

INFERNO!

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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

A Smith

INFERNO!

'Ack! What should I write about?'

No, the idea fairies haven't abandoned me this issue leaving me to write five hundred words of drivel (though you may disagree with me by the end). The above quote is from the Black Library internet forum and while I can sympathise to a certain degree with the author of the statement – all writer's suffer from block at some point in their career – I also find myself shaking my head in disbelief.

Although my role at the Black Library is editor of *Inferno!*, *Warhammer Monthly* and our graphic novels range I also find myself getting involved with other aspects of our burgeoning fiction and artbook range. I mean, who could resist reading the latest Gaunt's Ghosts or Gotrek & Felix novel months in advance of its publication or casting their eye over an artbook crammed full of Jes Goodwin sketches or Dave Gallagher paintings? Our latest background book, *Liber Chaotica: Khorne*, has just gone to the printers and as I was leafing through a proof copy I couldn't help but remember the words of our forum poster.

You see, pretty much all of the output from both Games Workshop and the Black Library contain some absolutely amazing hooks for stories. No, really.

You know all those colour text sections, or 'fluff' to use the language of the Black Library forum, in the army books and codices? Gold. Solid gold. Random example: I've just opened the Vampire Counts army book on page 20 and there's a sentence that says: 'Soon, the Strigoi Vampires had to hide from the wrath of their own kin and turned to a life of scavenging at the borders of human society.' What a great hook for a story.

An isolated village somewhere in the Empire is being victimised by a Strigoi vampire. A mysterious band of heroes turn up and eliminate their persecutor but, shock horror, the 'heroes' are actually a group of Von Carstein vampires who could not suffer the Strigoi abomination to live. And they're not prepared to leave the village until they have extracted their fee... And that's just off the top of my head.

Of course, now that I've mentioned it in an *Inferno!* editorial you're all precluded from submitting that particular story idea but

there are thousands of other hooks out there just waiting to snag writers.

Liber *Chaotica: Khorne* is an awesome book, not least in terms of design but also in respect to its content which is a writers' dream. Black Library old boy, Richard Williams, as well as presenting an in-depth treatise on the nature of the blood god and his followers, has also provided all aspiring Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 writers with a plethora of story ideas.

Banished barons who venture into the Chaos Wastes to dabble in the dark arts. Swords who wield men rather than the other way around. Monoliths erected to commemorate the ascension of a daemon prince.

It wouldn't surprise me if all the submissions we receive here at Black Library towers for the next few months were based on *Liber Chaotica: Khorne* and, if I'm perfectly honest, it wouldn't bother me – the source material is just that good.



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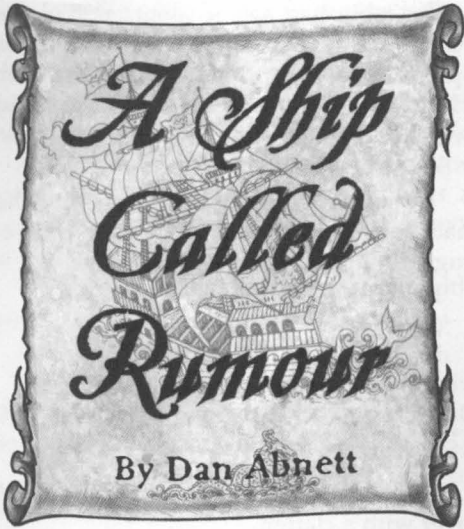
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'I'll have one,' he reassured, 'when the time comes. Now be on your guard. Down there, that's everything you damn people are afraid of.'



IN DAYLIGHT, the Hole-in-by-the-Hill was nothing to look at. A cave in the limestone cliff above Peg Street, its mouth extended with dank canvas awnings, was filled with a litter of tables and stools. But after dark, it came to life. Barrel fires were lit, and torches and lanterns too, strung from the awning poles or hooked to the cliff face. Hogs and fowls, blistered black with honey, spit-roasted over the smoking fire-pits in the cave, and firelight shone like gold off the low-hanging canvas. The tavern filled up with hot smoke and laughter and the stench of pipes, hops, swine-fat and salt sweat.

COME TWILIGHT, they rowed ashore and beached in a small, high-sided cove of shingle and mossy rock west of the harbour bay. The taller of the two disembarked first, he knew the way, and led his companion sure-footedly up the cove path, over the grassy headland and down towards the lantern lights of the ramshackle city.

The sky was violet, and stars were scattered across it like a haul of silver doblons. Down in the bay, marker bells tinkled and clunked in their moored baskets, rocked by the tide, and the great braziers on the horns of the harbour blazed into life, marking the port for late comers and raising a defiant finger to the revenue men of Luccini across the channel.

Sea breezes nodded the hemp grass and tusket flowers covering the headland. His companion stopped and gazed down at the thousand winking lamps of the notorious city. Catches of music and singing floated up in the night air.

'That's it?' said his companion.

'Indeed it is,' he replied, his deep voice a growl of relish. He knew he'd missed it but he hadn't realised how certain he'd been that he'd never see it again.

'Ready?' he asked.

'Not even slightly,' his companion replied. 'Going in there. I mean, that place. And you without even a sword.'

That night, a blind gurdy-man was turning out jigs and reels, aided and abetted by a drunken viol player. The pot girls, all of them well upholstered – for that was the way Grecco liked them – planked out jars of frothy ale, and basket-bottles of wine for those with deeper purses. One of the girls was dancing, twirling her grubby petticoats, and customers clapped in time and threw silver coins.

Grecco himself was in the cave, his huge bulk sooty and glistening with sweat as he worked the spits, contentedly watching his custom grow. His red macaw bobbed and shuffled up and down the wooden rung above his head, between the hanging ladles and meat-forks. It would be good eating, went the tavern joke. When it died, it would be ready-smoked.

At the main tables under the awning, the Lightfingers ate and drank and diced. There were forty or so of them, just the seniors and the veterans. The other hundred and twenty of them, the dog-sailors and ratings, were away down the bay for the night in the cheaper stews and inns.

Lightfingers, Grecco mused. They hadn't owned that name for long. Maybe a year at most. It was none too well-worn. Before that, they had been the Rievers, an altogether more virile name in his opinion. But names came and went, like reputations and fortunes, serving girls and lives. This was Sartosa, after all. Nothing lasted forever.

The master of the company, a bullish, shaven-headed man with a long chin beard braided with beads, set down his empty jar and beckoned to a passing pot-girl.

'More sup for all! And a favour from you too, little maid!'

The girl smiled and obligingly allowed herself to be tugged onto his knee.

'Do you know who I am?' he asked her, wiping his beard with the loose cuff of his once-white shirt.

'You would be Master Guido of the Lightfingers?'

'Uh uh now... Captain, it is! Captain Guido!' he cried. His men thumped the table boards, all except Tende, the big Ebonian helmsman, who simply gazed into his half-empty jar.

'Do you know why we're called the Lightfingers, my girl?' Guido asked, slapping the rump of the female on his lap.

'I cannot imagine,' she replied.

'Because we...' he dropped his voice and leaned into her face conspiratorially. She stopped breathing through her nose and smiled a fake smile. 'Because we,' Guido continued, 'can lift a king's ransom from under the noses of Luccini and Remas and every merchant prince in Tilea!'

Rowdy assent followed. Jars smacked together in toasts.

'Really?' said the girl, in mock wonder.

'Oh yes!' Guido snarled, and buried his face in her cleavage, snuffling. She put up with it for a few moments, looking bored and occasionally saying, 'Oh, stop it... you beast,' in a faintly encouraging way.

'Hey, Guido. Why don't you tell her why you're *really* called the Lightfingers?'

Guido halted his snuffling and slowly drew his face out of the girl's ample bosom.

The table had fallen silent, as had the rest of the inn. At the back, Grecco left his spits and moved out so he could see better. He folded his grease-spattered arms and watched.

So, he was back.

Everyone gazed at the big man who had spoken, standing under the breeze-tugged flap of the awning.

'Luka?' hissed Guido.

'Oh yes.'

'You're back?'

'I'm back.'

'But they said... you'd been executed.'

'I wasn't.'

Guido got up suddenly. His stool fell over with a clatter.

Luka looked over at the girl. 'He's called "Lightfinger" because he's light on fingers. He used to be my number two, and I took a finger off him every time he played me wrong. Didn't I, Guido?'

'Yes.'

'Show her.'

Guido raised his hands. The heavy cuffs of his velvet jacket slid away, revealing hands that were just claw: just index fingers and thumbs.

'How many times did you cross me, Guido?'

'Six times.'

'It's a bloody wonder I never killed you.'

This, thought Grecco, is going to be interesting.

'What do you want?' Guido snapped.

'My ships.'

Guido snorted. 'They're mine now. Passed on to me by the code.'

'I know,' said Luka Silvaro, stepping into the lamplight. He was tall and as massively built as a four-masted galleon, with a forked black goatee and a thick mane of curly, greying hair tied back in a pigtail. When last they had seen him, he had been fleshy, with an increasing thickness and a distinct paunch brought on by the good living his trade had afforded. There seemed not to be an ounce of fat on him now. He looked lean, pinched, hungry, and somehow that emphasized the scale and breadth of his naturally big frame. His eyes, however, were just as they

remembered. The colour of the sea before a storm. Gunmetal grey. He let his cloak drop off his shoulders to show he was unarmed. 'And I hereby issue challenge, according to the code, to take them back.'

All of the men jostled away from the table. Guido drew his sword. It was a hanger with a stirrup-hilt of gold, heavy and curved and double-edged.

'By the code, then. See if any stand with you.'

Luka nodded. 'A blade?'

His companion, until then a shadow in the background, pushed into the light, and offered Luka his elegant smallsword.

'No,' said Luka. 'No, it can't be you. That would break the code. Step out.'

His companion backed into the shadows again, frowning and ill at ease.

'Who'll blade him?' cried Guido. 'Anyone? Eh? Anyone?'

In an instant, a ribbing knife as long as a man's forearm landed, quivering, in the bench top beside Luka. Fahd, the company's wizened cook from Araby, had tossed it. Almost simultaneously, a flensing dagger thumped in next to it, thrown by the giant, Tende.

Guido grinned at the juddering blades. 'Choose your weapons,' he mocked.

There was a clatter. A sabre landed on the bench. It was an Estalian blade, a slender ribbon of watered steel, curved in a thirty degree arc, with straight quillons and a wire-wrapped pommel. It was still in its enamelled silver scabbard.

The companion couldn't tell who had thrown it in, but Luka knew.

He picked it up, drew out the fine blade and tossed the scabbard aside. He made a couple of whooshing practice chops in the air and then smiled at Guido.

'Lay on,' he said.

There was no ceremony. They went at each other as the press of men backed further away to be out of reach of the slashing blades. Vento, the master rigger, obligingly scraped the trestle table aside to give them space.

The swords struck and rang like bells, over and over. Guido danced back and forth with a low guard, his left arm swinging free, like a goaded bear at a

stake. Luka was more upright, shoulders back, the knuckles of his left hand pressed against his hip, like an illustration from a fencing manual. Almost comically dainty, in fact, for a man so big, but for the undeniable speed of his cuts.

The packed onlookers shouted encouragement. Amongst them, Grecco watched. He'd witnessed enough duels, many on his own premises, to have the measure of this one. There would be three deciding factors. First, if Guido's brute style could better Luka's tutored perfection. Second, if Luka had the sense – and skill – to guard his slender sabre against a direct blow from Guido's much heavier blade. Caught right, the sabre would break under the hanger's weight. Grecco had seen more than one fight end that way, and had been sponging the blood off his flagstones the morning after.

The third thing... well, he was waiting for that. It was against the code, but it often happened, so much so it was now an expected part of a code-duel. Any moment now...

Guido stamped in and thrust with the tip of his sword. Luka deflected it away from his heart, but still it slashed a line through the wide sleeve of his shirt. He flicked up, caught his edge against the loop of Guido's stirrup-guard, and pushed him away, but Guido back-sliced and drew blood from the knuckles of Luka's sword hand. Only his fat gold signet ring had prevented Luka from losing a finger.

Now there's irony, Grecco thought.

Luka whipped round and the very tip of his Estalian steel sliced off several strands of Guido's bead-plaited beard. Guido cursed, and presented with a down slice, followed by a side cut, forcing Luka back towards the cave mouth and the cooking fires. Some of the men were clapping rhythmically now, *slap-slap-slap*. The viol player, oblivious in his drunkenness, took this as a cue and started to play until the blind gurdy-man advised him to shut up.

Guido cut Luka across his right forearm. The white linen of his shirt began to stain dark red. Luka rallied and split the tip of Guido's nose. A great spray of blood splashed out and dribbled down his

mouth and beard. Guido returned so hard, Luka had to duck his swishing blade.

In the shadows, the anonymous companion began to back away, wondering how far he would get if he started to run now.

The fighters clashed blades, locked, pushed each other away, and then clashed again. Guido kicked his former captain in the shin. Both swords swung, and both missed.

They're getting tired, Grecco thought to himself. If I'm any judge, that third factor will come into play just about...

Two of the company broke from the onlookers and rushed Luka from behind. Girolo, a hairy brute in a blue-satin frock coat that he insisted on wearing even though it was too small, and Caponsacci, the barrel-chested gunner's mate.

'Have a care!' roared Grecco.

Luka broke fast, spinning to deflect Caponsacci's razor-edged tulwar, then back-cutting to knock away Girolo's stabbing sabre. The three swordsmen drove at Luka from the front quarters, jabbing and slashing, forcing him back out from under the awning, into the keg-yard. The audience scattered to let them through.

Girolo lunged and Luka ripped him away with a horizontal blow that sliced the meat of his shoulder. Girolo wailed and fell back. Caponsacci pressed in. Luka darted to the side, wrenched over a keg full of ale, and rolled it hard at Caponsacci with his foot. The gunner's mate tried to leap it, but it caught his shins and toppled him on his face.

Caponsacci blocked Guido for a heartbeat. Luka moved right, coming up at Girolo as he tried to recover, his beloved blue satin coat drenched red down one side.

Girolo's sabre wasn't fast enough. Luka sliced his throat and knocked him, choking and sucking for air, to the ground. The crowd gave a great roar.

'Choose your sides more wisely,' Luka panted at the dying man. Girolo gurgled and expired so suddenly that his head hit the floor with a solid crack.

Guido and Caponsacci flew at Luka, who was bounding back under the awning on his toes. They came on like furies. Even with his speed, Luka couldn't fend off the heavy curved hanger and the long, straight tulwar simultaneously.

He scrambled back, and managed to pluck the cook's long ribbing knife out of the tabletop as he passed. Then he turned, adopting the low, head-on stance of a sword-and-dagger fighter. He knocked back Guido's sword with the sabre in his right hand, deflected Caponsacci's broad-blade with the knife in his left, then scissored both blades, long and short, together to vice out Guido's rally stroke.

At the back of the rowdy audience, the anonymous companion rummaged inside his cloak and pulled out an engraved wheel-lock pistol, a quality Arabyan piece. He cocked the piece and raised it. A hand sheathed in soft kidskin reached in and gently took it from his hand.

'Don't,' said a voice.

The companion looked round with a start. A louche Estalian mariner in ostentatiously rich clothes stood beside him, carefully uncocking the pistol before handing it back. The man was unnecessarily handsome, his complexion dark, though not as dark as his eyes. His long, straight, black hair fell like a veil down the sides of his cheeks, framing a wolfish face.

'But - ' the companion began.

'Silvaro won't thank you for it. This duel is by the code. He has to fight alone, or there'll be no honour in his victory.' The man's voice was thick with the Estalian accent.

'There'll be no victory at all!' the companion spluttered indignantly. 'That Guido calls in his cronies. It's not a fair fight!'

'No, senor,' admitted the Estalian with a grudging nod. 'But it is the code. The challenger must be alone. If any of the crew choose to side with the master, then... so it goes.'

'Madness! It's unfair!' snapped the companion.

'Ah yes, tut tut. But...' the Estalian shrugged. 'It is the way. Put your fine pistol away before someone steals it.'

There was another braying howl from the crowd. Luka had glanced Guido's weighty steel aside, and now locked Caponsacci at the quillons with the ribbing knife. The thick-set gunner's mate tried to turn his wrist and plough the knife aside, but Luka sank his sabre a hand's span deep into the mariner's chestbone. Caponsacci's eyes turned up, and he crashed to his knees.

Before Caponsacci had even slammed nose-first onto the flags, Luka had twisted his sabre out, and turned, blood flying from the blade groove. His knife came up in a cross, and the flat of it stung away Guido's down slash. Then the long, watered-steel blade of Luka's borrowed sabre was resting on Guido's left shoulder, the edge pressed to the side of his neck. Guido froze.

'I suggest... you yield,' wheezed Luka.

Guido's eyes flicked wildly from side to side. No one else was stepping forward to help him now. The Estalian blade bit gently into the flesh of Guido's neck.

'Now?' Luka urged.

The hanger hit the flagstones with a clatter. The sword at his neck, Guido slowly sank to his knees.

'I yield,' he mumbled.

'Louder!' Luka snapped.

'I yield!'

'And?'

'I... I submit to you the ships and command that was previously yours, and lay no future claim on them. I say to the hearing of those here present that Luka Silvaro is captain and master of the Lightfingers' company.'

Luka smiled. He tossed the knife aside and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his freed hand. 'And is this submission witnessed?' he asked, loudly.

There followed a pandemonium of cheers, applause and thumping.

Luka acknowledged the tumult with a few smiling nods and a wave of his free hand. He took the blade off Guido's neck. A hush fell.

'My first act... is to exact penalty.'

Guido looked up and whimpered. 'Spare me...' he gasped.

'What is the penalty?' Luka called to the onlookers.

'Death!' someone shouted, and this notion was loudly cheered.

'Please...' whined Guido, gazing up at Luka.

'Well, Guido, what do you suggest?'

Feeble, reluctant, Guido slowly raised his left hand and stuck out his index finger, one of the last four digits he possessed.

Luka smiled and nodded.

The sabre flashed and Guido screamed. His left hand lay on the flags. Blood pumped from his severed wrist.

'You bastard! Aaaaah! The whole hand!'

'Consider yourself lucky,' Luka said. 'It's a bloody wonder I've never killed you.'

Grecco hurried forward to staunch the stump with a tablecloth. Some of the mariners came forward and helped to carry Guido's kicking, shrieking body back into the cave so that the stump could be cauterized.

'My second act,' shouted Luka above the din, 'is to rename this company the Rievers.'

More full-throated cheers.

Better, thought Grecco, hearing this above the fizzle of burning flesh as he pressed a red-hot skillet against Guido's truncated wrist. Guido howled, retched, and passed out.

'Why didn't he kill him?' the companion asked.

The Estalian shrugged.

'I mean, he deserved it. From his lack of fingers he's been given many chances already. Why didn't he kill him?'

The Estalian smiled. 'He has to cut him some slack. Guido is his brother, after all.'



THE SUN HAD been up for three hours and a breathless heat lay upon the harbourside. Beyond the immense stone quay, an ancient structure built by other races long before the rise of man, the tiled roofs of Sartosa rose in banks

and clusters up the hillside. Stucco plaster gleamed white in the sunlight, alongside mouldering grey stonework and antique timber frames. Sartosa's port was a patchwork city, sewn together by many different cultures at many different times. It was as if buildings had been looted from all the cities of the world, and piled here together to fade and rot. A plundered town. It seemed appropriate.

Though it was early in the season, Luka was surprised by the number of ships careened on the long-beach spit beyond the bay. Gangs of ratings carrying pitch ladles, ramming irons and mallets were threading their way down to work at caulking the hulls. The thick stench of heating pitch filled the air, almost but not quite blotting out the acrid fumes of boucan curing in the smoking huts along the harbour side.

'Early to set up dry,' commented Luka. He took a swig of watered rum from the earthenware bottle he was carrying and rinsed the taste of the night's carousing from his parched mouth. He'd walked down to the dockside with his nervous companion, and Benuto, the bosun.

'Many masters have had enough for the year, so tell,' Benuto said. He was an older man, from Miragliano originally, his face lined from years of sun and salt. He wore black buckle-shoes, stained calico trousers loose at the ankle and a crimson jacket so the crew could pick him out easily. Perched on his head was a black hat that had so many corners and so little shape, the companion was at a loss to tell its origins.

'With the summer pickings yet to be had?' Luka asked.

Benuto shook his head and sucked on his clay pipe. 'No pickings at all, sir, the seas are dry. You must've heard? About the Butcher Ship?'

'I've heard a thing or two,' Luka remarked carelessly, casting a look at his companion. 'Though I've not been abroad so much of late to hear the gossip. A few tales of woe. I see they're true... or at least the masters of Sartosa think they are.' Luka flexed his right arm thoughtfully; nursing the gash Guido had put there the night before.

'Oh, they're true, so tell,' said Benuto. 'Ten months now, the Butcher Ship's been out there. We all thought it fancy at first too. But the trade routes have emptied, and many of Sartosa's own have gone missing to boot.'

'So he prays on more than merchantmen?'

'The Butcher preys on everything. Mainlander and pirate alike.' Benuto spat and touched the gold ring in his ear to ward against bad fortune. 'Jacque Rawhead's boat, both of Hasty Leopald's, the Windrush, the Jonah, the Espiritu Santo, the Princess Ella, and the Lightning Tree, unless old Jeremiah Tusk went south around the Horn of Araby this year like he's always been threatening.'

'So many...' breathed Luka.

'I told you,' said his companion. Benuto glanced at the long-cloaked stranger who had been at Luka's side since his reappearance. The stranger looked clean and manicured, and his clothes, though plain, were finely made from quality cloth. A mainlander, if Benuto had ever smelled one, and from Luccini, by the accent. Luka Silvaro had been captured the year before during a battle with two of that city-state's man-o-wars, and the company had thought him rotting dead in a gibbet cage on the headland or rotting alive in a rat-swarming ponton, one of the notorious prison hulks on the estuary. The former, most likely, for Luka Silvaro was an infamous pirate prince. But the night before, it had turned out neither was true. Luka was alive, and come back to them, with a gentleman from Luccini at his heel. There was a mystery there, Benuto thought, one he hoped his captain would not be long in unwrapping.

