A heartbeat later, the bridge vanished as explosions blossomed along its length and blasted its supports to destruction. Thunderous, grinding cracks heralded its demise as giant sections of the bridge sagged, the shriek of tortured metal and cracking rockcrete filling Uriel's senses. Whole sections plummeted downwards, carrying hundreds of rebel tanks and soldiers to their deaths as the bridge tore itself apart under stresses it was never meant to endure.

Thick smoke and flames obscured the final death of Bridge Two-Four, its twisted remains crashing into the river below. Thunderhawk Two pulled out of the gorge, gaining altitude and banking round on a course for the Imperial lines. Even as the bridge shrank in the distance, Uriel could see there was almost nothing left of it.

The main supports were gone, the sections of roadway they had supported choking the river far below. There was now no way to cross the gorge for hundreds of miles in either direction.

He slid down the armoured interior of the Thunderhawk and wearily removed his helmet, cradling Idaeus's sword in his lap. He thought of Idaeus's sacrifice, wondering again that a warrior of the Ultramarines could command without immediate recourse to the Codex Astartes. It was a mystery to him, yet one he now felt able to explore.

He ran a gauntleted hand along the length of the masterfully inscribed scabbard, feeling the full weight of responsibility the weapon represented. Captain Idaeus of the Fourth Company was dead, but as long as Uriel Ventris wielded this blade, his memory would remain. He looked into the blood-stained faces of the Space Marines who had survived the mission and realised that the duty of command now fell to him.

Uriel vowed he would do it honour. 



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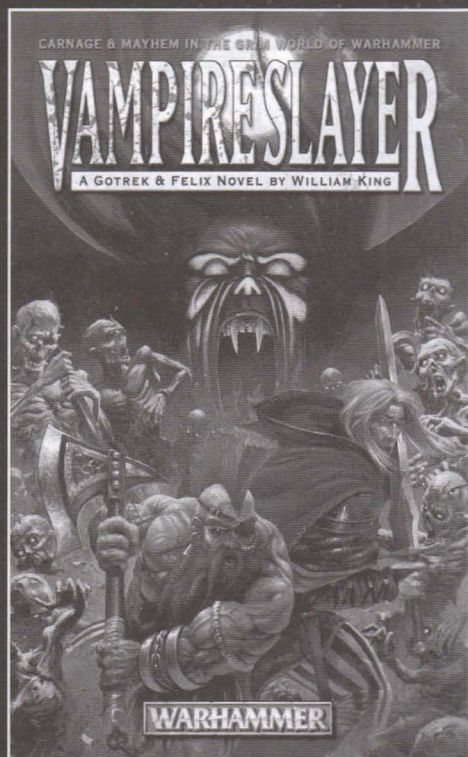
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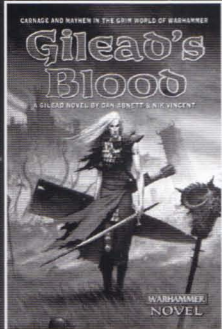


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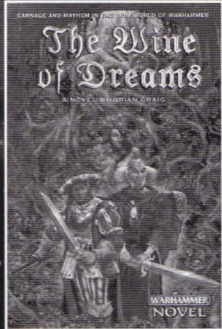
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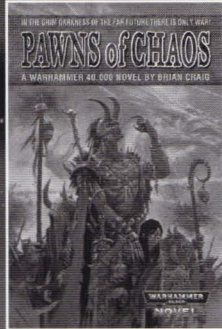
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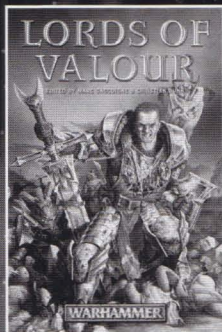
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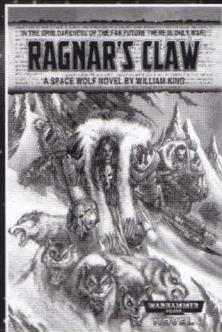
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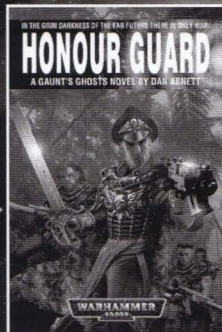
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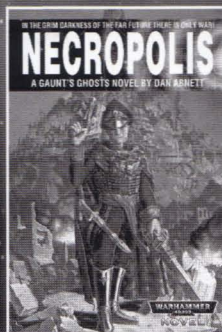
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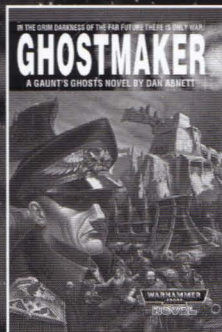
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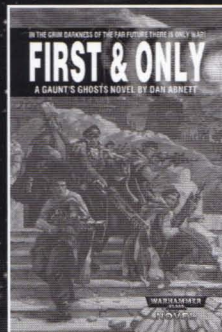
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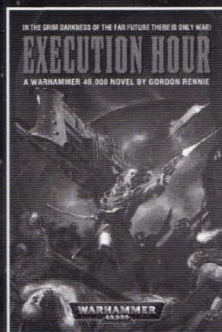
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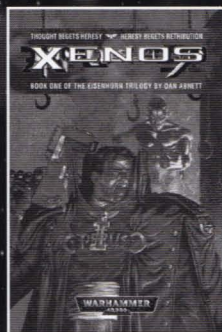
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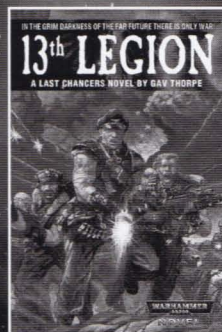
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- **FIRESTARTER by Jonathan Green**

Creed increased the pressure from his trigger fingers. Suddenly he gave a yelp of pain and let go of both guns. Creed looked down at the palms of his hands. Both were covered in large red weals and blistering skin, which stung like a milliasaur bite. Inexplicably, in a matter of seconds the metal of the stubbers had become white-hot, as if they had been heated in a furnace. Creed hugged his hands to his sides in an attempt to dull the pain.

*'Now we run!' Haze shouted, pulling sharply on Creed's arm.*

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'I had thought, like you, that this place was a myth, but here I was a witness to sights no man had previously beheld.'

- **THE SMALL ONES by C.L. Werner**

Ditmarr swung at his attacker, arresting his weapon when he found himself looking into the youthful face of the boy Thyssen had called Kurt. The boy stared back with eyes that were pools of crimson, windows into the gore-soaked domain of the Blood God. A slight smile tugged at the boy's lips as he backhanded Ditmarr and sent the knight flying across the mill. Ditmarr struck his head hard against the floor. As he raised himself from the ground, he shook his head groggily from side to side, trying to clear his vision.

- **CHAINS OF COMMAND by Graham McNeill**

They resembled Rhinos in name only. Bloody spikes festooned every surface and leering gargoyles thrashed across the undulating armour, gibbering eldritch incantations that made Uriel's skin crawl.

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