'We ourselves have just got back from a run empty-handed,' Benuto told Luka. 'Guido was thinking of having us careen now too.'

Luka shook his head. 'We'll be putting to sea,' he told the bosun. 'I've called in the company and told Junio already to make up the stores.'

'You have the funds for that, sir?' Benuto asked.

‘Indeed. I want you to get everything seashape, as fast as you can.’

‘There’s plenty work there,’ said Benuto, his voice trailing off.

Luka looked at his companion and held up three fingers. The man reached under his cloak and carefully drew out three leather moneybags. Luka hand-weighed them and gave them to Benuto. ‘Seashape, and no corners cut.’

‘No, sir!’ said the bosun sharply.

They had reached the pier-end and stood by the windwall, looking over at the ships of Luka’s company. The *Rumour*, a twenty-gun, two hundred ton brigantine, one hundred paces long at the keel. She had two masts, both fully square-rigged, with a fore-and-aft sail on the lower part of the mainmast. Her low, sleek hull was painted black except for a stripe of red along each flank from which the gun ports stared. A fast ship, quick in the turn and sharp of tooth. A hunter’s ship.

In her shadow lay her consort, a sixty-pace swift sloop called the *Safire*, a little beauty of twelve guns. Her hull, golden oak above the waist and white below, was made of butted planks so she would slip like a sword through the water. She was fore-and-aft rigged on the shorter mizzen mast, and could raise a square sail from the main if the wind was running, but her exceptionally long bowsprit, which almost doubled her overall length, could rig a great lateen sail and make her very fast indeed.

The company was already gathering around the ships, running repairs or loading victuals under the direction of Junio, the company storekeeper. Four men were parbuckling kegs of water, oil and beer up the side of the *Rumour* using a rope over a bitt. Up on one of the yards, Luka could see Largo, the sailmaker, hard at work with his needle, fid and seam rubber. Luka’s eye drifted along to the head of the *Rumour* and the figure there, painted gold; a woman with one hand cupped to her mouth and the other cupped to her ear.

It would have been a crime to careen these two so early. To beach them and heel them over and caulk the hulls, stranding them when there was so much summer and sea left in the world. They were like a

greyhound and a thoroughbred, both needing to be run out. No matter the hazard.

‘Who’ll master the *Safire*?’ asked a voice behind them. It was the lupine Estalian the companion had encountered the night before. ‘That was always Guido’s ship, till you went from us, and I’ll doubt you’ll give him command again.’

‘I don’t even know if he’ll be joining us, Roque,’ replied Luka. ‘Who did he have master the *Safire*?’

‘Silke.’

‘No surprise. Though I am surprised Silke didn’t jump in at his crony’s side last night.’

‘Silke’s always had an early nose for the way a tide is turning,’ said Benuto.

‘Well, I’ll keep Silke in his place for now. Test his loyalty.’ Luka looked at the Estalian. ‘My thanks for your sabre, by the by.’

The Estalian nodded politely. The companion now noticed that the fine blade Luka had used in the Hole-in-by-the-Hill was hanging from the Estalian’s wide leather baldric.

‘Well met again, gentleman,’ the Estalian said suddenly, looking over at the companion. ‘We’ve not yet been introduced.’

The companion shuffled awkwardly. Luka glanced from one to the other and shrugged. ‘Sesto, this is Roque Santiago Della Fortuna, the company’s master at arms. Roque, I present Sesto Sciortini, a gentleman of reputation from the mainland.’

Roque made a bow, his long straight hair hanging down like a glossy black curtain. The Estalian had fine manners, finer than might have been expected from a Sartosan sail-thief.

‘Della Fortuna... Roque Santiago Della Fortuna...’ murmured Sesto, returning the courtesy. ‘I have in mind a fellow of that name, of the Estalian nobility, who rose to fame some years past by making great voyages of discovery to Araby and the South Lands. I seem to think he disappeared on an expedition to the west. Are you by any chance... related?’

‘No,’ relied Roque. ‘But I met him once, before he died.’

'It seems, though, a coincidence – ' Sesto began.

'I will make allowances for the fact you are a stranger to the customs of Sartosa, friend Sesto. We seldom press with questions where questions are unwelcome. There's not a man among us who has secrets he would happily part with. That is, in fact, why many come here and make this reckless life their own. I would say to you, for instance, your name is intriguing. "Sesto"... the sixth born son, and "Sciortini"... which means a watchman or sentinel. A name right enough, and a fine one, but also a mask, I fancy. A meaning to hide behind.'

'Not at all,' said Sesto, quickly.

'Then why, pray, do you wear that signet ring turned in, so that only your palm may read the emblem upon it?'

'I –'

'There's not a man among us who has secrets he would happily part with, Roque,' said Luka. 'So you said yourself.'

'My apologies,' said Roque. 'I meant no harm.'

'That's what all pirates say,' chuckled Benuto, 'afore they slit your neck.'



ABOARD THE *Rumour*, in the great cabin, Luka called up the lamp-trimmer to set the lanterns, for even on a bright day, the low-beamed chamber was gloomy. Then he laid about the untidy quarters, hurling items of clothing and other oddments out through the gallery lights.

Sesto sat and watched, sipping brandy from a thick glass chaser with a squat stem. Grumbling, Luka threw out a shoe, a doublet, an empty powder horn, a tricorne hat, another shoe, a bundle of bedclothes, a mandolin...

He caught Sesto looking at him.

'Guido's stuff. Traipsed about here like he owned this cabin. My cabin! Mine!'

'I suppose he didn't think you were coming back,' said Sesto.

'I didn't think I was coming back. That's not the point. Ahhh! Look! My chessboard! He's lost half the pieces!'

'I gather Guido is your brother,' said Sesto.

Luka frowned. 'We share a mother. That's not quite the same thing.' He made to throw a grey velvet frock coat with wide button-back cuffs out of the window, and then stopped himself. 'Mine,' he remarked, then sniffed it. 'He's worn this, damn him!'

He raked around in the mess of clothes and pewter vessels on the floorboarding, and fished out a sash of scarlet silk, some brown moleskin breeks and a pair of black, thigh-length cavalry boots. Oblivious to Sesto's presence, Luka began to strip off and rid himself of the plain, cheaply made garments he'd been wearing since he came ashore. Sesto was intimidated by Luka's massive naked frame: the huge musculature of his arms and back, the fading cicatrices on his skin, the pallor of his flesh from too long out of the sun. Too long in the dungeon crypts of Luccini.

Luka dressed himself in the clothing he'd selected from the floor. They were his clothes, it seemed, for they fitted. He pulled on the breeks, then the boots, slouching the wide tops down around his knees, then tucked in a white linen blouse with full sleeves, tied the scarlet sash around his waist, and dragged on the grey frock coat.

'How do I look?' he asked, tightening the laces up the front of his blouse.

'The very model of a pirate lord,' said Sesto.

'The desired effect. But not pirate now, eh? Not now.'

'No, indeed. When are you going to tell them?'

'Them?'

'The company. The Rievers. Your crew, sir.'

'Soon. When we're at sea.'

'Aha,' nodded Sesto.

'I miss my gold and my stones,' said Luka flexing his fingers and staring at them. 'Your soldiers took it all when they fettered me. Took it and sold it, I'll wager.'

'You have that ring still,' Sesto said, nodding at the thick gold band that had spared Luka his little finger in the fight the night before. Luka looked at it as if he'd forgotten about it.

'That one. Yes, well I wouldn't let that one go. Hid it under my tongue for six weeks, then under a loose slab in my cell. Lose that and I lose myself.'

'It has meaning?' Sesto asked.

'When I embarked on my career, I took a gold ducat from the first treasure ship I captured and had it melted down and wrought into this. This is a part of me, a part of who I am, as surely as a hand or foot. But it's been without company for too long.'

Luka strode across to the lazarette behind the screwed-down chart table. Guido had evidently secured the locker with a new padlock during his tenure as master. Luka rummaged around in the mess and found a marlinespike, which he used to pry the door open. Inside was a pile of waggons and furled charts, tide-books, almanacs and a double-barrelled pocket pistol.

Beneath them, three brass coffers. Luka dragged them out, wrenched off the clasps and emptied the contents across the tabletop. Precious, glinting treasures scattered out. Garnets, rubies, malachite rings and bloodstone pins, wedges of Arabyan silver, enamelled crosses, opals, pearls, emerald pins, amethyst brooches, rose-sapphire pendants, gold snuff boxes, Tilean ducats, square-cut tierces, Estalian cruzados and peso octos, Arabyan rials, Imperial crowns and aquilas, rupeys from the Ind, Bretonnian guilders, yuans from Cathay, Kislevite roubles and all manner of gold and silver currency, including some that Sesto had never seen before.

Luka rattled around in the glittering spread, trying rings for size and tossing them back if they were too small or too big. He eventually decided on a fat green garnet for his right middle finger, a blue sapphire for his left ring finger, a round, rose-blood ruby for his left middle, and a gold Ebonian thumb ring for his left hand, coiled in the shape of a snake. Then he slipped a chunky gold loop into his left earlobe, rubbed it and spat for fortune.

'Gold in the ear improves the eyesight,' he told Sesto.

'I've heard that superstition.'

Luka winked. 'You'll not think it a superstition when we close with the Butcher.'

'Will they stand?' Sesto asked.

'Who?'

'The company. The Rievers. Your crew.' Sesto said, repeating his earlier remark like a refrain. 'When the time comes.'

'For what you're offering, I damn well hope so.'



FOR TWO MORE days, the victualling and repair of the brig and its consort continued apace. Sesto kept himself apart from the gathering company, fearful of every single one of them. They were free men; free in the worst way, their violent, vulgar souls loyal to no state or throne or prince. Only to themselves and their own selfish lusts, and to the creed of their criminal fraternity.

Sesto lingered around the poop and the quarterdeck of the *Rumour*, watching the graft. He got to recognize some of their faces at least. Junio, the storekeeper, a tall man who fussed around the provisioning work, his big eyes and long nose reminding Sesto of a goat's. Casaudor, the stern, robust master mate. Tende, the massive helmsman, bigger even than Luka, his skin black as coal. Fahd, the shrivelled cook, happily clucking in Arabyan as he worked in the sweaty confines of galley to serve up strong, spiced meals twice a day. One-legged Belissi, the ship's carpenter. Vento, the master rigger, surprisingly nimble for a heavy man, fond of a chalk-white frock coat, the tails of which he had to tuck into the waist of his breeks every time he ran aloft up the ratlines. His hands, like the sailmaker Largo's, were calloused and leathery from sewing and splicing. Benuto, the bosun, supervised all the work, always visible with his shapeless hat and crimson coat.

One of the common ratings stuck in his memory too. A dirty, narrow-eyed man whose name Sesto had yet to learn, a true boucaner by the scabby leather hides he wore. Wherever Sesto went, the boucaner seemed always to be nearby, watching him.

Silke, the retained master of the *Safire*, came aboard the *Rumour* once to speak with Luka. He was a shabby man with great, broad shoulders from which his ankle-length green silk robe hung like a kite. He had seven tight pigtailed poking down from the edge of the orange turban on his head.

Roque drilled the watches hard, counting time as they raised the targette shields at the blow of a whistle. At least half the ratings were trained with calivers, or had skill with a crossbow, or were teamed to man the swivel guns mounted along the rail. Every few hours, a whistle would blow and Roque would saunter along the deck as the watch drew pikes with a clatter, slammed up the targettes and iron pavises on port or starboard, and stood ready with grapnels. The calivermen and swivel-gun teams took station and fired off a crumping salute without lead.

'They're slow,' Sesto heard Luka tell Roque. 'Guido's let them get lazy.'

They didn't look lazy to Sesto. In under two minutes, the crew of the *Rumour* could armour either flank with targette boards, rattle off a salvo with caliver and swivels, fire a flurry of crossbow bolts, and make the ship bristle with long-hafted pikes like a porcupine. And that didn't take into account the individual weapons the men carried: hangers, sabres, sashes and baldrics laden with wheel and match-lock pistols, muskets, axes, rapiers and poinards, dirks and daggers, kidney knives and short, fat, single-edged swords they called cut-lesses. Sesto tried a cut-less for size. It was weighty and crude, a little more than a heavy dagger and a little less than a small hanger, but it sang well, and it was short enough to wield without snaring the shrouds or striking the ceiling below decks.

Sesto sneaked down onto the red-washed gundeck on the second day, and admired the brig's guns. Six cannon each side and three culverins, along with two

sakers placed as stern chasers. He was impressed to find that the cannon were laid up on wheeled trucks that could be easily dragged back inboard for reloading. The warships of the Luccinian fleet still mounted their cannon on field carriages, much more cumbersome to move and draw in. No wonder, then, the Sartosan reputation for multiple broadsides. Sesto noticed the wooden pegs laid out ready to be hammered in under the back of each barrel to adjust the angle of fire, and the brass monkeys of stacked shot – solid ball, chain shot, case shot and stone-buck. Peeking into the powder magazine, through the heavy curtains of mail-link, he saw only a stack of the small kegs made for pistol and caliver powder.

'Looking for something?'

Sesto glanced round and found himself facing Sheerglas, the *Rumour's* cadaverous master gunner. At some point in his long career, Sheerglas must have been marooned in the pagan settlements of the South Lands, for there was no other explanation Sesto could think of for the way Sheerglas's canine teeth were filed down to a point. Sheerglas never came above decks. He lurked in the ruddy twilight of the gundeck, haunting the shadows.

'I see only pistol – powder,' Sesto said.

Sheerglas smiled; an unnerving sight. His sharp canines drew the blood to the surface of his pale lower lip. 'On the captain's orders, we use only pistol powder,' he said.

Again, Sesto was impressed. Bulk-barrelled gunpowder, especially in Sartosa, was notoriously crude, mixed with ash and prone to misfire. Pistol powder, though much more expensive, was finely milled and purer. The *Rumour's* guns would fire well, and every time.

'I was merely interested,' Sesto said.

Sheerglas nodded. 'I like a man who takes an interest. You're the captain's friend and companion from the mainland, aren't you?'

'Y-yes.'

Sheerglas beckoned with the linstock in his bony hands. It was an ebony baton, the tip carved in the form of a lion's mouth to take the match. 'Come aft with me, to my quarters. We'll take a reviving drink, you and I.'

'I thank you, but no.'

'Come now,' Sheerglas whispered, more insistent.

'Let him be, Sheerglas,' snarled a voice nearby. It was the ubiquitous boucaner.

'I meant him no harm, Ymgrawl,' complained the master gunner.

'Thou never dost. But let him be.'

Sheerglas scowled and shuffled away back into the gundeck. Now Sesto felt as trapped by the boucaner as he had by the gunner. The rough-made man surprised him by standing aside to usher Sesto past up the companionway. Sesto turned to the side so he could get by. Close to, the man gave off the gross reek of tanned hide.

'Watch thyself,' the boucaner growled.

'I will,' Sesto assured him, and hurried aloft.



THE THIRD DAY'S sun rose with a lively westerly, and they put to sea. There was no fanfare or salute. Sesto suddenly realised they were underway. The voyage had started with the same abrupt lack of ceremony as the code-duel between Luka and his brother.

With the *Safire* leading off, they came around the harbour head and made sail for the west, along the so-called Pirate's Channel and into the blue, sunlit dish of the Tilean Sea. With the wind running and all standing, the *Rumour* and the *Safire* made spectacular speed. Land fell away behind, a ribbon of headland dead astern, fading to a smoky line and then nothing.

As soon as there was nothing in sight but open sea, a fair number of the crew went to the rail and cast offerings into the rolling green water. A coin for good luck, a stone for safe – return, a button for rich pickings. Sesto saw some men, Fahd amongst them, wing a chicken's neck and throw the dead

bird in. Sesto shuddered to think what heretical water-gods, sprites and idols these otherwise godless men believed in.

He stood on the poop with Luka, Casaudor and Benuto, feeling the sway of the deck. Tende's fists were clamped to the spokes of the gold-painted wheel, with a thick-necked lee helmsman called Saybee at his side. Sesto leaned over the taffrail and watched the sleek *Safire* racing ahead, its huge jibs bellying out from the long bowsprit. A piece of work, that sloop, its hull artfully light enough for speed, yet strong enough not to crack under the extreme pressure of carrying more sail than was usual for a vessel of that size.

Luka had laid out a waggoner, and was tracing a course across the parchment for Casaudor's benefit. Sesto heard him explain his intention to make speed for the western islands along the coast of Estalia, perhaps tracking even as far north as the waters of Tobaró. Casaudor said nothing, but Sesto didn't like the look in the master mate's eyes.

Luka himself seemed as animated as his craft, as if the wind was filling his sails too. Already, colour had returned to his skin, a ruddy, tanned look that thawed the pallor imprisonment had lent him. He was becoming his old self. In the two months he had known Luka, Sesto had begun to trust him, almost like him. But now they were at sea, the man was changed. He was wildly free again, cut loose, and Sesto wondered how long the terms of their fragile agreement would last.



ON THE SECOND and third days, the wind declined, and they made slower going, though the weather was still fair. They'd seen nothing but open water, deep ocean birds and, once, a flurry of flying fish that dashed and leapt through the waves ahead of them.

Then, at noon on the third day, the man in the main's topcastle sang out. A sail.

The lookout had view of about fifteen miles in all directions, and his arm pointed to the south west. The sail he'd sighted was behind the horizon from the point of view of those on the deck. Luka had some sail struck on both vessels, and as they gybed and close-hauled around, he took his brass scope and went aloft himself.

By the time he returned to the deck, two tiny white dots had come into view.

'It's Ru'af,' he said to Casaudor. 'Both his galleys, if my eyes are not mistaken.'

'Then we press on,' said the master mate.

Luka shook his head. 'I'd hail the old devil and take his news. In these unhappy times it might pay to take what intelligence we can.'

'Even from Ru'af?'

'Even from him. Set us about to meet him and hoist the black.'

Casaudor began barking orders to the crew, and the top gangs ran up the sheets like monkeys. Sesto saw the *Safire* had trimmed sail likewise and was now running on their port quarter.

'What are we doing?' Sesto asked Luka, drawing the captain to one side for a moment.

'The sails are those of Muhannad Ru'af. Corsair galleys. We'll find out what he knows.'

'Corsairs?'

'Aye, Sesto.'

'Who will just come alongside and talk?'

'Oh, they're rivals, and there's no love lost, but they sail by the code too. Remember the code?'

'How could I forget?'

'We're safe if we show our colours.'

Luka gestured aloft, and Sesto saw the *Rumour* was now flying a ragged black flag on which was a hand-stitched white skeleton and hourglass. The *Safire* flew a similar badge: crossed white swords on black.

Pirate marks. The flags that warned a victim ship to give over without a fight, or informed another pirate of a fellow. If a pirate displayed his black before an attack and you surrendered without a fight, he was obliged to show mercy.

In the space of about half an hour, the corsair ships hove into view. The Rievers' vessels were almost at a dead stop, turned out of the light wind. Muhannad Ru'af's craft were galleys, and came on under power of the massive banks of oars. Ru'af's flag ship, the *Badara*, was a sixty oar trireme painted red, white and gold, much longer and narrower than either of Luka's ships, and dominated by two mighty lateen masts, the sails now furled, and a raised, crenelated fighting castle at the bow. Its consort, the *Tariq*, was a forty oar bireme, similar in aspect to the *Badara*, but smaller. A great structure of red-painted wood was raised almost upright from the bowcastle.

They were closing still, and closing fast, oars stroking, approaching the *Rumour* at the port beam.

'Lower a longboat,' Luka told Benuto. 'I'll go across myself as soon as they swing about. Get some—'

'Have a care!' Casaudor suddenly hollered. There was a general shouting from the crew. Sesto jumped, scared, and heard Roque blowing his whistle.

Sesto saw what Casaudor had seen. As they closed on the Rievers' vessels, the corsair galleys had struck the black marks they had been flying, and had run up plain red flags.

The bloody flag. The jolie rouge. The sign of death without quarter.

There was a distant banging and Sesto realised the galleys had fired their fore cannon. He heard whistling, whizzing sounds in the air around him. A section of the quarterdeck rail exploded in a shower of wood splinters, and two ratings shrieked and tumbled to their knees. A main topsail shredded and hung limp. The sea around them churned with splashes and spouts.

Another crump of fire. Flames and wood gouted from the port bulwarks. At least one man fell into the sea. Case shot ripped across the quarterdeck, bursting to release whipping chains and lead balls that turned barrels, ratlines and three men into sprays of fibres and bloody fragments.

There was a look of sheer incredulity on Luka Silvaro's face.

The *Rumour's* guns began to return fire. Oar staves shattered and pieces were thrown high out of the water. A pall of smoke filled the space between the ships. Shouts and screams cut the air.

Roque, blasting on his pipe, had succeeded in drawing the port watch to the rail, clattering their targettes together as they threw them up to form a barricade. Pikemen thrust their long-poled weapons out from the thick shield line. The deck shuddered violently, both with the impact of cannon-shell and the discharge of the *Rumour's* own.

Retorts of a higher pitch, like branches snapped, rolled down the port line as the calivermen began firing. Ducked down by the taffrail on the poop, Sesto saw the figures of men toppling down on the *Badara's* deck or plunging into the frothing sea. Swivel guns on both ships began to thump. A section of Roque's shield wall went down as a ten-pound ball from a corsair saker bowled through it, spilling broken men and twisted segments of pavise before it.

The *Tariq* had powered across the bow of the *Rumour* and was now coming in from the starboard side. With precious little wind, there was slim chance of out-maneuvring it. The *Safire*, however, was pulling away from the grappling mass of ships. Sesto saw that Silke had put out four longboats, laden with men, and these crews were now all rowing fit to break, towing the sloop clear on long lines.

Was he running? Was Silke failing his test of loyalty so early?

The red-painted projection raised from the *Tariq's* bowcastle began to lower, and Sesto realised what it was. A hinged boarding ramp, known as a corvus, large enough for two men to come down it abreast, and armoured along the sides with wooden targettes painted with Arabyan motifs. The corvus had a huge spike extended from the lip of its front end.

As Sesto watched, the *Tariq* slammed in towards the *Rumour's* waist as if to ram her, oars stroking like the legs of some great pool-skater. Then the cables securing the corvus were let out, and the wooden bridge came smashing down, disintegrating the

toprail and slamming against the deck, the spike biting deep through the scrubbed oak boards. Ululating, corsairs began to pour across: ragged, wild-haired men in florid silks and linens, brandishing wheel-locks, shamshirs and lances.

Roque and Benuto had mobbed the starboard watch and all the available topmen to repel. There was a firecracker peal of handguns blasting at short range, and a clatter of pikes and lances. Brutal hand to hand fighting, a tangled, blurry confusion, spilled across the *Rumour's* waist.

Luka was at the port rail with Casaudor when the crew of the *Badara* began their boarding attempt. He had a ducksfoot pistol in his left hand and a curved Arabyan shamshir in his right, and bellowed orders at the pikemen and the targetters. Calivermen and crossbowmen were now wriggling aloft in the shrouds under the direction of Vento and the old sailmaker Largo. They began raining shot and bolts down onto the railside of the *Badara*. Arrows and smallshot loosed back, and Sesto saw one caliverman drop like a stone from the rigging, and another, an arrow through his throat, fall and dangle, suspended by one foot, pouring blood like a strung hog.

Vento, his white coattails tucked into his breeks, straddled a yard arm like a man on a horse, and fired lethal stone balls with a heavy bullet-crossbow with double strings. Largo, higher up still, had rammed a gold Estalian comb-morion on his head for protection, and was shooting with a curved horse bow, spare arrows clutched between the fingers of his left hand so he could nock them quickly.

'We'll not overmatch them, man-for-man!' Luka yelled at Casaudor. 'We take it to them! I want Ru'af's heart for this infamy!'

Sesto watched in disbelief as Luka raised a boarding action to counter the *Badara's* assault. Outflung grapnels closed the distance, dragging galley and brigantine side to side, and boarding planks and ladders slammed out through the targette wall.

Luka led the attack. As he leapt over the boards, he fired his ducksfoot, and the five-splayed barrels of the grotesque pistol

roared simultaneously. Casaudor was beside him, blowing two corsairs off the plank bridge with a blast from his blunderbuss. The heavy weapon had a spring-blade under the trumpet, and Casaudor snapped it out and impaled the next corsair on it. Dying, the corsair took the blunderbuss with him as he pitched, screaming, into the sea, and Casaudor drew a cup-guard rapier and set in with that.

Many of the Rievers had multiple pistols strung around them on ribbon sashes, so they could be fired and not lost. There was no time to reload. Surging over the gap, the men fired each weapon in turn until they were spent, and then resorted to cutless, boarding axe and sabre.

Corsairs, swinging on lines, were now swarming over the poop rail. Tende, hefting a long-handled stabbing axe of curious and no doubt Ebonion design, led a repulse with ten men, including Junio and Fahd. Backing away, wondering where on earth he could run to, Sesto heard the swishing of steel, the crack of breaking bone, the yelp of the dying. Blood ran across the decking, following the lines of the boards. The corsairs surged again, pushing more men through onto the poop, despite the loss of half a dozen picked from the swing-ropes by the fire of Vento's marksmen above.

Sesto found himself in a haze of smoke. He staggered around, eyes watering, and got his hand around the grip of his pistol. Junio loomed out of the smoke. The side of his head was cloven in and he looked more than ever like a goat. A sacrificial goat. He fell into Sesto's embrace, soaking the gentleman from Luccini in sour, hot blood. Sesto fell back under the dead weight. A toothless, raving corsair with a bloody adze came charging out of the smoke, and Sesto fired his pistol from under the armpit of the dead storekeeper. The ball bounced off the side of the corsair's head and pulped his ear. As he fell, yowling, two more followed him into view, lunging at Sesto.

The first sabre slash struck Junio's back, and Sesto was forced to use the pitiful corpse in his arms as a shield. One of the corsairs stabbed with a lance and the iron tip came spearing out of the storekeeper's

mouth towards Sesto's face. Sesto yelled and retreated, dropping Junio face down.

The corsairs hurled themselves after him. Sesto tried to draw his smallsword, but fell down hard on the bloody deck.

Ymgrawl the boucaner appeared from nowhere and interposed himself between Sesto and his attackers. The boucaner's cut-less ripped the lancer across the eyes, then he turned and broke the other's jaw with a blow from his blade's heavy stirrup-guard, before grabbing hold of the man by the hair and wrenching him head-first over the rail.

'Get thee up!' Ymgrawl yelled.

Sesto never would have believed he'd be happy to see the wretched boucaner.

'Thee makes my job hard!' Ymgrawl snorted, bundling Sesto down the companion ladder onto the quarterdeck.

'Your job?'

'Silvaro told me to shadow thee and keep thee safe from harm,' said Ymgrawl.



LUKA HACKED and slashed his way down the centre walk of the *Badara* at the head of a pack of Rievers. The corsairs had thrown their full effort into the assaults, for though the rowing benches were packed with men, most were lying down, helpless with fatigue. The corsairs were all thin and undernourished, and many showed signs of scurvy. The forced row to engage Luka's ships had exhausted most of them. Luka knew he was lucky. If Ru'af's crew hadn't been ailing, the sheer number of them would have overrun his tubs already.

Through the chaos and smoke, Luka saw the big, pot-bellied corsair chief up on the aft castle of the *Badara*.

'Ru'af! Bitch-pup!' he yelled in Arabyan, using every curse Fahd had ever taught him. 'Call off your dogs and I might remember my mark was black!'

Ru'af made an obscene gesture in Luka's direction. Luka turned away, hacking down an oarsman with a dagger who was running at Casaudor, and looked to sea.

Silke, his wits about him, had got into position at last, the rowers in the tugging longboats gasping and collapsing over their oars. The *Safire* hadn't run at all. It had been pulled clear to present beam-on to the *Tariq*.

The first broadside almost stopped the battle dead with its thunder crack. Pieces of oar, rail and bulwark from the *Tariq* flew into the air and rained down. Another broadside, and the *Tariq* ruptured, spewing smoke and flames up into the windless blue. Its foremast collapsed, and her crew, deafened and dazed, began jumping into the sea. On the waist of the *Rumour*, Roque, Benuto and a dozen other blood-soaked Rievers struggled to dislodge the spike of the corvus before the *Tariq* dragged the brigantine onto its beam end.

Then the bireme folded in the middle, timbers shearing and splintering, and the sea rushed in to consume her.



THE FIGHT WAS out of the corsairs. Luka had to issue stern orders to stop the Rievers massacring them. Their blood was up, and the corsairs had broken the sea code. Pirates did not prey on pirates.

Luka dragged Ru'af to the *Badara's* aft castle and spoke to him there alone for long minutes. When he returned, it was clear to all that he was disappointed by the conversation. He ordered Benuto to cut the lines holding the ships together.

The *Badara*, smoke wreathing the sea around it, drifted away astern. The *Rumour* and the *Safire* put up what sail they could to catch the meagre breeze, and slowly hauled away west.

Luka found Sesto in the great cabin, swallowing brandy.

'They attacked us because they hadn't seen a sail in seven weeks. They were famished and scurvyed and low on water. It's as Benuto said. The seas are dry. Ru'af was in no doubt. The Butcher Ship has driven everyone from the sea with its bloody fury.'

'I thought we *were* going to die,' said Sesto.

'We *were* going to die,' snapped Luka. 'That's why we fought.'

He looked at Sesto grimly. 'Ru'af was in no doubt. Common word in the islands is that Henri of Breton is the Butcher. It is his great galleon that everyone fears.'

'You know him?'

'Yes. But if Henri is the Butcher, he's not the man I knew.'

Luka took a folded parchment from his coat pocket. The sealing wax bore the imprint of the Prince of Luccini.

'It's time to tell the Rievers,' Luka announced.



HAVE EARS, you all!' Luka yelled from the break-rail. All across the deck, toil ceased. The last few bodies had been pitched over the side, and repairs were now underway to crew and ship alike.

'When I was took by the Luccini warships, I never thought to see light again. Nor would they have let me out, but left me to rot. Until they found another use for me, and freed me. An amnesty, and a thousand crowns! That's what they offer me, and every man of you too!'

That had their attention.

Luka held up the parchment. 'This is a letter of marque and reprisal, signed by the Prince himself. Under its terms, we Rievers cease to be pirates and become privateers. Payment shall be the amnesty and the thousand crowns. My friend Sesto is here to witness our work. Take heed, that unless we return him safe to Luccini, so he may report in our favour, we'll not see a crumb.'

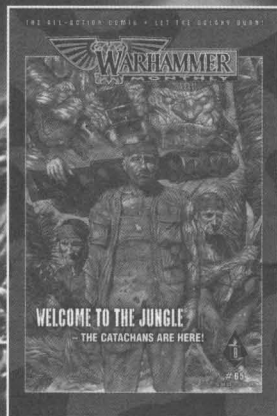
All eyes turned to Sesto for a moment, and he felt uncomfortable.

'What work must we do?' shouted out Benuto.

'Why, we must rid the seas of the Butcher Ship,' said Luka Silvaro. ♣

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THE BEGUILING



A CIAPHAS CAIN STORY BY SANDY MITCHELL

NIGHT AND THE rain had both been falling for some time and I'd been getting steadily colder, wetter and more hacked off since the middle of the afternoon before we saw the light, glimmering faintly through the trees which bordered the road. The two gunners in the back of the Salamander with me hadn't helped my darkening mood either; they were fresh out from Valhalla, had never seen rain before, and found the 'liquid snow' a fascinating novelty which they discussed at inordinate length and with increasingly inanity. To add insult to injury they had an ice-worlder's indifference to low temperatures, chattering about how warm it was, while I huddled into my greatcoat and shivered. The only upside to their presence was their transparent awe at being in the company of the famous Commissar Cain, whose heroism and concern for his men was fast becoming legendary.

Legendary, that is, in the literal sense of being both widely believed and completely without foundation. Since my attempt to save my own miserable skin by deserting in the face of a tyrannid horde on Desolatia had backfired spectacularly, leaving me the inadvertent hero of the hour, my undeserved reputation had continued to grow like tanglevine. A couple of narrow scrapes during the subsequent campaign to cleanse Keffia of genestealers, which aren't strictly relevant to this anecdote but were unpleasant enough at the time, had added to it; mostly I'd run for cover, kept my head down, and emerged to take the credit when the noise stopped.

So I should have had the sense to sit back and enjoy the relative peace the post I'd gone to some trouble to arrange for myself ought to have guaranteed; a rear-echelon artillery battery, a long way from the front line, with no disciplinary problems to speak of. But, true to form, I just couldn't leave well enough alone.

We'd been campaigning on Slawkenberg for about eight months standard, or about half the local year, putting down in the southern hemisphere of the main eastern continent just as the snows of winter began to give way to a clement, sweet-scented spring. Tough luck on the Valhallans, who bore the disappointment with the stoicism I'd come to expect, but just gravy so far as I was concerned. True to form we spent the spring, and the sort of balmy summer that vacation worlds build their entire economies on, flinging shells into the distance secure in the knowledge that we were doing the Emperor's work without any of the unpleasantness you get when the enemy can shoot back at you.

I wasn't even sure who the enemy was, to be honest. As usual I'd given the briefing slates only the most perfunctory of glances before turning my attention to matters of more immediate concern, like grabbing the best billets for myself and a few favoured cronies. Since my instincts in this regard remained as finely honed as ever I managed to install myself in a high class hotel in a nearby village along with the senior command staff, most of whom still cordially detested me but who weren't about to turn down a soft bed and a cellar full of cask-matured amasec. I had equally little time for them, but liked to be able to keep an eye on them without too much effort.

I made sure Colonel Mostrue got the best suite, of course, selecting a more modest one for myself which better fitted my undeserved reputation, and which had the added advantage of a pair of bay windows which afforded easy and unobserved access to the street through a small garden which was only overlooked by the apartment belonging to the hotel's owner. He wasn't about to challenge anything an Imperial Commissar might do, and with the indispensable Jurgen, my faithful and

malodorous aide, camped out in the anteroom, there was no chance of anyone wandering in to discover that I was entertaining company or had wandered off to amuse myself in the many houses of discreet entertainment the locality had to offer.

In short, I had it made. So, as the summer wore on, it was only a matter of time before I found myself getting bored.

'That's the trouble with you, Cai.' Toren Divas, the young lieutenant who was the closest thing I had to a friend among the battery, and was certainly the only member of it who would even dream of using the familiar form of my given name, tilted his glass and let the amber liquid slide down his throat and sighed with satisfaction. 'You're not suited to this rear-echelon soldiering. A man like you needs more of a challenge.' He fumbled for the bottle, found it was empty, and looked around hopefully for another.

'Right now I've got enough of a challenge with that winning streak of yours,' I said, hoping to bluff him into doubling his bet again. The best he could be holding was a pair of Inquisitors, and I only needed one more Emperor to scoop the pot. But he wasn't biting.

'You're going stir crazy here,' he went on. 'You need a bit of excitement.'

Well, that was true, but not in the way he meant. He'd been there on Desolatia and seen me take on a swarm of tyranids with just a chainsword, hacking my way through to save Jurgen's miserable hide completely by accident, and bought the Cain the Hero legend wholesale. His idea of excitement was being in a place where people or aliens or warp-spawned monstrosities wanted to kill you as horribly as possible and doing it to them first. Mine was finding a gambling den without a house limit, or a well-endowed young lady with a thing for men in uniforms and access to her father's credit slip. And in the last few months I'd pretty much run out of both locally, not to mention other recreational facilities of a less salubrious nature. So I nodded, mindful of the need to play up to my public persona.

'Well, the enemy's leagues away,' I said, trying to sound rueful. 'What can you do?'

'Go out and look for them,' he said. Maybe it was the amasec, maybe it was the stage of the evening when you start to talk frak just for the hell of it, but for whatever reason I found myself pursuing the topic.

'I wish it was that easy,' I said insincerely. 'But then I'd have to shoot myself for desertion.' Divas laughed at the feeble joke.

'Not if you made it official,' he said. There was something about his voice which sounded quite serious, despite the amasec-induced preternatural care with which he formed the words. If I'd just laughed it off at that point, it would all have turned out differently; a couple of eager young troopers wouldn't have died, Slawkenberg might have fallen to the forces of Chaos, and I definitely wouldn't have ended up fleeing in terror from yet another bunch of psychopaths determined to kill me. But, as usual, my curiosity got the better of me.

'How do you mean?' I asked.



'LET ME GET this straight.' Colonel Mostrue looked at me narrowly, distrust clearly evident in his ice-blue eyes. He'd never fully bought my story on Desolatia, and although he generally gave me the benefit of the doubt he was never quite able to ignore the instinctive antipathy most Guard officers harboured towards members of the Commissariat. 'You want to lead a recon mission out towards the enemy lines.'

'Not lead, exactly,' I said. 'More like tag along. See how the forward observers are doing.'

'They seem to be doing fine,' Mostrue riposted, his breath puffing to vapour as he spoke; as usual he had the air conditioning in his office turned up high enough to preserve grox.

'As I'd expect,' I said smoothly. 'But I'm sure you've seen the latest intelligence reports.' Which was more than I had, until my conversation with Divas had drawn my attention to them. 'Something peculiar seems to be happening among the enemy forces.'

'Of course it does.' His voice held a faint tinge of asperity. 'They're Chaos worshippers.' I almost expected him to spit. 'Nothing they do makes sense.'

'Of course not,' I said. 'But I feel I'd be shirking my duties if I didn't take a look for myself.' Although I didn't have the slightest intention of going anywhere near the battlefield, I really was mildly intrigued by the reports I'd skimmed. The traitors seemed to be fighting each other in several places, even ignoring nearby Imperial forces altogether unless they intervened. I didn't know or care why, any more than Mostrue did; the more damage they inflicted on each other the better I liked it. But it did give me the perfect excuse to comander some transport and check out the recreational possibilities of some of the nearby towns. Mostrue shrugged.

'Well, please yourself,' he said. 'It's your funeral.'



SO I FOUND myself later that morning in the vehicle park, watching a couple of young gunners called Grear and Mulenz stowing their kit in the back of a Salamander. Jurgen, who I'd co-opted as my driver, glanced up at the almost cloudless sky, his shirtsleeves rolled up as usual, a faint sheen of sweat trickling across his interesting collection of skin diseases. Even though we were in the open air, and he wasn't perspiring nearly as much as he had when we first met in the baking deserts of Desolatia, I kept upwind of him through long habit. Jurgen's body odour was quite spectacular, and even though our time together had more or less immured me to it there was no point in taking any chances. Physically he was much less prepossessing than he smelled, looking as though someone had started to mould a human figure out of clay but became bored before they finished.

Though I strongly suspected Mostrue had assigned him as my aide more as a practical joke than anything else, Jurgen had turned out to be ideally suited to the role. He wasn't the biggest bang in the armoury by any

means, but made up for his lack of intellect with a literally minded approach to following orders and an unquestioning acceptance of even the mutually contradictory parts of Imperial doctrine which would have done credit to the most devout ecclesiarch. Now he looked at a faint wisp of cloud on the horizon, and shook his head.

'Weather'll be changing soon.'

'It seems fine to me,' I said. I suppose I should have listened, but I grew up in a hive and had never quite got the hang of living in an environment you couldn't adjust. And besides, it had been warm and dry for weeks now. Jurgen shrugged.

'As the Emperor wills,' he said, and started the engine.



WHAT THE Emperor willed on this particular morning was a steady increase in the cloud, which gradually began to attenuate the sunshine, and a slowly freshening breeze which stole the remaining warmth from it. The sky darkened by almost imperceptible degrees as we rattled along, making good time towards the nearest town, and I wasn't too surprised to feel the first drops of moisture on my skin while we were still some way short of our destination.

'How much further?' I asked Jurgen, wishing I'd comandered a Chimera instead. The noise in the enclosed crew bay would have been deafening, but at least it would have kept the rain off.

'Ten or twelve leagues,' he said, apparently unperturbed by the change in the weather. 'Fifteen to the OP.' I had no intention of accompanying Grear and Mulenz all the way to the forward observation post, but we were close enough to civilisation to make the quarter hour or so of mild discomfort I still had to look forward to seem bearable. 'Good,' I said, then turned to the gunners with an encouraging smile. 'You'll be there in no time.'

'What about you, sir?' Mulenz asked, looking up from his ranging scope. It was the first time I'd let them know I wasn't planning on checking in on the observation post; every artillery battery needs its forward observers, but it's a hard, thankless job, and a fire magnet for every enemy trooper in the area once they realise you're there. I smiled again, the warm, confident smile of the hero they expected me to be.

'I'll just be poking around to see what the enemy's up to,' I said. 'I'm sure you don't need me getting in the way.' That was always my style, making the troops feel as though they had my full confidence. A pat on the back generally works better than a gun to the head, in my experience; and if it doesn't you can just as easily shoot them later. Grear nodded, his chest swelling visibly.

'You can count on us, sir,' he said, positively radiating enthusiasm.

'I'm sure I can,' I said, then lifted myself up to look over the rim of the driver's compartment again. 'Jurgen. Why are we stopping?'

'Roadblock,' he said. The palms of my hands began to tingle, as they often do when something I can't quite put my finger on doesn't seem right. 'Catachans, by the look of it.'

'They can't be,' I said. I glanced ahead of us: a squad of troopers was fanning out across the road, lasguns at the ready. Jurgen was right, from this distance they did seem to have the heavily-muscled build which distinguishes the inhabitants of that greenhouse hell. But there was something about the way they moved which rang alarm bells in my mind. And besides... 'They're all assigned to the equatorial region.'

'Then who are they?' Jurgen asked.

'Good question. Let's not wait to find out.' No other instructions were necessary: he killed the drive to the left-hand tracks, and the Salamander slewed round to face the way we'd come. Grear and Mulenz sprawled across the floor of the crew compartment, taken by surprise by the violent manoeuvre; more used to Jurgen's robust driving style I'd grabbed the pintel mount to steady myself.

A few las-bolts shot past our heads as the ambushers realised we were getting away, followed by barely coherent curses.

'Emperor's blood!' I swung the heavy bolter around and loosed off a fusilade of badly-aimed shots at our pursuers. Grear and Mulenz gaped at me, obviously stunned at seeing the heroic legend come to life, until I grabbed Grear and got him to replace me at the weapon.

'Keep firing,' I snapped, pleased to see that I'd got a couple at least, and dropped back behind the safety of the armour plate. That required an excuse, so I seized the vocaster. 'Cain to Command. We have hostiles on the forest road, co-ordinates...' I scabbled for the map slate, which Mulenz helpfully thrust at me, and rattled them off. 'Estimate at no more than platoon strength...'

'There's more of them up ahead,' Jurgen cut in helpfully.

'Command. Wait one.' I peered cautiously over the rim of the crew compartment. Another squad had emerged from the trees lining the road, then another, and another... I could estimate at least fifty men, maybe more, straggling across the highway towards concealment on the other side. 'Make that company strength. Possibly a full advance.'

'Confirming that, commissar.' Mostrue's voice, calm and collected as usual. 'Targeting now. Firing in two.'

'What?' But the link had gone dead. We only had one chance. 'Jurgen! Get us off the road!'

'Yes, sir.' The Salamander swung violently again, lasbolts spanging from the armour on all sides now, throwing us around like peas in a bucket. The ride became a succession of sickening lurches, as the smooth rocrete of the highway gave way to a rutted forest track. The flurry of bolts began to dwindle as we opened the distance from our pursuers. All except a few, which continued to pepper the front armour to little effect.

I risked another peek over the armour to see a small knot of men scattering in front of us: a couple of them weren't quite fast enough, and the Salamander lurched again with a sickening crack and a smell of putrescence which made Jurgen's odour seem like a flower garden.

'Who are these guys?' Mulenz asked, grabbing a lasgun and sending a few rounds after them for good measure.

'Care to guess?' I suggested, drawing my chainsword as one of the enemy troopers began clawing his way aboard. Despite everything I'd seen in my career up to that point, it was still a shock. The face was distended with infection, pus seeping from open sores, and his limbs were swollen and arthritic. But inhumanly strong, for all that; even an ork would probably have thought twice about trying to board a vehicle moving at our pace...

With an incoherent scream, which the two gunners fortunately took for a heroic battle cry, I swung the humming weapon in a short arc that separated the head from his body. A fountain of filth jetted from it as it fell, fortunately away from the Salamander, making us gag and retch at the smell. By the time I was able to blink my eyes clear I could hear the first shrieks of the incoming shells.

The roar of the barrage detonating behind us was almost deafening, splinters of wood from shattered trees spattering the armour plate, and stinging my cheek as I ducked for cover. Jurgen kept us moving at a brisk pace, deeper into the cover of the woods, and the noise gradually receded; Gear and Mulenz were looking back at the flashes and smoke like juvies at a firework display, but I guess being forward observers they were used to being at the sharp end of one of our barrages. For me it was a novel experience, and one I wasn't keen to repeat.

'What do we do now, commissar?' Jurgen asked, slowing to a less life-threatening speed as the noise grew fainter behind us. I shrugged, considering our options.

'Well we can't go back,' I said. 'The road will be impassable after that.' A quick conversation on the vox was enough to vindicate my guess; things had been chewed up so badly regimental headquarters was having to send patrols in on foot to confirm that the enemy had been neutralised. I looked at the map slate again. The forest seemed awfully big now that we were inside it, and the rain was starting to fall in earnest, gathering on the overhanging branches to drip in large, cold drops my exposed skin. I shivered.

'What I don't understand is what they were doing out here,' Gear said. 'There's nothing of any strategic importance in this area.'

'There's nothing in this area at all,' I said, mesmerised by the map. 'Except trees.' A faint line was probably the forest track we were on; I leaned forwards to show it to Jurgen. 'I reckon we're about here,' I concluded. He nodded.

'Looks about right, sir.' He switched on the headlights; the twisting track became a lot clearer, but the trees surrounding us suddenly loomed more dark and threatening. I traced the thin line with my thumbnail.

'If it is,' I said, 'it comes out on the north road. Eventually.' It was going to be a long, arduous trip, though. For a moment I even considered going back the way we'd come, and taking our chances on the shattered highway, but that was never really going to be an option; the Salamander's suspension would be wrecked in moments, and there were bound to be enemy survivors lurking in the woods. Pushing on was the only sensible choice.



FOUR HOURS LATER, cold, tired, hungry, and seriously hacked off, I was beginning to think fighting our way out through a bunch of walking pubbags wouldn't have been so bad after all. We'd probably have linked up with the first of our recon patrols by now, and be on our way back to the battery in a nice cosy Chimera...

'What's that?' Gear pointed off to the left, through the trees.

'What's what?' I brushed the fringe of raindrops from the peak of my cap, and followed the direction of his finger with my eyes.

'I thought I saw something.' Shadows and trees continued to crawl past the Salamander.

'What, exactly?' I asked, trying not to snap at him.

'I don't know.' A fine observer he was turning out to be. 'There!' He pointed again, and this time I saw it for myself. A glimmer of light flickering through the trees.

'Civilisation!' I said. 'Emperor be praised!' There could be no doubt that the light was artificial, a strong, warm glow.

'There's nothing on the map,' Jurgen said. He killed the headlights, and brought us to a stop. I glanced at the softly-glowing slate screen.

'We're almost at the highway,' I concluded. 'Maybe it's a farmhouse or something.'

'Not exactly agricultural land around here though, is it, sir?' Mulenz asked. I shrugged.

'Forestry workers, then.' I didn't really care. The light promised warmth, food, and a chance to get out of the rain. That was good enough for me. Except for the little voice of caution which scratched at the back of my mind...

'We'll go in on foot,' I decided. 'If they're hostile they can't have heard our engine yet. We'll reconnoitre before we proceed. Any questions?'

No one had, so we disembarked; the three gunners carrying lasguns, while I loosened my trusty chainsword in its scabbard.

The ground was ankle-deep in mud and mulch as we squelched our way forward. I ordered us into the trees to make for the light directly, cutting the corner off the curve of the track. The going was easier here, a carpet of rich loam and fallen leaves cushioning our footfalls, and the thick tracery of branches overhead keeping most of the rain off as we slipped between the shadowy trunks.

A line of thicker darkness began to resolve itself through the trees, backlit by the increasing glow behind it.

'It's a wall,' Mulenz said. No wonder they made him an observer, I thought, nothing gets past this one. I raised a cautious hand to it: old stonework, slick with moss, about twice my own height. I was about to mutter something sarcastic about his ability to state the obvious when we heard the scream. It was a woman's voice, harsh and shrill, cutting through the shrouding gloom around us.

'This way!' Mulenz took off like a startled sump rat, and the rest of us followed. I drew my laspistol, and tried to look as though I was heroically leading the charge while

keeping the rest of the group between me and potential danger. Something was crashing towards us through the undergrowth, and I drew a bead on it, finger tightening reflexively on the trigger.

'Frak!' I held my fire as the looming shape resolved itself into a young woman, her clothing torn and muddy, who I suddenly found clamped around my neck.

'Help me!' she cried, like the heroine of a cheesy holodrama. Easier said than done with a good fifty kilos of feminine pulchritude trying to throttle me. Despite the mud and grime and darkness I found her extraordinarily attractive, the scent of her hair dizzying; at the time, I put it down to oxygen starvation.

'With pleasure,' I croaked, finally managing to unwind her from around my throat. 'If you could just...'

'They're coming!' she shrieked, wriggling in my grip like a downhive dancing girl. Under other circumstances I'd have enjoyed the experience, but there's a time and a place for everything, and this was neither.

'Who are, miss?' At least Jurgen was paying attention; Grear and Mulenz were just staring at her, as though they'd never seen a pretty girl falling out of her dress before. Maybe they didn't get out much.

'Them!' She pointed back they way she'd come, where something else was thrashing its way through the undergrowth. The stench preceeding it was enough to confirm the presence of at least one of the chaos troopers we'd encountered before. Shaking her off like an overeager puppy I raised my arm and fired.

The crack of the lasbolt broke the spell; Grear and Mulenz raised their lasguns and followed suit. Jurgen took slower, deliberate aim.

Something shrieked in the darkness, and burst through the surrounding undergrowth. A smoking crater had been gouged out of the left side of its body, a mortal wound to any normal man, but it just kept coming. Jurgen fired once, exploding its head, and it fell in a shower of putrescence.

'Sir! There's another!' Grear fired again, setting fire to a nearby shrub. In the sudden flare of light the enemy trooper stood out

clearly, running towards us, a filthy combat blade in its hand. Jurgen and I fired simultaneously, blowing it to pieces before it could close.

'Is that the last of them?' I asked the girl. She nodded, shaking with reaction, and slumped against me. Once again I found the sensation curiously distracting; with a surge of willpower I detached her again. 'Mulenz. Help her.'

He came forward grinning like an idiot, and I handed the girl across to him. As I did so a curious expression flickered across her face, almost like surprise, before she swooned decorously into his arms.

'Any movement out there?' I asked, crossing to Jurgen. He turned slowly, tracking the barrel of his lasgun, sweeping the perimeter of firelight. Welcome as it had been at the climax of the fight, now it was a hindrance, destroying our night vision and rendering everything outside it impenetrable.

'I think I can still hear movement,' he said. I strained my ears, picking up the faint scuff of feet moving through the forest detritus.

'Several of them,' I agreed. 'Back towards the road.' Almost the opposite direction to the one our guest and her pursuers had come from.

'Commissar, look.' Grear managed to tear his envious attention away from Mulenz long enough to point. Flickering lights were moving through the trees, heading towards us. He levelled his gun.

'Hold your fire,' I said. Whoever it was out there was moving far too openly to be trying to sneak up on us. I kept my pistol in my hand nevertheless. 'It might be...'

'Hello?' A warm, contralto voice floated out of the darkness, unmistakably feminine. A tension I hadn't even been aware of suddenly left me; even without seeing the speaker I felt as though here was someone to be trusted.

'Over here,' I found myself calling unnecessarily. The lights were now bobbing in our direction, attracted by the glow of the gradually diminishing fire, and quickly resolved themselves into hand-held luminators. Half a dozen girls, dressed like the one clamped firmly to Mulenz but without the mud and rents appeared; like

her they all seemed to be in their late teens. All except one...

She stepped forward out of the group, almost a head taller, the hood falling back from her cape to reveal long, raven hair. Her eyes were a startling emerald colour, her lips full and rounded, pulling back to reveal perfect white teeth as she smiled. She extended a hand towards me. Even before she spoke I knew hers would be the voice I'd heard before.

'I'm Emeli Duboir. And you are?'

'Ciaphas Cain. Imperial Commissar, 12th Valhallan Field Artillery. At your service.' I bowed formally. She smiled again, and I felt warm and comfortable for the first time that night.

'Delighted to make your acquaintance, commissar.' Her voice tingled down my spine. Listening to it was like bathing in chocolate. 'It seems we owe you a great deal.' Her eyes moved on, taking in the corpses of the traitors, and the girl who still seemed welded to Mulenz. 'Is Krystabel all right?'

'Shocked a little, possibly,' I said. 'Maybe a few minor scrapes. Nothing a warm bath couldn't put right.' The words were accompanied by a sudden, extraordinarily vivid mental image of Krystabel luxuriating in a steaming bathtub; I fought it down, bringing my thoughts back to the necessities of the present. Emeli was looking at me with faint amusement, an eyebrow quirked, as though she could read my thoughts.

'We need to get her inside as soon as possible,' she said. 'I wonder if your man would mind helping to carry her.'

'Of course not,' I said. Judging by Mulenz's expression we'd need a crowbar to separate them.



SO WE ACCOMPANIED the women home, which turned out to be a large, rambling manor house set securely in its own grounds. A plaque on the gates announced that this was the Saint Trynia Academy for the Daughters of Gentlefolk,

which explained a lot. To my relief I saw that the forest track was paved from that point on, which would speed up our journey considerably when we set out again. But of course Emeli wouldn't hear of it.

'You must stay, at least until the morning,' she said. By this time we were in the main hall, which was warmed by a roaring fire; I'd expected the Valhallans to be severely uncomfortable, but they didn't seem to mind, crowding into the benches along the polished wooden dining table with the students.

We were certainly the centre of attention during dinner. Grear was surrounded by a small knot of giggling admirers, oohing and ahing appreciatively as he enlarged on our day's adventures. Although he was making me out to be the main hero of the piece, he was painting himself a fairly creditable second. Mulenz had seemed remarkably subdued since Krystabel was detached from him and packed off to the infirmary, but he perked up as soon as she reappeared, chatty and animated now. She perched on his knee as he ate, the two of them gazing into one another's eyes, and I found myself thinking I was going to have trouble getting him back aboard the Salamander in the morning. Even Jurgen was being flirted with outrageously, which struck me as truly bizarre; the only female I'd ever known to take a romantic interest in him before was an ogryn on R&R, and she'd been drunk at the time. He picked at his food nervously, responding as best he could, but it was clear he was out of his depth.

'Is the grox all right?' Emeli asked at my elbow. Protocol demanded I sat next to her at the top table.

'It's fine,' I responded. In truth it was excellent, the most tender I'd ever tasted, lightly poached in a samec sauce that was positively to die for. Which I nearly did, of course, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself. She smiled dazzlingly at my approval, and again I found my senses overwhelmed by her closeness. The sound of her voice was like the caress of silk, smooth and fine, like the fabric of her gown; it was the same shade of green as her bewitching eyes, clinging to the curves of her body in ways which inflamed my imagination. She knew it too, the minx. As she leaned over to pick up the condiments

she brushed my arm lightly with her own, and a lightning strike of desire swept the breath from my lungs.

'I'm glad you like it,' she said, her voice bubbling with mischief. 'I think you'll find a lot here to enjoy.'

'I'm sure I will,' I said.



AFTER DINNER the company separated. Emeli invited me up to her private apartments, and promised to arrange accomodation for the gunners, although by the look of things Grear and Mulenz had pretty much taken care of that for themselves. While Emeli went off to do whatever finishing school principals did in the evening I caught up with Jurgen in the hallway, and prized him away from his giggling escort.

'Jurgen,' I said. 'Get back to the Salamander. Vox the battery, and give them our co-ordinates. This is all very pleasant, but...'

'I know what you mean, sir.' He nodded, relief clearly visible in his eyes. 'The way the lads are acting...'

'They're acting pretty much like troopers always do when there are women around,' I said. He nodded.

'Only more so.' He hesitated. 'I was beginning to think they'd got to you too, sir.'

Well they had, nearly. But my innate paranoia hadn't let me down. If it's too good to be true then it probably is, as my old tutor used to say, and even though I wasn't sure exactly what was going on here I knew something wasn't right. I just hoped I could keep reminding myself of that when I was with Emeli.

Of course I should have been wondering why Jurgen wasn't affected like the rest of us, but that particular coin wouldn't drop for another decade or more; in those days although I'd read the manual, I'd never met a psyker, let alone a blank.

'Don't worry girls,' I reassured his hovering fan club. 'He'll be right back.' Jurgen shot me a grateful look, and disappeared.

‘Ciaphas. There you are.’ Emeli appeared at the top of the stairs. ‘I was wondering what had happened to you.’

‘Likewise.’ I turned on the charm with practiced ease, and moved to join her; although I told myself I was climbing the stairs of my own volition, something drew me towards her, something which seemed to grow stronger and muffle my senses the closer I got. She moulded herself to the inside of my arm, and we drifted across a wide hallway towards her apartments.

I had no memory of entering, but found myself inside an elegant boudoir, smelling faintly of some heady perfume. Everywhere I looked were soft pastel colours, flimsy fabrics, and artworks of the most flagrant eroticism. I’d seen quite a bit in my time, I have to confess, but the atmosphere of sensual indulgence inside that room was something I couldn’t have begun to imagine.

Emeli sank into the wide, yielding bed, drawing me down after her. Her breath was sweet as our lips touched, tasting faintly of that strange, sensual perfume.

‘I knew you were one of us the moment I felt your presence in the woods,’ she whispered. I tried to make sense of her words, but the sheer physical need for her was pounding in my blood.

‘Felt?’ I mumbled, drawing her closer. She nodded, kissing my throat.

‘I could taste your soul,’ she breathed. ‘Like to like...’

The little voice in my head was screaming now, screaming that something was wrong. Screaming out questions that something kept trying to suppress, something which I now realised was outside myself, trying to worm its way in.

‘Why were you out there?’ I asked, and the answer suddenly flared in my mind. Hunting. Krystabel had been...

‘Bait,’ Emeli’s voice rang silently inside my brain. ‘Enticing those Nurglite scum. But then you came instead. Much better.’

‘Better for what?’ I mumbled. It felt like one of those dreams where you know you’re asleep and try desperately to wake. Her voice danced through my mind like laughing windchimes.

‘That which wakes. It comes tonight. But not for you.’ Somewhere in the physical world our bodies moved together,

caressing, enticing, casting a spell of physical pleasure I knew with a sudden burst of panic was ensnaring my very soul; her disembodied voice laughed again. ‘Give in, Ciaphas. Slaanesh has surely touched your soul before now. You live only for yourself. You’re his, whether you know it or not.’

Holy Emperor! That was the first time I’d heard the names of any of the Chaos powers, long before my subsequent activities as the Inquisition’s occasional and extremely reluctant errand boy made them all too familiar, but even then I could tell that what I faced was monstrous beyond measure. Selfish and self-indulgent I may well have been, and still am if I’m honest about it, but if I have any qualities that outmatch that one it’s my will to survive. The realisation of what I faced, and the consequences if I failed, doused me like a shock of cold water. I snapped back to myself like a drowning man gasping for air, to find Emeli staring at me in consternation.

‘You broke free!’ she said, like a petulant child denied a sweet. Now I knew she was a psyker I could feel the tendrils starting to wrap themselves around my mind again. I scrabbled for the laspistol at my belt, desperation making my fingers shake.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I prefer blondes.’ Then I shot her. She glared at me for a moment in outraged astonishment, before the light faded from her eyes and she went to join whatever she worshipped in hell.

As my mind began to clear I became aware of a new sound, a rhythmical chanting which echoed through the building. I wasn’t sure what it meant, but my tingling palms told me things were about to get a whole lot worse.



SURE ENOUGH, as I staggered down the stairway to the entrance hall, the sound grew in intensity. I hefted the pistol in my sweat-sticky hand and cautiously pushed the door to the great hall ajar. I wished I hadn’t. Every girl in the school was there, along with what was left

of Grear and Mulenz. They were still alive, for whatever that was worth, rictus grins of insane ecstasy on their faces, as the priestesses of depravity conducted their obscene rituals. As I watched, Grear expired, and an ululating howl of joy rose from the assembled cultist's throats.

Then Krystabel stepped forward, her voice raised, chanting something new in counterpoint to the other acolytes. A faint wind blew through the room, thick with that damnable perfume, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. Mulenz began to levitate, his body shifting and distorting in strange inhuman ways. Power began to crackle through the air.

'Merciful Emperor!' I made the warding sign of the aquila, more out of habit than because I expected it to do any good, and turned to leave. Whatever was beginning to possess my erstwhile trooper, I wanted to be long gone before it manifested itself properly. Not that that seemed likely without a miracle...

Lasbolts exploded over my head, raking the room, taking down some of the cultists. I turned, the sudden stench behind me warning me what I was about to see; sure enough the entrance hall was full of the pusbag troopers, and for the first time I realised that Slawkenberg was under attack from two different Chaos powers. No wonder they were more interested in killing each other than us. Not that I was likely to reap the benefit, by the look of things.

The Slaaneshi cult was rallying by now, howling forward to meet their disease-ridden rivals in what looked like a suicidal charge; but it was only to buy Krystabel enough time to complete her ritual. The daemonhost which had formally been Mulenz levitated forwards, spitting bolts of energy from its hands, and laughing insanely as it blasted pusbags and schoolgirls alike. I fled, ignored by the Nurglites, who grouped together to concentrate their lasgun fire on the hovering abomination. Much good it seemed to be doing them. I could hear screams and explosions behind me as I sprinted across the lawn, shoulderblades itching in expectation of feeling a lasbolt or something worse at any moment.

'Commissar! Over here!' Jurgen's familiar voice rose above the roar of an engine, and the Salamander crashed through an ornamental shrubbery. I clambered aboard.

'Jurgen!' I shouted, dazed and delighted to see him. 'I thought they'd got you too!'

'No.' He looked puzzled for a moment. 'I ran into some of those enemy troopers in the woods. But they walked right past me. I can't understand it.' I caught a full-strength whiff of his body odour as he shrugged.

'The Emperor protects the righteous,' I suggested straight-faced. Jurgen nodded.

He crossed himself and gunned the engine.


'At least we know what they were doing in this sector now,' I said, as we raced down the paved track towards the road. 'They were trying to stop the summoning... Oh frak!' I grabbed the voxcaster. 'Did you vox in our co-ordinates?'

'Of course,' Jurgen nodded.

'Cain to command. Full barrage, danger close, immediate effect. Don't argue, just do it!' I hung up before Mostrue could start pestering me with questions, and waited for the first shells to arrive.

If being close to the first strike had been worrying, getting caught in a full barrage was serious change of undergarments time. For what seemed like eternity the world disappeared in fire and smoke, but I guess the Emperor was looking out for us after all or we'd never have made it to the road in one piece.

When we went back at first light the entire building had been obliterated, along with several hectares of woodland. I left out the bit about the daemonhost in my report; I'd been the only one to see it, after all, and I didn't want the Inquisition poking around in my affairs. Instead I made up some extravagant lies about the heroism of the dead troopers, which, as usual, were taken as a modest attempt to deflect attention from my own valour. And, so far as I knew at the time, that was the end of it.

Except that sometimes at night, even after more than a century, I find myself dreaming of green eyes and a voice like velvet, and I wonder if my soul is as safe as I'd like to think... 

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS **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**...

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

STORY:
STU TAYLOR
ART:
SHANE OAKLEY
LETTERS:
FIONA STEPHENSON

The Tale of the Widow

...AND SOME TO **MOCK** THOSE WITH A **HIGHER PURPOSE**.



SO YOU **SPECIALISE** IN WEDDINGS AND DEATHS, **FATHER GRIGORI**? WELL IT'S A PITY YOU DIDN'T MEET I SOONER...

'COULD HAVE FLUNG A DECENT AMOUNT OF GOLD YOUR WAY, CONSIDERING THE **NUMBER OF FUNERALS** I'VE CAUSED!



FASCINATING, MY CHILD. YOUR FAMILY MUST BE **MOST PROUD**. HOWEVER, I TAKE NO PAYMENT FOR MY **FUNERAL SERVICES**.

I ASK ONLY FOR A **MODEST COIN** WHEN REQUESTED TO PRESIDE OVER THE **HAPPIER OCCASION** OF A **MATRIMONIAL UNION**.




HO! WELL YOU BE IN LUCK THERE TOO, FATHER. FOR I GET THROUGH WIVES **FASTER** THAN A DWARF CAN DOWN A BARREL OF ALE! JUST MARRIED ME **SEVENTH** WENCH THIS PAST WINTER, AS IT HAPPENS.

ONLY SEVEN? I KNOW A TALE OF SOMEONE WHO MARRIED **AT LEAST TEN** TIMES BEFORE REACHING THEIR THIRTIETH YEAR.




PRAY TELL, FATHER. FOR I'D LIKE TO BUY SUCH A MAN A **TANKARD OF MEAD!**




THIS WAS
NO MAN... AND I DOUBT A
MERE TANKARD OF MEAD
WOULD IMPRESS
HER.

'HER PALETTE WAS SUCH THAT THE
SIMPLE LIFE OF A PIG FARMER'S
WIFE WOULD NEVER SATISFY.


'MAGDALENA MORGANA'S TASTES
WERE FAR MORE EXTRAVAGANT...



'SO PERHAPS IT WAS NO REAL
SURPRISE WHEN HER HUSBAND
'ACCIDENTALLY' CHOKED ON
A BOILED PIG'S TROTTER?




'BEING THE **SOLE** BENEFICIARY
OF HER LATE-HUSBAND'S
FORTUNESPURRED MAGDALENA
ON TO **GREATER** THINGS, FAR
AWAY FROM HER HUMBLE HOVEL...



'BUT MAGDALENA **NEVER** MARRIED
FOR LOVE. NO, FOR ONE SUCH AS
SHE **ONLY** LOVED **WEALTH** AND THE
TRAPPINGS THAT CAME WITH IT.

'...AND IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE SUCH AN
AVAILABLE BEAUTY CAUGHT THE EYES OF
MANY A WEALTHY BRETTONIAN SUITOR.



'AND, INDEED, **GREAT WEALTH**
SHOWERED MAGDALENA EACH
TIME ONE OF HER MANY HUSBANDS
BEFELL A **TRAGIC** ACCIDENT.'

'MAGDALENA WOULD SPIN THIS MACABRE SPIDER'S WEB OF MURDER AND TREACHERY IN DIFFERENT CITIES THROUGHOUT THE OLD WORLD.

...LEADING HER TO MORE OBSCURE, UNCHARTERED TERRITORIES WHERE HER REPUTATION DID NOT PRECEDE HER.



'HER HUNGER FOR ANOTHER PROSPEROUS AND NAIVE SUITOR BROUGHT MAGDALENA TO MORGDORF, A VILLAGE AT THE FOOT OF THE WORLD'S EDGE MOUNTAINS.



'AND IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR HER TO **ROOT** OUT THE MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR TO MARRY...



...AND THEN **ATTEND** HIS FUNERAL.

'I PRESIDED OVER BOTH THE WEDDING AND FUNERAL, AND WAS **MOST AMUSED** AT MAGDALENA'S IGNORANCE OF THE **LOCAL RITUALS**.



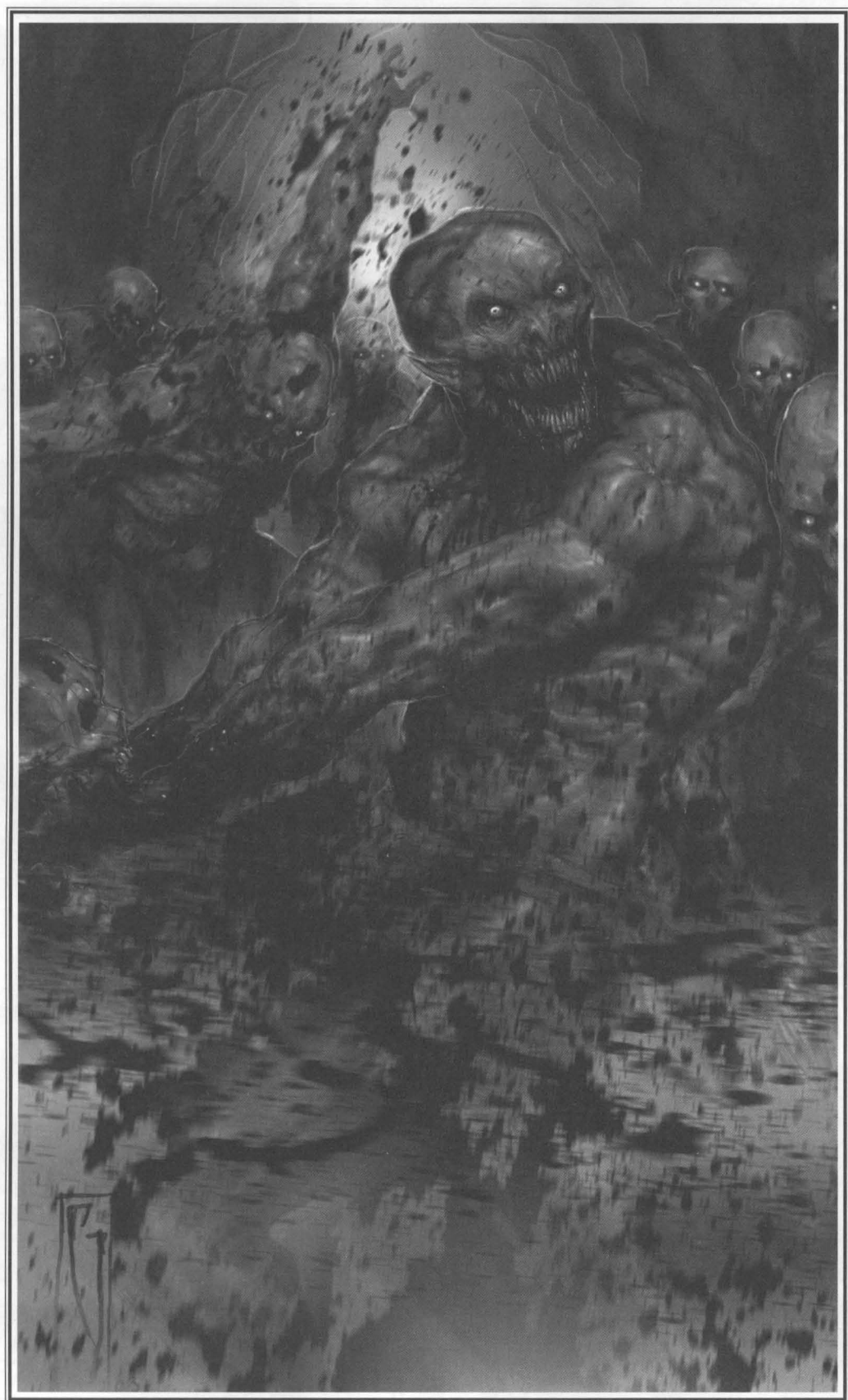
'IT WAS A MORGDORF TRADITION FOR THE WIFE TO **JOIN** HER HUSBAND ON HIS JOURNEY TO THE **AFTERLIFE**...'



...AND I IMAGINE BEING **BURIED ALIVE** - ALONG WITH HER TENTH HUSBAND - CAME AS QUITE A SHOCK TO MAGDALENA, THE **BLACK WIDOW BRIDE!**



THE END



MEAT WAGON

by C. L. Werner

THE DOOR OF the coaching inn was flung open with a loud bang, causing the denizens of the place to look up with varying degrees of alarm and surprise. The figure framed momentarily in the doorway was a brutish one, a head below average height but nearly twice as broad as most men. A leather hat with a wide brim was scrunched about his head, covering the blonde fuzz that clung to his skull. The brute's face was full and meaty, a bulbous nose crushed in some long-ago brawl looming above an expansive mouth filled with black teeth. In one gloved fist, the man held a coiled whip; the other gripped the edge of the door.

'Coach be leavin' soon,' the harsh voice of the wagoner grunted. 'Suggest you lot get yerselves organised.' With no further word, the hulking drover turned, stomping back out the door and slamming it closed as he left.

'Wretched villain,' muttered one of the seated patrons of the inn's bar-room. He was a middle-aged man, his body on the downward spiral towards obesity. His raiment was rich, more of his fingers burdened with bejeweled rings than without. 'Why I should suffer such disrespect from that creature...'

'Because, like the rest of us, you want to be in Nuln, and you want to be there quickly,' responded the man seated to the table just to the left of the complaining merchant. He was a tall, young, thin man, his striped breeches and double-breasted tunic as refined as the clothes of the merchant, though more restrained in their opulence. The bearded man with the long, gaunt face flipped over two of the small bone cards set upon the table, smiling as he saw the faces of the cards revealed.

'And why are you in such a hurry, might I ask, Feldherrn?' the fat-faced merchant grumbled. 'Surely there are pockets you have not yet picked in Stirland?'

Feldherrn didn't look up, continuing to turn over cards arrayed on the table before him, matching them into pairs and sets. 'I don't hold a knife to anyone's throat. If a man loses the contents of his purse in my company, it is by his own carelessness. But I am sure that taking the silver of those drunkards who crawl into the bottles of vodka you caravan down from Kislev is a much more noble vocation, Steinmetz.' The gambler looked back at the merchant, then turned his gaze to the person seated beside the fat man. Steinmetz's sullen glower at the gambler's words turned into an open scowl as he noted the direction of his antagonist's gaze.

The woman seated beside Steinmetz was pretty, young and frail in build. Her skin displayed the pallor of the north country, the hue of Ostland and the Kislev frontier where the rays of the sun were weak and the hours of night were long. A flush of red coloured her face as the young girl noted the gambler's attention. She smiled slightly, but the smile was quickly banished as Steinmetz gripped her forearm, his chubby fingers pinching her skin.

'Ravna,' the merchant called, his tone sharp. A towering, broad-shouldered man rose from a stool set against the back wall of the room. Unlike the other occupants of the room, this man wore armour, steel back and breast plates encasing his torso and similar ones upon his legs and upper arms. The bodyguard marched toward Steinmetz, one callused hand resting easily on the pommel of the longsword sheathed at his side. Without rising from his own seat, Steinmetz pulled the girl to her feet as the Ravna came near. 'Escort Lydia to the coach,' Steinmetz ordered. 'We are to be leaving soon.' With a dismissive flick of his hand, the merchant turned his smirking face back toward Feldherrn. The gambler gave Steinmetz a look that suggested indigestion.

'Indeed, we should all be boarding that travelling termite circus,' rumbled the deep voice of the person seated at the table

beside that of Feldherrn. The speaker was a dwarf, just under five feet in height, but broader of shoulder than most full grown men. A long, flowing black beard engulfed his face, only a bulbous nose and a pair of stony grey eyes emerging from the mass of hair. The dwarf tipped the clay stein he had been drinking from, draining the remaining two-thirds of the tankard in a single swallow. With a belch of satisfaction, the dwarf slammed the stein down and returned the rounded steel cap of his helmet to his head.

'Revolting,' complained a voice both rich and husky. It belonged to a woman seated alone, nearer the door. Tall, her features even, too devoid of warmth and softness to properly be termed beautiful, the woman wore a travelling dress of rich green fabric, her gloves and boots trimmed with white ermine. Like the departed bodyguard, she wore a slender bladed sword at her side, but unlike the weapon of Ravna, the woman's sword bore a gilded hilt and there were gems set into the pommel. The woman stared at the dwarf for a moment, then wrinkled her nose in distaste, putting such effort into the grimace that it set her chestnut-hued tresses bouncing about her face.

'I must agree with you, Baroness von Raeder,' Steinmetz's thick tones rolled from the fat man's mouth. 'Quite a disagreeable sight. To travel in the company of such crude creatures is more of a trial even than that loutish coachman. Why we must tolerate their kind in our lands...' The merchant cast a snide, condescending look at the dwarf. 'They should all crawl back into their burrows in the mountains and stop pretending that they are men.' The dwarf glared back. Clenching his fists until the knuckles began to whiten.

'Hardly an enlightened statement,' Feldherrn commented, still intent upon his cards. 'When we get to Nuln you might have a look at the walls, or perhaps the sewers. They have stood for centuries, and are as sturdy today as when they were first laid down by Fergrim's ancestors.' The gambler looked up as he finished his speech. Fergrim Ironsharp nodded his head slightly in the gambler's direction.

'The walls and sewers are built,' Steinmetz grumbled. 'We don't need their kind anymore.'

'I understood that Herr Ironsharp was to be an instructor at the engineering school?' the Baroness von Raeder commented.

'That is so,' Fergrim said, turning to face the Baroness. 'By invitation of your master engineers.' The dwarf smiled at the noblewoman. 'I apologise if I offended you, my lady.' The dwarf bowed at the waist and clicked his heels together in the fashion of young officers of the Reiksguard presenting themselves in social situations. The Baroness smiled back at the dwarf engineer. Fergrim jabbed a finger over his shoulder to indicate Steinmetz. 'Don't mind him. He doesn't like my people because we prefer good wholesome beer that puts meat on a person, not the poisonous bear-piss he brings down from the north.' Bowing again, and with a last malicious look at the merchant, Fergrim left the room. Steinmetz mumbled several colourful oaths about the dwarf's tastes under his breath.

'We should be going as well,' Feldherrn declared, rising from his chair and gathering up his cards. 'Our coachmen look to be just the sort of villains who would leave us behind.' The gambler walked towards the door. As he walked near the noblewoman, he extended his arm. 'Shall we repair to your carriage, Baroness?' Her hand lightly resting on Feldherrn's arm, the noblewoman allowed the adventurer to escort her to the waiting coach.

Steinmetz grumbled a few more coloured expressions as they left, waiting a full minute before rising to his own feet and making his own way outside.

The coach stood just before the small roadside inn. It was a large, oak pannelled carriage with two massive stallions hitched to the yoke at its fore. Dark leather curtains enclosed the carriage itself, providing some insulation from the elements for the passengers within. The roof of the coach was laden down by the packs and luggage of the travellers, lashed into place by heavy ropes. A small iron seat had been folded out at the rear of the coach, a similarly tiny ladder allowing Fergrim to ascend to his position behind the carriage. The dwarf cast an appraising eye at several wooden boxes lashed atop the coach, each box bearing a

single dwarf rune burned onto its surface, his keen gaze looking for any hint that they had been disturbed. The other passengers were seated within the carriage itself, awaiting the arrival of the merchant, Steinmetz.

At the fore of the weathered, yet serviceable coach, a thin, spindly man sat upon the fur-lined bench within the driver's box. The man's features were somehow unpleasant, the cast of his face suggesting a furtive and calculating nature. Greasy locks of long dark hair streamed from beneath his feathered hat, disappearing into the collar of his heavy longcoat. The man's skin was dirty, his thin moustaches displaying traces of bread crumbs and dried soup, his clothing grey with dust and flakes of mud. Yet despite his squalid bearing, three shiny earrings, each a wide hoop of gold, tugged at the lobe of his left ear.

The sinister little coachman cast a sullen gaze at the door of the inn, then looked down from his seat to where the massive frame of his brutish partner stood beside the still open door of the carriage.

'How long does that swine think to keep us waiting?' the coachman's thin, weasely voice croaked, the words tinged by just the slightest hint of an accent. The coachman kept his voice low, so that the already embarked passengers would not hear his complaints.

'That prig be thinkin' ta be fashnably late,' the hulking wagoner grinned up at his partner, his paw clenching about the length of whip clasped in his hand.

'It is a real pleasure to have someone of his like among our custom, eh, Herr Ocker?' the coachman hissed, a sly light in his eye.

'Indeed it be, Herr Bersh,' the burly Ocker replied, smiling broadly as Steinmetz strolled casually from the inn, making it a point to display the lack of haste in his stride. 'Indeed it be.'



THE COACH WAS less than an hour out from the inn when there suddenly appeared a figure standing in the road

ahead. Bresh and Ocker slowed the coach down, trying to take in the cut of the man who seemed to be waiting for them. The road wardens did not patrol this particular path too frequently and it would not be the first time they would have found themselves forced to drive off a highwayman. But as they drew closer, and more details became apparent, the wagoners found themselves wishing it was a mere brigand awaiting them.

The lone man was dressed opulently: a scarlet shirt trimmed with gold thread, a long black cape trimmed with ermine. A tall, conical hat with a broad round rim rested atop his sharp-featured face. About his waist a dragonskin belt supported a pair of holstered pistols and a sheathed longsword. The man's face was thin, a slender moustache beneath his dagger-like nose, a slight tuft of grey beard upon his chin. The grey eyes of the man were focused intently upon the coachmen, silently commanding them to stop.

'Witch hunter!' swore Bresh, almost under his breath.

'Ride 'im down,' suggested Ocker in a low hiss. But even as the man made the suggestion, a second man appeared on the road. Unlike the witch hunter, he was dressed shabbily, his worn leather armour struggling to contain his powerful build. The other man was mounted, leading a second horse. But it was not these details that attracted Ocker's attention. It was the loaded crossbow in the second man's hands and the murderous twinkle in his eyes that suggested he would dearly love an excuse to use the weapon.

The coach slowed to a stop as Bresh reined in the horses. A muffled protest as to the stop rose from the carriage but the coachman ignored the complaint.

'How can we help you, templar?' Bresh called down in what he hoped was his most affable voice.

The witch hunter's cool eyes washed over the coachman for a moment. 'I have need of passage,' his sharp voice said. 'My horse has thrown a shoe.' Bresh and Ocker looked over to note the second animal being led by the mounted crossbowman. 'It is fortunate that you happened along.' The witch hunter strode towards the side of the coach.

'I would normally be most happy to aid a noble servant of mighty Sigmar...' Bresh began to say. In midsentence, the witch hunter opened the door of the carriage and began to climb in.

'I am very happy to hear it,' the witch hunter observed. 'It would be a much better realm if everyone observed their duties to Sigmar so well.' So saying, the man disappeared into the coach. Ocker began to climb from the box to protest in a more forcible fashion, but a second glance at the witch hunter's mounted companion convinced him to reconsider.

'You can continue now,' the witch hunter said, then withdrew his head back into the carriage. Bresh grumbled and flicked the reins, commanding the horses to gallop forward. The witch hunter's companion fell in behind the coach, still leading the other animal.

'Well, that fixes things,' snarled Bresh in a low voice.

'Khaine take me if'n it do,' swore Ocker. 'That fat pig got more on 'im then we seen sin' Miththerbst! An that dwarf is always fuss'n bout that cargo uv 'is.' The Ostlander twisted his face into a greedy smile. 'I figer that 'll turn morn' a few groats.'

'But the witch hunter...' protested Bresh.

'Yer friends 'll deal wiv 'im,' Ocker stated. 'Like dey always done before.'

Within the carriage, the witch hunter took a seat, forcing Baroness von Raeder to shift her position closer toward the gambler Feldherrn. The templar removed his hat and smiled thinly at his fellow passengers.

'My name is Mathias Thulmann,' he said. 'Ordned witch hunter in the service of the most high Temple of Sigmar.' The introduction did little to warm the cool atmosphere within the carriage. Thulmann's next words made the carriage positively icy. 'We have a long ride ahead of us. Perhaps we might pass the time by getting to know each other. Now tell me: who are you, where do you come from and what are you doing?'



IT WAS LATE in the day when the coach emerged from the embrace of the ominous sprawl of the forest. Ahead of the travellers lay a small hollow of rolling land. Once there might have been lush fields and pastures claiming the open ground, but now it was given over to wild grass and squat thorny bushes. Here and there the remains of a stone wall or a lone chimney jutted up from the grass, the only forlorn evidence that this place had once known the hand of man.

As the coach made its way along a narrow, barely visible path that wound its way through the rolling heights and deep depressions in the hollow, a dark cluster of buildings slowly became visible. For a space, the settlement would disappear from view as the wagon's path took it into some low indentation in the valley floor or it rounded some small hillock. But always it became visible once more, visible but indistinct, like a mirage flickering across the horizon. Within the carriage each passenger quietly wondered what breed of men would mark out such a lonely and isolated a spot for their habitation.

Then the coach rounded one final hill and, as if some conjurer had suddenly torn away one last obscuring veil, the town loomed before them. A mass of roofs were visible, rising above a clustered mass of buildings, strewn about like litter. The roofs were in ill repair, timbers sticking through long rotten thatching like broken bones thrust through skin. The empty bell tower of a shrine rose above all else, all the more wretched for its diminished sanctity.

A timber gate stood before the cluster of buildings, the doors open, their panels sagging in their crude iron frames, warped by the forces of wind and rain. A small rectangle of wood dangled from a rusting chain, barely discernible letters burnt into the sign.

'Mureiste? What manner of name is that?' wondered the Baroness as she read the faded letters.

'Sounds like some foreign doggerel,' snorted Steinmetz, grimacing as though from a foul odour.

'It is Sylvanian,' stated the witch hunter, his voice low, filled with suspicion.

'Sylvanian?' gasped Lydia, her eyes going wide with sudden alarm, a delicate hand clutching at her throat. Her skin paled to an even more marble-like hue as the innumerable nightmare tales of horror originating from the blighted former province wormed their way at once to the forefront of her mind. Beside her, the bloated fingers of Steinmetz fumbled to form a crude mark of Sigmar.

'But why in the name of Ranald would we be anywhere near Sylvania?' asked Feldherrn, his own face becoming suspicious.

'Indeed,' observed Thulmann. 'It is a curious road that leads to Nuln in the south-west by taking its travellers north-east.'

The coach continued on into the town. The buildings, seen close up, were indeed as dilapidated as they seemed from afar. Many of the mudbrick hovels had all but collapsed, great holes pitting their walls, thatch roofs fallen in, doors lying amid weeds and brambles. The wooden structures leaned like drunken men, looking as if they might topple onto their sides at any instant. And yet, as ramshackle as they were, to the witch hunter's keen gaze, alarming incongruities presented themselves. Some of the buildings bore marks of crude unskilled repair, dried mud pushed into holes, fresh grass and branches thrown upon a thatched roof. Decayed and forsaken the town of Mureiste might be, but there were signs that it was not abandoned.

The coach came to a stop in what once must have been the town square of Mureiste. At its centre, the remains of a once heroic statue stood upon a weed choked stone pillar. The dreary facades of shops and a two-storied guild-hall considered the decayed champion with dark, gaping windows. One side of the square was dominated by a temple, the bronze hammer icon drooping from its steeple proclaiming it as having once been devoted to Sigmar. Alone among the rotting structures of Mureiste, the temple was constructed from stone, great granite blocks that must have been transported at great expense through forest and hollow.

Bresh shared a knowing look with Ocker, then slid back the small wooden window at the rear of the driver's box to speak to the passengers within the carriage.

'Just a short rest stop,' the coachman assured his passengers. 'This is the last fresh water for some distance. We shall see to the horses, then we'll be on our way again.'

His reassuring smile faded as he saw the barrel of Thulmann's pistol rise from the compartment and point at his face.

'If either of you scoundrels makes a move to drop from that box,' Thulmann's voice hissed, 'you will have the distinctly unpleasant experience of having your brains blown out of the back of your skull.'

Bresh froze under the witch hunter's threat, the only motion in his entire frame limited to a pleading sidewise glance at his partner. Ocker slowly pulled the wide-mouthed musket from its place at the side of the bench, well beyond the limited vision of those within the carriage.

'I shouldn't do that,' snarled a harsh voice from beside the coach. Ocker's hand froze against the frame of the firearm. He looked over at the mounted ruffian who had accompanied the witch hunter. A heavy crossbow was held in Streng's hands, the bolt aimed at the Ostlander's midsection. 'Breathe in a fashion I dislike and I'll split your belly.'

From his position at the back of the coach, Fergrim Ironsharp stood upon the metal seat, trying to peer over the top of the carriage to see what was unfolding before him. The dwarf craned his neck one way then another trying to see past the barrier of boxes and crates. Then he whipped his neck around, staring at the decayed buildings around the coach. His sharp eyes, excelling at piercing the dark like all of his tunnel dwelling kind, discerned motion within the blackened doorway of an old tanner's shop. Fergrim noticed more motion in the dark recess of an alley, seeing two indistinct figures lurking within the mouth of the shadowy lane. The dwarf licked his suddenly dry mouth. There was something disturbing about those shapes, something unnatural.

'I don't think we're alone,' Fergrim declared, but his words did not reach down into the compartment below. The dwarf continued to watch as the shadowy figures began to multiply. Again he muttered an unheard warning.

Suddenly, from the darkness of a dozen doorways, from the shadows filling alley and lane, horrible shapes loped into the fading light. Each was lean, pale skin stretched tight over lanky limbs and wasted bellies, tattered mockeries of garments draped about loins or cast over shoulders. Long claws tipped each of the creatures' hands, talons more suited to a vulture than anything resembling a man. The faces of each were drawn, the heads bald, long noses perched above wide, fanged mouths. Beady red eyes glared from the pits of each face, burning with an overwhelming hunger. With a low moan-like howl, the loathsome throng began to sprint toward the coach.

'Hashut's bald beard!' screamed Fergrim, ripping his throwing axe from his belt, knuckles whitening over the haft of the blade. This time the dwarf's shout could not fail to be heard and the leather curtains were pushed aside, the occupants of the coach screaming their own cries of horror as they saw the fiendish host emptying from the ruinous streets of Mureiste.

At the front of the coach, Streng looked away from Ocker, the witch hunter's henchman staring in disbelief as the twisted inhabitants of Mureiste howled and wailed in unholy hunger. A slight movement from the driver's box brought Streng whipping around and he fired the bolt from his crossbow just as Ocker was levelling the musket towards him and drawing back the hammer. The bolt smashed into the villain's belly and the Ostlander gave vent to a loud scream of agony. He fell from the driver's box, landing partially underneath the coach. As Ocker's body hit the ground, the musket still held in his hands was discharged by the violent impact with the ground.

The thunderous boom of the firearm caused the stallions to spring into a terrified gallop. The animals sprinted forward, pulling the carriage after them. The rear wheels of the coach passed over the legs of Ocker, and a fresh scream rang from the wagoner's lungs as the bones were pulverised under the tremendous weight. At the rear of the coach, Fergrim was jostled, nearly falling from his seat. The axe fell from the dwarf's hands as his stubby fingers assumed a death-grip on the frame of the roof. Fergrim risked a look over his

shoulder, blanching as he saw the first twisted creatures reaching towards him, their claws pawing at the empty air in a desperate effort to rend his flesh.

The speed of the terrified horses soon outdistanced the creatures that had converged upon the rear of the coach. But other twisted monstrosities gathered in the path of the carriage. Atop the driver's box, Bresh was vainly attempting to get some measure of control over his animals. The stallions plowed into the first of the degenerate things, crushing three of them beneath their hooves. Another of the monsters sprang at the wagon, clinging to the panels like a great spider. The beast's twisted face peered in through the window, drool dangling from its jaws. Lydia screamed as the hideous thing's eyes focused upon her.

The Baroness was not so distressed, leaning back in her seat and smashing her boot into the grinning monstrosity's face. The malformed thing howled anew as the violence of the woman's kick caused it to lose its grip on the coach and its body was crushed under the wheels of the coach.

Bresh was trying to steer the coach away, out of the blighted village. Everything had gone wrong this time, they should never have come here. He should never have let Ocker talk him into bringing the coach here after they had picked up the witch hunter. As he turned the wagon still once more, he saw yet another lane choked with thin, hungry shapes. Bresh cursed once more, slipping into the seldom used words of his native tongue. They should never have come here before dark. He cursed Ocker once more, and as if summoned up by his words, the coachman saw a pile of bones and blood lying upon the ground, a pile of bones and blood wearing the Ostlander's face. The denizens of Mureiste were indeed hungry this night.

'Make for the temple,' a harsh voice snarled through the window at the back of the box. 'If you don't, we're all dead!' Bresh swore once again, then directed the horses toward the looming stone structure. The stallions were breathing hard now, bleeding from dozens of cuts, filthy black wounds caused by the claws of the deformed monsters. Bresh knew that they would not last much longer. Cracking the whip

mercilessly, he drove the failing animals onward, toward the shrine. The animals almost made it.

One of the lead horses failed a dozen yards from the temple, dropping instantly as its heart was stilled by the poison working through its veins. The momentum of the coach and the sudden violent stop caused it to crash onto its side, snapping the yoke, freeing the remaining stallion to drag its dead comrade a few dozen paces before it too staggered and fell. As the coach crashed, a tiny figure was thrown upwards, rocketing ahead of the wagon and crashing into the short flight of steps that led to the rickety wooden doors. The wagon itself continued onward, plowing across the ground, its momentum pushing it forward. Bresh, with an almost inhuman agility, had leaped atop the carriage as it turned over, clutching to the now topmost side, riding the destroyed coach like a child upon a sled.

Fergim Ironsharp rolled onto his back, groaning loudly, trying to force the sparks to stop dancing before his eyes. As his vision cleared, the dwarf muttered another curse, watching as the mammoth shape of the coach slid towards him. He braced himself for the crushing impact, throwing his forearms behind his face. After a moment, he peered through his arms. A great cloud of dust was billowing all about him, and in the centre of the dust cloud, he could see the shape of the coach, ground to a halt so near to him, that the dwarf could reach out and touch the splintered remains of the driver's box.



ATOP THE COACH, Bresh began to laugh, overwhelmed to have survived the ordeal. The coachman lifted himself, began to slide down to the ground, when a hand closed about his ankle, causing his descent to turn into a fall. The coachman groaned, grasping at his twisted foot. As he turned his eyes upward, he saw the door of the carriage open and the dishevelled form of the witch hunter pull himself from the wreckage. His pistol was gone, but a longsword was gripped purposefully in his hands. Thulmann glared down at the injured Bresh, murder in his eyes.

'Hurry up, Mathias!' shouted a voice from the doorway of the temple. Streng stood at the top of the steps, his crossbow gripped in his hands. 'They've nearly finished fighting over the horses. They'll be on us next!'

Mathias Thulmann dropped to the ground, landing beside Bresh. 'I have half a mind to leave you for the ghouls,' his harsh tones hissed. The witch hunter gripped the front of the coachman's tunic, pulling him painfully to his feet. 'But there is a rope waiting for you,' Thulmann snarled. 'Scum such as you is for hanging.' The witch hunter pushed Bresh ahead of him, following after the coachman's hobbling steps.

Behind them, other figures were slowly, painfully, emerging from the wreckage. First the Baroness, lifted from below by powerful hands. The woman perched atop the coach for a moment, then slid down to the ground, a glance at the nearness of the ghouls lending haste to her feet. Even as the next occupant of the carriage pulled himself through the door, the noblewoman was already sprinting into the temple, skirts lifted about her knees.

By some miracle of fate, none of the occupants of the carriage appeared to have sustained more than bruises. In short order, the other passengers were free of the wreck, the bulky merchant Steinmetz coming last of all, pulled from the compartment by his burly bodyguard, Ravna. The fat-faced vodka seller froze as he saw the lean, hungry figures rising from their dinner of horseflesh. Faces crimson with gore turned in his direction. For a moment, man and ghoul stared at one another in silence. Then the moment passed. The ghoul's gory mouth dropped open, a howl escaping its wasted frame. As though it were a call to arms, the sound brought dozens of the creatures to their feet. Soon a mob of the emaciated fiends was sprinting toward the overturned coach.

'Sigmar's holy hammer,' Steinmetz stammered as his bowels emptied. Ravna tugged at his employer's arm, trying to get him to move. But the obese man was frozen to the spot, eyes fixed on the quickly advancing horde. Finally, the bodyguard pushed Steinmetz from the top of the wreck. The bulky merchant struck the ground with his shoulder, grunting with pain. He looked about him, as if the impact had snapped him back to reality. A girlish wail rose from his

lungs and, with a speed which seemed impossible for a man of his decadent build, he ran for the open doors of the temple.

Ravna was right behind the fat man, leaping down from his perch even as the obese man struck earth. The mercenary saw Fergrim sitting at the base of the steps, the dwarf still trying to shake some sense back into his skull after his flight from the back of the coach. Ravna cast a beefy arm about Fergrim's waist, lifting the heavy dwarf from the ground. The bodyguard cast a glance over his shoulder, eyes going wide with horror as he saw a gaunt shape scabbling over the coach.

'A poor place to gather your thoughts, master engineer,' the mercenary commented, leaping across the steps two at a time in his haste to reach the sanctuary of the temple. A pair of ghouls raced after him, snarling and snapping like feral dogs. As Ravna and his heavy burden reached the top of the steps, one of the ghouls let out a cry of pain, spinning about and crashing back down the stairs, a crossbow bolt lodged in its ribs. The other ghoul clawed at the bodyguard with its talons, ropes of gory drool dangling from its jaws. The claws scraped across Ravna's backplate, scratching the metal but failing to harm the man within. The ghoul was not so fortunate, as a thin sword blade pierced its side. Ravna raced past Feldherrn as the gambler freed his blade from the dying ghoul. Feldherrn cast a single look at the dozen or so other monsters racing toward the steps and hurried after the mercenary.

The wooden doors slammed shut behind Feldherrn, almost in the very face of the foremost of the ghouls. Streng and Baroness von Rader put their full weight into the effort of holding the doors shut. Feldherrn quickly sheathed his own sword and pounced upon the heavy bronze-bound doors just as they began to inch inward. Ravna set Fergrim down on one of the pews that littered the ramshackle chamber of worship. The dwarf snorted as he was set down. The mercenary looked over at the pale figure of Lydia.

'See if you can do anything for him,' Ravna snapped at the girl, racing toward the doors to help hold them against the hungry mob of cannibals outside. He did not spare a second glance at Steinmetz, cowering behind an old podium, muttering

a long overdue prayer for absolution of his many moral failings.

The doors threatened to open once again as the weight and frenzy of the ghouls nearly overcame the strength of the four people desperately trying to keep the barrier closed.

'You know, I once escaped from the Reiksfang prison,' Feldherrn said, his voice loud to be heard over the clamour of the ghouls. 'Suddenly having my head separated from my shoulders by Judge Valkberg's ogre doesn't seem such a bad way to go.'

Streng adjusted his feet to lend more strength to his upper body even as he chuckled at the gambler's gallows humour. As the professional torturer cast his eyes toward the gambler, he saw a figure in scarlet and black walking toward them from the inner reaches of the hall.

'Lend a hand, Mathias,' the henchman grunted. For reply, the witch hunter drew his remaining pistol. Thulmann advanced upon the embattled doorway. Sighting a hole in the wood, he stuck the barrel of the pistol to it, pulling the trigger. A loud howl of pain sounded from beyond the door and the pressure against the portal faded away almost at once. The witch hunter favoured the four people holding the door with a smile and calmly holstered the smoking weapon.

'That should keep them back for a little while, but I suggest you break up a few of these pews and reinforce that door. When the sun fully sets, I think we can expect them to try again,' Thulmann turned about, his black cape swirling about him. 'Sigmar will understand the need. You'll find some nails in the cleric's cell. There is also a window behind the altar and a side door next to the storeroom. I suggest you barricade those as well before our friends outside remember them.' The witch hunter began to stalk away.

'And just what are you going to be doing?' demanded the Baroness.

'Interrogating my prisoner,' Thulmann replied without turning around.



BRESH WAS TIED hand and foot, lying upon the floor of the old priest's cell at the back of the temple. Thulmann had taken the leather thongs from the saddlebags of Streng's horse, both the henchman's and the witch hunter's animals having been brought into the temple along with the thuggish hireling.

The coachman was struggling against his bonds, trying to worm his wrists free when he heard the dreaded stomp of the witch hunter's boots. Bresh looked up from the floor, flinching slightly as he saw Thulmann's scowling face.

'Not one of your better days, I imagine,' the witch hunter sneered. He made an elaborate show of removing a number of steel needles from a pouch on his belt, then leaned down toward the terrified man. Thulmann favoured the villain with a cruel smile. 'Have you ever heard the old proverb that evil will always reveal itself?' Bresh was sweating now, the salty liquid causing dirt to slip from his face. 'It is only by chance that we happened upon your nasty little racket. My friend and I were trying to find a petty noble whose misdeeds warranted the attention of the Temple. We thought we might be able to pick up his trail again if we followed the stage route he used to escape Carlsbruck.'

Thulmann leaned forward, stabbing one of the needles into the coachman's hand. Bresh snarled in pain, a litany of curses slipping from his lips. The witch hunter nodded his head as the foreign vulgarities continued to stream from the rogue's mouth.

'I thought so,' Thulmann mused. 'You had a certain look about you beneath that grime. I thought at first you might be a Sylvanian under all that filth. Thank you for correcting me.' The witch hunter began to replace the needles into their pouch. 'I was wondering how you two cut-throats managed your vile scheme. The good citizens of Mureiste make a meal of your passengers, and you two divy up their valuables. That is the arrangement, is it not, swine?' Thulmann smashed the toe of his boot into the trussed thief's side.

'You'll never leave this place alive!' swore Bresh, spitting at Thulmann. The witch hunter wiped the spittle from the front of his scarlet and gold shirt, then kicked his captive again.

'You were nervous about me being along for the ride,' Thulmann continued. 'You rushed things. We were supposed to arrive later, after the sun had set, after your other partner was around to keep the ghouls under control.'

'The Master will kill you, witchfinder!'

Thulmann smiled back at Bresh. 'We'll see about that. This was a temple of Sigmar, and unless someone had a chance to desanctify it, it is still holy ground. That gives me an edge over your "master", Strigany.'

Bresh rolled onto his back, sneering at his captor. 'Your Sigmar won't help you! The Master will drain your body and toss the husk to the ghouls!'

Thulmann turned on his heel, striding back into the chamber of worship. 'Keep a happy thought, Strigany. It will make hanging you all the more satisfying.'

Thulmann returned to the main room of the temple. Most of the pews, he found, had been broken apart. He watched for a moment as the dwarf, apparently recovered from his concussion, carted a huge armful of wood towards the front door where the Baroness von Raeder and the gambler Feldherrn were nailing planks in place, reinforcing the portal against a second attack. He could hear more banging coming from the side door within the small storeroom located behind the cleric's cell. Behind him, he could see Streng forcing the remains of a bench against the iron frame of the single window behind the altar. The witch hunter called out to his minion. Streng hastily finished nailing the bench into place and leapt down from the altar which he had been using as a bench.

'I'd prefer a dozen of Morr's Black Guard and maybe a cannon or two,' the warrior said, 'but with a little luck, we might be able to keep them out.'

'I'm afraid that your luck has run out,' the witch hunter responded. Then his eyes caught the bloated shape of Steinmetz seated on an undamaged pew near the column where the horses had been tethered.

'Our merchant friend doesn't help?' Thulmann asked, eyebrows arching.

'I would have forced the issue, but his bodyguard said it was just as well,' Streng answered. 'He said that he'd not trust a nail

driven by that pampered trash. He took the fancy girl to help him secure the storeroom door.' Suddenly the import of something the witch hunter had said sank in. Streng gripped his employer's arm. 'Why do you say our luck is done?'

Thulmann fixed his gaze on his henchman. 'Because unless I am much mistaken, in a few moments we are going to be entertaining a vampire.'



OUTSIDE THE OLD temple, the ghouls crowded about the old market square. Hungry eyes stared at the building, drool dribbling from gaping mouths. Several of the twisted deformed men stared at the fast fading sun, their eyes gleaming with expectation. On the steps of the temple, a few ghoul corpses lay where they had fallen. They too would become provender for the hideous denizens of the town, but only after they had been left for a time, after the rot had been allowed to sink into their tainted flesh.

It had been a strange break in the routine when the wagon had arrived early, causing the denizens of Murieste no end of confusion. They had watched and waited. But when it appeared that something was wrong, that perhaps the coach would leave, even the most restrained of their number had panicked and surged forward to claim their portion of the meat. Now, with the travellers trapped within the old shrine, the monsters had settled down to await the night. The intruders might have their loud magic which had exploded the face of one who had been at the front of the pack, but the people of Murieste were not without their own sorcerous resources.

As the long shadows engulfed the town, filling each lane and alleyway, darkness truly fell upon Murieste. The sound of leathern wings beating upon the thin night winds descended from above to thrill the eager ears of the ghouls. The monsters looked skyward with an almost religious fervour, pawing at the earth with their claws and uttering a sound that was not the howl of a jackal nor the chanting of a monk, but something kindred to both.

A shape detached itself from the night, hovering and soaring above the malformed mob. A black shadow swept across the square, circling it twice before coming to land at the base of the old hero's statue. It was a massive, monstrous bat, gigantic fangs jutting from its hideous face like the incisors of a sabre-toothed lion of far away Norsca.

As the creature settled to earth, it wrapped its leathery wings about itself, like a rich burgomaster burrowing into his cloak to keep warm. The talons of the bat slowly grew into muscular legs as it came to stand before the statue. The change that had begun with the legs continued up the animal's body, fur retreating back into pale, lifeless skin, sleek pinions collapsing into powerful arms bulging with muscle and sinew. The face of the bat slowly twisted and rearranged itself into a leering, diabolic countenance. A great gash of a mouth sporting sharp, over-sized teeth dominated a hairless, deformed head. The eyes of the monster, like two scabby pools of blackened blood, stared at the ghoulish throng, fixing the miserable creatures with a pitiless gaze.

At an unspoken word of command, one of the ghouls scuttled forward, cringing before the vampire. The undead beast towered over the comparatively frail cannibal, and reached downward with a clawed hand. The sword-sized talons of the vampire curled about the ghoul's chin, forcing the wretch to meet that merciless stare. The vampire locked its eyes upon those of the ghoul, letting its vision linger, draining the ghoul's memories of the arrival of the coach and all that had transpired after.

The vampire hissed in wrath, pulling its hand away from the ghoul's chin and swiping at the creature's head with its other claw in what looked to be a single impossibly swift motion. The head of the ghoul flew across the square, bouncing from the side of the old guild-hall. The vampire pulled the headless corpse to it, fixing its massive jaw over the spurting stump of the corpse-eater's neck. The vampire sucked the vile-tasting liquid noisily and greedily. It did not pay any notice to the yelps and howls of the ghouls cringing all about the vampire, their pleas for forgiveness and reaffirmations of their devotion.

The vampire let the drained cadaver fall, licking the blood that had coated its chin with a long lupine tongue. It was an abominable feeding, one the vampire was loathe to subject itself to, but it had reason to suspect it would need all the strength it could muster, even such strength as the thin, corrupt blood of a ghoul might bestow. It had seen with the eyes of the slain ghoul the passengers of the coach as they fled into the temple, and the cast of one of them troubled the undead coffin worm greatly. It could recall those long ago years when the great Vampire Counts waged their wars, and the terrible scouring of tomb and grave that had followed when the mortals were again able to hold dominion over Sylvania. It had been a long time since it had cause to fear the stakes of vampire slayers. The corpse-thing cast a wrathful look at the temple. It had no desire to confront such a man in the house of its enemy.

It would just have to send the ghouls in to fetch him out. It was little different than sending hounds to flush a hare from a stand of thorn bushes. The dogs might be injured, but the game would fill the belly just the same.



MATHIAS THULMANN stood before the old altar, facing the motley collection of people who had escaped from the sinister plot of the coachmen. The witch hunter studied each of his companions, trying to weigh his impressions of them with what he had learned of them from the idle chatter during the ride to Murieste. They were not the sort of people he would have chosen to stand with. Of them all, he was confident only in Streng to stand his ground, only because the henchman knew how useless it would be to run. The dwarf was another dependable quantity, but he was still somewhat disoriented from his fall. Thulmann felt that the engineer could also be trusted not to break, but how effective a defence he would be able to muster was a question he was much more uncertain of.

Of the others, the witch hunter was more dubious. The Baroness von Raeder seemed a very strong-willed and confident woman, but there was something about her which he did not entirely trust. She seemed a bit too strong-willed, a bit too independent. Such tendencies had led to her being sent away by her husband, and Thulmann wondered where such tendencies might yet lead her.

Feldherrn was a professional gambler, little more than a common thief. Thulmann was not about to place any great store in the courage of a thief. The mercenary, Ravna, was much the same, a man who owed more loyalty to gold than anything else, his loyalty went to the man who promised him further payment, even such a man as Steinmetz, whom the mercenary clearly held in contempt. It was a hold on the man, but Thulmann knew that such a tie might easily be severed when the master of Murieste came for them. A man will risk his life for gold, but he won't give it.

Steinmetz himself was worthless. Thulmann had struck the merchant, trying to knock some courage into the man, but he still slobbered over himself in fear. The merchant's companion was slightly less hysterical, but she was obviously no fighter. In the coming conflict, neither of them could be relied upon to do anything except distract some of the ghouls should the creatures force their way in.

'I've told you all what we are likely to face,' the witch hunter said. Streng had withdrawn several bulbs of garlic from one of the saddlebags and the girl, Lydia, had helped fashion them into makeshift necklaces. Sometimes garlic was useful in his work. The animal familiars of some witches were unnaturally repulsed by them, giving themselves away. Thulmann also knew that common folklore held that vampires detested it as well, and would be kept at bay by the fragrance. Coming from the mouth of a Templar of Sigmar, Thulmann hoped the others would accept the superstition and take heart from their imaginary protection.

'We must hold our ground until dawn, there is no other way out of this. This place is a temple of our mighty Lord Sigmar, bane of the undead, crippler of Black Nagash. The vampire will not dare enter here, for his

powers will be weak. But he will send his slaves, and we must defy them. It is not merely our lives which are at risk, but our very souls.' Thulmann doubted that last part. Even if the ghouls did present one of them to their master in anything resembling life, he knew they would strip to the bone whatever the Strigoi left. No chance of coming back from the grave when it is in the bellies of a three score or so ghouls.

Mathias Thulmann pointed a gloved hand at Fergrim Ironsharp and Ravna. 'You two will guard the side door. They didn't attack from that quarter before, but they are better organised now, even if they do not think to exploit it, the vampire probably will.' The dwarf and the bodyguard hastened to their positions, the latter armed with his sword, the dwarf making do with a wood-axe taken from Streng's saddle bags. The witch hunter considered the Baroness for a moment, then turned and pointed at the blocked window. 'Keep a guard on the window. It is unlikely that they will try that way, but be on guard just the same. Any fingers try to pull at those boards, cut them off with your dagger. Above all, cry out. Let us know.' The Baroness stalked past the witch hunter, dagger in her hand.

'I guess that leaves you and me to join your friend at the front door,' sighed Feldherrn.

Thulmann let his eyes pass over Steinmetz and Lydia, then stared at Feldherrn. 'Still think Ranald's luck is with you?' he asked.

'I never put much stock in luck,' Feldherrn replied, walking toward the portal. 'A good gambler finds other ways to prosper.'

The witch hunter joined Streng and Feldherrn at the door. As he stood beside Streng, the man removed his eye from the small knothole Thulmann had fired his pistol through. The henchman was visibly upset, his face ashen. Streng gestured for him to have a look for himself.

Thulmann at once saw what had upset his man. Standing before the old statue was a towering monstrosity, a beast that resembled some ghastly daemon of the Blood God more than it did anything that might once have been numbered amongst men. As he watched, the vampire drew back one of its powerful arms, pointing at

the temple with a finger that was tipped by a long black talon. The vampire said something, but the witch hunter did not need to understand the words to understand its meaning. With a low howl, the ghouls mustered in the square leapt to their feet and scrambled toward the temple.

'Get ready!' Thulmann yelled. 'Here they come!'



THE GHOULS STRUCK the temple doors as a frenzied mass of hungry meat. The heavy portal shook under the impact as if a battering ram had been brought against it. The defenders found themselves forced to put their shoulders against the doors as several of the boards were ripped from the frame by the concentrated force. The rabid howls and snarls of the creatures sounded from the other side of the door, claws digging splinters from the door, eyes peering in. The defenders found themselves hard pressed to keep the door from sagging inward, despite the reinforcement. Thulmann managed to fumble his reloaded pistol from its holster. The witch hunter pressed the weapon against the same knothole. He pressed the trigger and once again there was a howl of pain.

'At least they are consistent,' he commented, holstering the weapon and redoubling his efforts to hold the door.

Streng cursed aloud as a clawed hand wriggled its way through a weakness in the rotten wood. Splinters rained onto his hair as the ghoulish limb scabbled about in the opening. Filthy black venom trickled from the ghouls' claws. The henchman snarled, bringing his hunting knife against the pale flesh. The ghoul outside screamed as Streng sawed at its wrist. The hand twisted and turned in the hole, but try as it might, it could not be withdrawn. Streng kept at his grisly labour, finally cutting the extremity from the ghoul's arm. The hand flopped to the floor and a piteous wailing could be heard as the maimed creature retreated. No sooner had the first been injured, than another clawed hand was groping through the opening.

'As you said, Mathias, at least they are consistent,' grinned Streng, reaching toward the second hand with his knife.



THE SOUNDS OF the semi-human monsters battering at the doors of the temple sounded in Steinmetz's ears like the booming of cannon. The merchant tried to curl his fat body into a ball, choking on sobs of fear. Terror raced through his body like a debilitating poison. At his side, Lydia placed a delicate hand on Steinmetz's head, stroking his hair, trying to soothe him as she would a frightened babe. Somehow, the intense fear of her employer seemed to lessen her own and she spoke soft words of reassurance and hope into the sobbing man's ears.

At first Steinmetz did not seem to hear Lydia, then a slight flicker of reason fought its way into his eyes. He uncurled himself, his fat hands crushing hers in a desperate, hungry grip. A feverish tremble set the merchant's meaty features twitching. Lydia tried not to look alarmed as Steinmetz stared into her eyes.

'The coachman, Lydia,' Steinmetz hissed.

'Please, don't excite yourself,' Lydia replied, trying to wrest her hands back from the merchant's strong grasp. 'The witch hunter will get us out of this.'

'The coachman brought us here, Lydia,' Steinmetz repeated in a low voice, ignoring her own reply. 'He brought us here. He must know a way out!' Lydia freed her hands and drew away from the merchant in alarm. Steinmetz smiled at her sudden fright. 'If we help him escape, he will help us escape!'

'No, Emil, you can't do such a thing,' protested Lydia. Steinmetz rose to his feet, pulling his arm away from Lydia's attempt to restrain him.

'I'll pay him,' the merchant continued. 'He will accept that. I'll pay him to get us out of here. Just you and me.' Steinmetz faced the girl again, anger flaring in his face as he noted the look of shocked outrage on her features. 'You won't do it?' he snarled. The merchant's meaty hand slapped

Lydia's face, knocking her onto her side with the force of the blow. 'Then tay here and die! There are fancy girls enough in Nuln to warm my bed.'



BRESH WAS STILL lying upon the floor of the old priest's cell, straining at his bonds when he heard the fat merchant enter. The coachman went rigid with alarm as he saw the obese man draw a dagger from his boot. Steinmetz stared at him for a moment, but Bresh could not decide what thoughts were squirming about behind those eyes. The merchant waddled forward and Bresh braced himself for the sharp stab of steel.

Instead, he found himself turned onto his side, felt the edge of the weapon slicing through his bonds. Words were dribbling from the merchant's mouth, inane babble about paying the Strigany a king's ransom to get him away from the blighted village, desperate pleas for the coachman to save him from the ghouls howling for his blood, promises to help Bresh escape from the witch hunter. He smiled to himself. There was no fool so gullible as a fool in fear of his life.

Bresh rose to his feet, rubbing at his wrists and knees to try and restore circulation. The Strigany looked up at his benefactor, his features shaping themselves into a mocking smile. He pointed at the knife in Steinmetz's hand.

'Will you help me?' the merchant demanded, but it was but an echo of his former pomposity and arrogance that gave the words their sting.

'Of course,' Bresh smiled. 'I am in your debt now.' He opened his hand, extending it toward Steinmetz. 'The dagger, if you please?'

'Why do you want it?' the merchant asked, voice trembling with suspicion and fear.

'Unless you want to take care of the witch hunter yourself,' Bresh answered. 'We shall have to kill him if we are going to get out of here.' The words had their desired effect and Bresh felt the reassuring weight of the weapon slide into his hand. He briefly entertained the thought of returning it to

the merchant, opening the conniving tradesman's belly with his own steel, but Bresh quickly dismissed the idea. It would be much more fun to watch the ghouls dispose of him.

Bresh crept warily back into the shrine. He could see the Baroness, standing atop the altar, her back to him, intent upon the window. She presented a tempting target, but she was not his primary concern. He could also hear the commotion at the storeroom door, where Steinmetz had informed him that Ravna and the dwarf were standing guard. It sounded as if a score of ghouls were trying to beat their way through the small door. He turned his eyes forward. The gambler, the witch hunter and the witch hunter's man were holding the larger entryway. Their backs were to the main room as they strove to punish the many black-clawed hands that were clutching at them from numerous holes in the wooden doors.

The Strigany smiled. His master would be greatly pleased if he dealt with the witch hunter, perhaps even forgiving him for bringing the man here in the first place. Bresh knew his master's vile moods and unpredictable temper and knew that anything he could do to strengthen his position would be a matter of life or something worse than death. Bresh tightened his grip upon the dagger and began to move stealthily toward the doors. Behind him, the fat figure of the merchant filled the doorway of the cell, sweating with nervous excitement as he watched the assassin creep across the decrepit hall of worship.

Neither man noticed the small figure that lifted herself from the bench of one of the pews. Lydia watched the Strigany emerge from the priest's cell, saw the dagger in his hand. She followed the course of his furtive steps, noting where they would eventually lead.

'Witch hunter! Behind you!'



MATHIAS THULMANN whipped about as Lydia's scream sounded above the howls and snarls of the ghouls. He saw

the Strigany, barely a dozen paces away, the gleaming dagger clutched in his hand. Bresh had turned to see who had betrayed his intentions, losing the opportunity to fall upon the witch hunter's back in one final, swift, murderous rush.

The scrape of steel on leather rasped from Thulmann's side as he drew his longsword. The weapon gleamed in the feeble light filtering downward from the temple's rotting roof. Blessed by no less a personage than the Grand Theogonist of Sigmar himself, the sword was a weapon that could banish daemons and still the black hearts of sorcerers. Thulmann felt it was almost demeaning to force the elegant sword to soil itself with the blood of a mere thief and murderer. But once again, he felt that Sigmar would understand.

Thulmann found the Strigany ready for him, the dagger held outwards and to his side in the manner of a practised knife fighter. Thulmann would have doubted his chances against the man with all things being equal. However, the witch hunter bore no six-inch dagger, but three feet of Reikland steel. It was an advantage none of the Strigany's tricks could overcome.

Bresh managed to twist his midsection away from Thulmann's initial strike, but the witch hunter was too far away for the Strigany to follow through with his attack. Thulmann thrust at the villain's stomach and the Strigany darted to the right, trying to slash the witch hunter's arm before he could recover. But again, the longer reach thwarted the knife fighter's instincts.

'Finish him quickly! They're getting through!' roared Streng. The groan of the doors, the cracking sound of splintering wood grew in volume even as the snarls of the ghouls increased into a bestial cry of triumph. Bresh smiled, expecting the witch hunter to be distracted by the calamitous report. He dove inward for Thulmann's vitals.

The witch hunter stepped away as Bresh flopped to the floor. He had anticipated the villain to strike, and had met his charge, bringing the longsword stabbing through the Strigany's throat as the man leaped forward. Thulmann paused only long enough to kick the dagger from the dying man's reach before hurrying toward the doors.

The ghouls had indeed forced a wide gap between the doors and Streng and Feldherrn were hard pressed to keep them from opening further. The snarling face and wiry arm of one ghoul were thrust through the opening, their owner straining to undermine the efforts of his human prey to force the doors back. An entirely human look of surprise filled the ghoul's face as Thulmann thrust his sword through its eye. The doors slowly inched backward as Thulmann added his own weight to the efforts of Streng and Feldherrn.



BRESH COUGHED, a great bubble of blood bursting from the hole in his throat. But the Strigany smiled a weak and crimson smile. He could feel his master's rage; it burned within his mind. It did not concern Bresh overly that his vampiric master was so furious because it considered Bresh a piece of property that had been ruined. Only one thought warmed the dying man's soul as it quit his body.

Now the Master will come and everyone here will die!

It burst through the wooden barricade that filled the window behind the altar as if it were paper. The hulking shape fell upon Baroness von Raeder before she could even register the destruction of the barricade. A mammoth hand tipped with sword-claws ripped her in half, tossing her mangled body across the hall to crash into a support pillar.

The vampire roared, its screech sharp and piercing. The undead horror leapt from the altar, springing with panther like agility. The monster smashed to splinters one of the remaining pews as it landed. Blood-black eyes glared about the hall, smelling the hated stench of the living. The vampire hissed, sprinting across the shrine toward the nearest source of that stench. Steinmetz tried to scream, but the sound was ripped from his body as the vampire's claws tore into him, opening him from navel to collar bone, the bulb of garlic flying into the air as it was severed from the crude necklace. The merchant slumped against the wall, organs spilling from his burst ribcage and stomach.

Lydia screamed, the cry attracting the notice of the fiend. The Strigoi turned its head in her direction, but before it could move, a harsh, commanding voice shouted at it. The vampire hissed anew as it regarded its challenger.

'You are quite brave to enter Sigmar's house, filth,' Mathias Thulmann snarled. The witch hunter stepped towards the undead monster, sword gleaming at his side. The vampire's eyes seemed to burn suddenly with an unholy light and there was no mistaking the rage that warped its already twisted features. 'Show me how brave you are, coffin-worm!'

The Strigoi leapt forward. The single hop brought it within reach of the witch hunter, and its claw was already in motion even as it landed. Thulmann managed to dodge the blow by only the narrowest of measures, and the sword-sized talons tore into his cape before gouging the stone floor. And even as the vampire's first attack was avoided, its other hand sought to disembowel him with a crude swipe, blocked at the last instant by the witch hunter's sword. The undead talons smoked where the holy sword had nicked them and the Strigoi drew its bulk back to hiss at its adversary with renewed wrath.

Even as the duel between man and corpse-thing was being fought, the great double doors of the temple at last gave way to the frenzied ghoul mob struggling to get inside. Streng and Feldherrn gave ground before the snarling mass, their every attention given over to defending themselves from the venomous claws and snapping jaws of their adversaries. Behind the first wave of ghouls, dozens more fought amongst themselves to squirm through the doors, the thought of opening them wider eluding their frenzied, ravenous minds.

Thulmann did not wait for the vampire to recover its balance, but thrust at the undead beast, not with his sword, but with his off hand. The crystal flask gripped between his gloved fingers discharged its contents squarely into the vampire's face. The Strigoi howled in pain as the blessed water chewed at its rotten flesh, sizzling and steaming like bacon on a hot iron. The witch hunter darted forward, not allowing the vampire time to consider its injury. The longsword sliced into the vampire's shoulder. Once

again, the Strigoï howled in pain, twisting its massive bulk about so as to tear the sword from its flesh even as one of its clawed hands cradled its smoking face. The vampire swiped at Thulmann with its other hand, but the blow was both slow and clumsy. The effect of standing within a holy place was beginning to tell on the corrupt monster, both its strength and speed diminishing rapidly to below mortal levels.

The Strigoï snarled at Thulmann and darted away from the witch hunter, leaping over the heads of startled ghouls, smashing its way through the half-open doors and racing into the night, a trail of putrid smoke drifting in its wake. The ghouls gave voice to a pitiable wail of despair as they saw the vampire flee and began a rout of dismal disorder. Streng and Feldherrn harried the escaping monsters, running several of the degenerate things through the back as they fled.

The witch hunter dropped to his knees, exhaling deeply, thanking Sigmar for the rout of the undead abomination and its followers. But he knew that there were more hours to pass before the dawn and that the vampire would be doubly determined to exterminate them now. Before, they had represented food. Now they represented a threat to the undying horror.



THULMANN TOOK count of the toll the attack had taken. Steinmetz and Baroness von Raeder were dead. The loss of the merchant did not disturb him in the slightest, but the Baroness had represented another pair of eyes and ears that could watch for danger, another blade that could fend off the hungry cannibals. A more telling injury had been dealt at the rear door of the temple. Hearing their vampiric master rampaging within, the ghouls had redoubled their efforts to gain entry, tearing great gashes into the wood. Ravna and Fergrim had kept the pack out, but one of the venom-laden claws had slashed the wrist of the mercenary. He seemed only slightly dizzy at the moment, and protested loudly that it was no more

than a scratch, but the witch hunter knew only too well that the poison of a ghouls' claw was both fast and lethal. He would not last the night.

Mathias Thulmann stood before the remaining survivors. Streng had been set to watch the rear door, Feldherrn peering out the wreckage that framed the main entrance. There was little hope of defending the doorway after the vampire's brutal exit and the destruction it had delivered upon the doors themselves. As yet, the ghouls had not returned to exploit the indefensible entryway, but Thulmann knew that they would.

'Listen,' the witch hunter spoke. 'We have driven them away, but they will return, more determined than before. The undead thing that rules these wretches cannot afford to let us live to see the dawn. He must return to his crypt when the sun rises and fears that I will find his refuge while he is helpless. It is all or nothing for him, he will offer no quarter.' Thulmann studied each face, noting the expressions of resignation and regret, but finding that fear had passed even from Lydia's pale face. Men who have accepted their own deaths have no place for fear in their hearts.

'When they come again, we must make our stand,' the witch hunter continued, something of a preacher's manners slipping into his tones. 'Here, in this house of Sigmar, we will show this filth how real men die and make them pay a price in misery these wretches will not soon forget.'

A soft clapping punctuated Thulmann's brief speech. Fergrim Ironsharp hopped to his feet. 'And you folk call dwarfs dour?' the engineer chuckled. 'You will forgive me if I am not terribly excited by the proposition of dying to impress a human god, but I think that if I can get back to the coach, I may be able to fix things so we can get out of this graveyard.'

'I don't think the vampire is going to be bribed with your gold,' scoffed Feldherrn from the doorway. 'Indeed, it was probably your "valuable cargo" that made those murderers bring us here in the first place.'

'Gold indeed!' grumbled the dwarf, turning to the gambler. 'If I had a hoard of gold I'd have better uses for it than to take it on holiday to Nuln! I speak of explosives!

Five hundred pounds of premium Ironsharp blasting powder!

The revelation swept about the room like wildfire, exciting each survivor.

'You have an idea of how to exploit these explosives?' asked Thulmann, trying not to let any degree of unwarranted hope creep into his words.

'All I need to do is run a fuse to those boxes and the next time our friends come howling at the door, there won't be enough of them left to feed a crow,' declared Fergrim, puffing himself up proudly. 'Just give me somebody to watch my back, and we'll give that blood-worm a very unpleasant reception!'



IT WAS QUICKLY decided. Streng would remain on guard at the rear door while Feldherrn kept watch inside with Lydia in the event that the vampire again chose to enter through the window. Thulmann emerged from the doorway, his sharp eyes scanning the shadowy town square. The dwarf would have made a better sentry with his excellent night vision, but he had a very different role to play. Ravna, the ghoulish venom pulsing through his body now, insisted on accompanying the dwarf. Thulmann noted with some dismay the slow, ungainly steps of the once powerful man.

Fergrim knelt beside the overturned coach, rummaging about amongst the luggage still lashed to the roof. He removed a length of black fuse, traces of gunpowder soaked into the thin line of rope, and then began knocking a hole in the uppermost crate.

Thulmann could hear the sound of many naked feet running in the darkness. He shouted a call of alarm to the dwarf. Fergrim snorted back that he was hurrying. The witch hunter cursed as the sickly grave-stench of the ghouls and their low groans of hunger emerged from the veil of darkness.

'They're closing in, Fergrim,' he said.

The dwarf remained focused upon his task. From the corner of his mouth he swore at the man. 'Perhaps you'd prefer if I made a mistake! We have just one chance at this.' Beside him, Ravna thrust the point of his sword into the ground. Fumbling at his belt, he removed a small tinderbox and a wooden taper. The need for haste had not been lost on the former bodyguard.

The piteous, feral wailing of the ghouls was rising in volume now. Thulmann sighted one of the creatures as it rounded the overturned coach. Aiming quickly, he sent the bullet from his pistol crashing into its skull.

'Grace of Sigmar, dwarf! Move!'

Fergrim finished fixing the fuse to the uppermost box, uncoiling the length of black cord. 'You can't rush a decent job!' the dwarf grumbled. Suddenly the coach shook. Fergrim turned his face upward.

The Strigoi sat perched atop the side of the coach like a crouching panther. The vampire snarled at Thulmann, flexing its claws, promising its enemy a lingering and gruesome death. The witch hunter had emerged from his burrow. Now the advantage was the vampire's.

So intent was the monster on its enemy, that it paid no attention to the much closer prey. Fergrim stared at the undead horror right above his head and slashed at the fuse in his hands, cutting the line much shorter than he had been planning. Suddenly, a powerful grip closed about his belt and the dwarf found himself stumbling backwards falling on the bottom most steps. Even as he started to voice a colourful oath of outrage, the dwarf saw who had thrown him away from the coach, and what he was doing now. Fergrim leaped up the steps and dove onto his face amid the remains of the doorway.

The Strigoi continued to snarl and spit, waiting while more and more of its ghoulish minions rounded the overturned coach. Several of the monsters noted the man crouching against the side of the obstacle, just beneath their master and began to close upon him. But even as they did, Ravna stabbed the lit taper into the hole Fergrim had knocked into the uppermost box of powder.

Mathias Thulmann ducked inside the doorway, letting the heavy stone wall of the temple shield him from the explosion. The sound was deafening, like the angry bellow of a wrathful daemon. The temple shook, tiles falling from its roof. Debris, wooden and organic, rushed through the doorway, propelled by a hot wind. As the boom dissipated the sound of painful screams and moans filled the air, the stench of cooked meat permeated the air.

Thulmann stepped back through the door. Near his feet, a stout, short form wriggled itself free of the debris that had covered him like a shroud. The dwarf rolled onto his back, grumbling and bemoaning the loss of his valuable supply of powder. Thulmann regarded the devastated scene before the temple. The coach was blown apart, reduced to burning fragments scattered across the square. The firelight illuminated surviving ghouls fleeing back into the shadows, maimed and injured ones slowly crawling away. A score or more were thrown all about, burned, torn and quite dead. The witch hunter quietly saluted the sacrifice of Ravna and prayed that Sigmar would conduct the man's soul to one of the more pleasant gardens within the realm of Morr.

Motion snapped the witch hunter from his thoughts. He could see a massive shape writhing at the base of the now toppled statue. He firmed his grip upon his sword and carefully made his way down the temple steps. He could hear the others behind him, filling the doorway, marvelling at the destruction the blast had caused, but the witch hunter did not turn his eyes from the wounded beast. Now hunter had become prey.

The vampire had been thrown backwards at great force by the explosion. Huge splinters of wood from the coach had been driven through its unclean flesh, piercing it through in a dozen places. The violence of the explosion had tossed the creature as though it were a rag doll, causing it to smash into the eroded statue in the centre of the square. The forgotten hero had struck the ground ahead of the vampire, but had rolled backwards, crushing one of the monster's limbs beneath its weight. The vampire fought to free itself, but the maddening pain of its

injuries had reduced its already disordered mind to an animal level. The misshapen fangs worried at the trapped arm, trying to sever it from the Strigoï's body. Suddenly, a familiar scent caused the vampire to snap its head about, pain and imprisonment forgotten.

Mathias Thulmann stared down at the hideous monster as it regarded him with rage-filled eyes of blood. 'When you want to kill someone, do so. Don't talk about it next time.' Thulmann laughed softly as the vampire hissed up at him. 'I forgot. You don't get a next time.'

Thulmann raised his sword above his head in both hands and with a downward thrust, impaled the Strigoï's heart, pinning the undead creature to the clean earth below. The vampire struggled for a moment, then its final breath oozed through its jaws in a dry gargle. Thulmann turned away from the dead monster. The blessed steel would serve as well as a stake until he could decapitate the corpse and dispose of its remains in purifying fire. But such work would wait for the dawn.



MATHIAS THULMANN turned his horse away from the flickering flames. He patted the steed's neck with a gloved hand and looked over at Streng. 'Well, friend Streng, I do not think we will find our man here. If he did have the misfortune to come this way, he is beyond the reach of the Temple now.' The two men began to walk their animals back toward the gates of Murieste. Behind them, three figures stood beside the pyre, each wearing an angry look.

'What about us?' demanded Feldherrn.

Thulmann turned about in the saddle. He considered each of the people staring at him. Lydia stared back at him with accusing eyes, Fergrim Ironsharp was grumbling into his beard.

'Do what people without horses have done since the days of Most Holy Sigmar,' the witch hunter advised as he turned back around and continued on his way.

'Walk.' ●

WARP SPAWN

BY MATT RALPHS

PETTY OFFICER Drant manoeuvred his wheelchair closer to the edge of the loading ramp and peered out into the gloom. The light from the cargo hold spilled out before him, illuminating a portion of the landing compound; it looked like a vast frozen lake, shining dully in the encroaching dusk. He drummed his fingers nervously on the arm rests and shivered as frigid tendrils of cold penetrated through his tunic. The crisp evening chill steamed his breath and he blew on his fingers, inwardly cursing his captain, who at this very minute was probably tucked up in bed. As far as his aging eyes could tell, the cargo port was empty and still. He cursed and waited, stewing in his own disquiet.

Where were they?

A few small spacecraft, mostly private merchant clippers, sat squat and silent, their hulls softly lit up orange by the sodium lamps that battled valiantly against the deepening dark. These ships, although large, were dwarfed by the vessel Drant looked out from. Guild Freighter *Sable Bess*, half a mile from stubby snout to square cut fins, loomed up massively. Her holds were laden with military supplies destined for the Imperial Guard, and she patiently waited for departure at dawn.

But she was not yet fully laden. There was more cargo still to arrive.

Drant activated a comm-link on the bulkhead and it buzzed into life.

'Private link, captain's quarters,' he whispered.

'Unable to respond. Please speak up,' a mechanical voice replied.

Drant smacked the offending device in exasperation.

'Private link, captain's quarters,' he repeated, louder this time.

He waited, fidgeting nervously – then looked round towards the loading ramp, his pale face panicked.

Voices!

He retreated back into the shadows behind a bulkhead mainstay, terrified by the seemingly deafening noise his chair made in the quiet that surely anyone could hear. In his haste to hide he bumped into a loading cradle, toppling a precariously balanced pot of grease which he managed to grab in the second that two arbites rounded the corner onto the ramp. They stopped and peered up, shining their torches into the hold.

At that moment the comm-link connection to the captain's quarters was made and the line opened with a crackle. Drant's eyes widened and his grip on the slippery pot slipped; it overturned, spilling two litres of stinking axle grease onto his uniform.

The arbites heard the comms unit bleep, and hurried up the ramp. A rough voice, heavy with sleep, crackled over the connection.

'Captain Matteus here. That you, Drant?'

The arbites exchanged perplexed looks, and one touched the 'respond' icon.

'Er, good evening, captain, this is perimeter patrol, Private Hu speaking. Any reason you're paging an empty hold?'

Drant held his breath, waiting for his captain's reply. S'blood, it'd better be good! There was a slight pause, then: 'Dammit, that connection's still faulty. Where're you speaking from trooper?'

'Says hold one-forty on the floor, sir,' Hu replied, slightly bemused.

'Answer me this, Hu. How can a freighter captain such as myself, charged with supplying the brave men of the Imperial Guard with important equipment, be expected to run a tight ship when his supposed comm-link with engineering patches him through to an empty cargo hold?'

Drant could see Hu grin at his colleague, and relief swept through him. They were going to get away with it!

'I can't answer that, sir,' Hu chuckled. 'But I suggest you get it fixed before departure.'

'Good advice, trooper. Thanks for checking up on us. I'd better close that hold door now.'

'Understood, sir. Safe voyage.'

'Emperor protects.'

The connection clicked off.

Drant let out his breath as the arbites ambled down the ramp, idly swinging their power mauls, and disappeared into the night. He whirred back over to the comm-unit and re-connected back to the captain's quarters.

'That actually you, this time, Drant?' Matteus growled.

'Yes, sir,' Drant replied. He kept the exasperation he felt out of his voice and replaced it a weary tone of irony. 'Our extra cargo is not here and the compound arbites are, as you've just experienced, somewhat alert tonight.'

'I should hope they are, that's their job. And calm down, our cargo will be here. They paid in advance so I don't much care if they turn up or not, though I suspect they will. They seemed... keen, shall we say, to leave this sector entirely. Told me the local gangers were after them. Behind in protection money. Sad.' Matteus paused as if reflecting on something. 'They had a little girl too...'

'You and your hard luck cases,' Drant muttered. 'We were nearly caught with those Cumanian refugees in the silage ducts last year. I don't need this kind of excitement. It was too much excitement that lost me my legs.'

'Then you've nothing to worry about, old friend,' Matteus replied slyly. 'You can't lose your legs twice.'

The connection cut off, leaving Drant alone again in the silent cold. He scanned the perimeter of the compound for any signs of movement, getting more nervous with every passing minute. The next half hour dragged by until two figures carrying a limp bundle appeared from behind some loading frames and dashed over to the cargo ramp. He didn't know whether to feel relieved or frightened.

AFTER A successful launch, with the planet Vrantis III receding into nothing more than a bright light behind her, the *Sable Bess* began preparations for the warp jump. Her decks were alive with activity as the crew busied themselves with maintenance and routine duties. Captain Matteus found Drant outside the infirmary.

'All well?' he asked.

Drant eyed him darkly. 'Well enough. They're in hold one-forty.'

'Good. As planned then,' Matteus replied. 'Was the girl with them?'

Drant regarded his captain shrewdly. 'Is that why you took this contract on, Matteus? Because of the little girl?'

Matteus glanced down, 'They paid. That's all the reason I need.'

Drant snorted, unconvinced. 'She was asleep, looked dead to the world.'

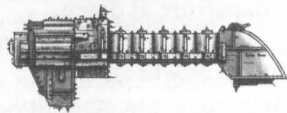
The phrase echoed in Matteus's mind.

Dead to the world. She's dead to me now, or may as well be. Where is she now? While she is gone, I will know no peace. Ten years since... It felt like a prison sentence.

Matteus collected himself, as Drant looked on trying to read his inscrutable face.

'Check on them would you, Drant? Make sure the child's not sick.' He paused, thinking, 'I may move them somewhere more comfortable for the journey.'

Drant grunted and whirred off down the corridor. Matteus closed his eyes for a second, then turned on his heel and strode towards the bridge.



ASCENE OF organised chaos greeted him when he arrived. He watched the hurried preparations from a darkened alcove in the bulkhead. He could see Lieutenant Eusoph, his rangy second-in-command gesticulating to the pilots as they busily entered data into the ship's main computing engine and conducted last minute safety precautions. Dozens of servitors crouched before banks of machinery, checking and cross-checking numbers that flooded their screens in

endless reams. Black-clad crewmen hurried around taking gauge readings; and amongst all this movement and bustle two robed tech-adepts glided, anointing both men and machines with blessed oil from silver tureens. Noticing Matteus in the shadows, Eusoph looked questioningly at him, but his captain waved his hand, allowing him to continue conducting the final preparations himself.

The atmosphere was tense. Matteus had lost count of how many warp jumps he had undertaken, but always he felt a giddy, nervous excitement at this point in the proceedings. Safety checks be damned, he thought; we're in the power of the warp now, anything can happen.

'One minute,' Eusoph snapped over the bridge-vox. 'Be ready.'

The noise and flurry of activity slowly petered out and then ceased altogether. All eyes turned to the huge stained glass window that monopolised the starboard side of the bridge. The coloured glass depicted a stylised outline of the *Bess* surrounded by a halo of protective light, which was itself surrounded by a horde of ravening daemons. This impressive diorama was part of a wall that sealed off the navigator's chamber. The bridge crew stared at the twisted and wizened man behind the window, who himself overlooked them from a cradle that hung on dozens of chains from the high ceiling. He looked like a living sacrifice.

Although the imperfect surface of the window blurred and distorted his form he could clearly be discerned; silent, apart, but omnipresent to a crew that regarded him with a mixture of fear and awe. His body was wrapped in a harness of interlinked straps that swung gently to and fro. A mass of cables and wires extruded from the mummified creatures' face, linking him to the ship's navigation equipment and the engine servitors below decks. The only human features visible were sightless milky eyes, flat nostrils and the thin line of his mouth. The third eye that allowed this otherwise blind man insight into the flux of the warp was hidden by a circular metal plate, which fitted snugly around his domed forehead. Upon this was etched the outline of a staring eye.

Eusoph cleared his throat. 'Navigator?' he prompted.

The cocooned man shuddered, as if waking from a deep sleep. His mouth opened and a voice like sandpaper on rust rasped over the vox-com.

'I am ready,' he said. From the floor before him a large screen rose up elegantly on a jointed support pillar. His mind activated the metal plate on his head which opened up like a flower, allowing his third eye access to the warp field as it appeared on the screen. 'The warp is ready,' he said after a few seconds. 'It is time.'

Eusoph nodded. 'Blast shields down,' he said.

Matteus gazed out of the viewing port before him. Staring back was a vista of stars, bright and clear against the blackness. It was starkly and coldly beautiful. Matteus shivered. With a heavy grating sound, a thick shield began to lower over the forward windows and the stars blinked out one by one as it slowly ground down into position. With a solid thump it stopped and locking bolts snapped into place.

Tech-Priest Iotep Kull, garbed in a silver trimmed black cowl, bowed low before the main engine control board, and whispered the final initiation sequence that would ignite the warp engines. A deep booming throb began to seep up from the decks below, as the power unleashed from the warp core in the bowels of the ship was distributed to the engines themselves: the Machine God was awake. Matteus could feel it emanating through the soles of his boots.

'Prepare for warp entry,' Eusoph said, his voice tight with tension. 'On the captain's command.'

Matteus settled down into his giant leather chair, savouring the moment, 'Now, if you please,' he said, indicating to Kull. Kull, flanked on either side by two priests swinging incense pendulums, lifted his face up to the towering bank of instruments that blinked with dozens of glowing runes. Streams of heavy smelling vapour issued forth from fluted pipes to settle in miasmatic layers around his feet.

'Ignis, aduro, illustro!' he intoned.

The engines crackled into violent life and the ship lunged forward. The navigator strained to steady the vessel as she nosed past the forced rent in the fabric of space and into the warp. Matteus leant forward in his chair, feeling the intensity of the merciless pressure winds buffeting them. In the face of this unmanageable power and fury, he felt helplessness and futility deaden him to his core. It was a personal struggle against his own inadequacies that he battled with during every warp jump.

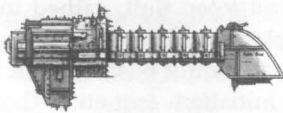
The navigator's scratchy voice rattled over the vox: 'The warp has swallowed us whole.'

Eusoph flicked off the vox-link.

Brock, the security officer, watched the crew for tell tale signs of warp psychosis. Seeing none, he relaxed a little. The danger period passed and the bridge crew settled back to their respective duties, anticipating another uneventful journey through one of the safest supply routes in Imperial space.

'Into the maelstrom,' Matteus whispered.

The reserve navigator, curled up in his cot in a recess in the bulkhead and lost in a deep slumber, twitched and whimpered.



THE LIFT screeched slowly down on grime encrusted runnels and settled heavily on the deck. Drant heaved the rusty lattice door open and activated his chair. As he whined down the dank corridor, inquisitive rats poked sleek black muzzles from out of their holes to see what the intrusion was. He ducked his head rhythmically to pass under hissing overhead pipes and wrinkled his nose as the heavy odour of promethium fuel battered his nostrils. For centuries the *Sable Bess* had been a tanker until she was downgraded to a dry freight vessel. She was now consigned to an easy routine, supplying non-essentials manufactured on Vrantis III to the Imperial Guard garrison on Jared's World, deep inside Imperium controlled space.

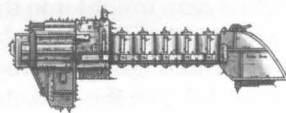
The name *Sable Bess* was derived from the black fuel she once towed from supply depot to war-zone, in the more exciting period of her career. But that time was now

passed. Her former cargo's powerful smell hung in her holds and corridors, dormitories and gangways like a pungent ghost from the past. The stench was particularly bad near the stern where hold one-forty was situated. Drant glided down the corridor, enjoying the quiet.

He reached the hold door. It towered above him, a rusty orange colour with dark streaks smeared down its length. Under the layer of dirt was painted '140'. He punched in the relevant code on the rune pad set into the door frame. With a grinding roar the huge doors heaved apart and Drant was momentarily stunned by the smell of promethium that wafted over him. But he was more stunned by the scene that confronted him inside compartment one forty.

The hold opened out immeasurably on either side, the walls receding into darkness. Two portable glow-globes, plugged into the door mechanism lit up an area of floor about fifteen yards distant. Several packing cases had been pushed together to form a makeshift table. Lying on this was a little girl. Her face, white as cotton and turned towards Drant, was fixed with a livid expression of despair; frightened eyes, framed within dark rings of fatigue, were wide open and alive with movement. Her mouth, the edges pulled down in an expression of utter misery, oozed drool. Spittle flicked and her pink tongue lolled grotesquely behind white baby teeth. She hissed as her thin body bucked and arched from the table as if caught in an uncontrollable spasm of agony.

Over her, stooped with intent, was a man. In his bony hand he held a long, liquid filled syringe that was poised over the struggling girl's neck. At the sound of the opening door he looked up, alarmed. Seeing Drant, he roared with fury and before the medic could react, lunged for him.



WHEN MATTEUS was assured his ship was safely on its way, he handed over the bridge to Eusoph and headed to hold one-forty to see to his stowaways.

As he rounded a corner, whistling lightly through his teeth, the ship lurched, throwing him heavily against the wall. Deafening klaxons sounded and the light globes in the ceiling dimmed, flickered and came back on a deep orange hue. Underneath the noise of the alarms Matteus heard the ship's superstructure groaning like a stricken beast; dread twisted his guts as the noise grew. He reached out a hand to steady himself against the bulkhead and he felt it shiver under his touch.

For a split second his mind flashed back ten years...

...the sickening crunch as the eldar corsairs latched onto his vessel. The ruptured hull imploding inwards. The billowing smoke and crackling flames. The murderous boarding crews, screaming like banshees, seizing his cargo. And his child...

Clutching his numbed arm and regaining his shocked senses, Matteus found a vox-com control on the wall.

'Bridge, this is the captain. What's going on up there?' he said, fighting to hide the panic in his speech.

Eusoph answered, his voice strained but controlled: 'We don't know. You'd better get up here quick.'

In the background Matteus could hear the clamour of the bridge crew, and men shouting urgent orders.

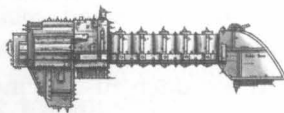
'Did we hit something? Any sign of intruders?'

'No, and there's no damage that we can tell. As yet...'

Matteus winced as the hull around him quivered, sending shallow shockwaves down the length of the corridor. The light above his head shattered in a shower of bright sparks. He cowered as slivers of glass rained down, pattering onto his head and shoulders.

'Tell that to the Bess!. On my way. And for the love of all that is holy, turn off these alarms.'

Still holding his arm, Matteus pounded back up the passageway as the ship strained and protested around him.



DRANT'S VISION was filled by the quivering needle just an inch from his eye and a rabidly angry face looming behind it. The man's knee was on Drant's chest and his elevation over the chair-bound medic gave him an advantage; but Drant had once been a corporal in the Imperial Guard and, although disabled, he was stronger than most able-bodied men. With one meaty hand he clutched the man's throat, and with the other his thin wrist; but still the point edged closer. Drant struggled, heart beating fast; all he could see was the wicked looking needle, one drop of clear liquid hanging like a tear from its tip.

Then the ship reeled, and the lock was broken. Losing his balance, the man pitched over Drant's chair and in doing so sent him rolling back against the bulkhead. All the lights went out, plunging the hold into darkness. For a second the light fizzled back into life and Drant had a snapshot of the man picking himself up; and someone else, slight of build and with raven black hair covering her face, leaning over the comatose child who now lay crumpled on the ground.

Blackness returned. He could hear movement, and urgent whispers that echoed confusingly around the enormous hold. Then it went quiet.

Drant tried to control his ragged breathing. He'd seen plenty of combat in his Imperial Guard days, so fear was not new to him, but being consigned to a wheelchair had been an agonizing test of faith and character. He had adapted, with the help of the Emperor. But now his lack of mobility frustrated him; he was fully aware that this disadvantage could be the death of him. He switched off his chair motors, knowing that their use would alert his enemy to his position. He began to roll towards where he thought the door was by turning the wheels manually. Seconds passed. Straining his ears and eyes for his

aggressor, he trundled on with agonising slowness. He could see a faint light outlining the door frame. Evidently some of the glow-globes in the corridor had not gone out.

Nearly there...ten more yards...

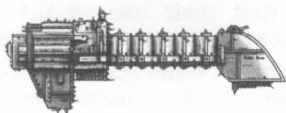
There was a sudden rush of movement and something heavy collided with his chair, tipping Drant over onto his side. He grunted as all the air was knocked from his lungs. The man brought all his weight to bear and Drant was rendered completely immobile. Hot breath rasped into his ear and a voice, scratchy and cold said, 'This is not your business, cripple.'

Drant, terrified and helpless, felt something cold and sharp against his cheek; it slid smoothly under the skin. He pictured the man's white skinny thumb over the syringe plunger, about to press...

A buzzing sound filled the room and the lights burst back on, burning bright and harsh. Shouts invaded his petrified mind even as all he could think about was the needle in his flesh. There was a guttural roar of violent rage above and the weight of the man on top of him was suddenly gone. From the corner of his eye Drant saw him sprawl onto the ground, robes flying around him and limbs flailing. He smashed into a packing case and fell limp. His neck rested at an ugly, crooked angle; Drant knew he was dead. Towering over the corpse stood a mountain of uniformed muscle, it was Gunnar Larson, the captain's mate, and huddled against the table was the raven-haired woman, cradling the child in her arms. As Gunnar approached her, she snarled, mouth twisting into an ugly grimace.

Drant clawed at the needle that was still embedded in him, pulling it loose. He felt relief beyond measure when he saw that it was still full of liquid. Strong hands gathered him up and set his chair upright. He looked up into the concerned features of Brock, the security officer.

'Drant, can you tell what in the Emperor's name is going on?'



MATTEUS GAZED mortified at the ravaged mess behind the stained glass window. The navigator hung half out of his harness, face a tormented mask of agony. Reddy-brown rents ran down his cheeks and, where his warp-eye should have been, was just a raw crimson pit weeping pus and blood.

'What... what did this?' Matteus stammered.

'He did it to himself,' Eusoph said. Matteus looked at him dumbly. Eusoph pointed to the navigator.

'Look at his arm.'

Matteus saw that one scrawny limb rested by his side. He had somehow managed to free it from the restraints. His fingers were curled into claws and stained with dark cerise fluid. The pipes and cables that made up the navigator's delicate connection with the ship had been ripped from his head, leaving deep welts in his ashen skin.

'One minute all systems were functioning and the navigator was guiding us,' Eusoph continued. 'Then he screamed something over the vox. A warning I think, but incoherent. Then he tore himself apart. He used his restraining buckle to pierce his eyes.' Eusoph swallowed. 'There was nothing we could do but watch.'

Matteus tore his gaze from the dead navigator. 'What's our current status?'

'The *Bess* is stable but we're adrift within the warp,' Eusoph said. He looked at the dead man. 'Some sort of exposure to the outside elements may have caused this but we should be safe, the navigator's chamber is completely sealed off.'

Matteus calmed a little. Around them, bridge officers barked orders and conflagrators were dousing dozens of small fires that had broken out. Smoke filtered away through ceiling vents, and a semblance of order was being restored.

'Organise damage teams to inspect every rivet and bolt on this ship, and I want all tech-priests testing warding beacons and protective veins. Get them preying to their blasted Machine God, whatever...' Matteus checked himself. I must keep calm, he said inwardly. 'I want our secondary navigator linked up in half an hour.'

Eusoph looked troubled, 'We can't wake him. He's in some unholy trance. Filthy psychers, I don't understand them. It will take time to rouse him.' He paused, as if assessing whether he should tell his visibly shocked captain any more.

'There's something else.'

'Go on.'

'Someone's opened compartment one-forty, and there's no reason for anyone to do that. It's empty. I've sent Brock and Gunnar down to see.'

As if on cue the vox-com crackled into life.

'Bridge, this is Brock. We've some uninvited guests. One dead man, one unconscious girl, and one woman screaming blue murder.' In the background Matteus could hear a woman's shrill cries of despair. Brock's voice faded from the voice pick-up. 'Gunnar, shut that harpy up, for Terra's sake.' A slap rang out, followed by silence. Brock spoke back into the vox-com. 'I'm taking the woman to the brig and Drant's going to see to the child in the medi-bay. And what the hell happened to the ship? I almost fell over the gantry on the way here.'

'Tell Drant I'll meet him in the medi-bay. Then I'll see you in the brig. Find out what you can from her, and don't stand on ceremony. I'll talk to you then.' Matteus looked down guiltily, 'Is Drant alright?'

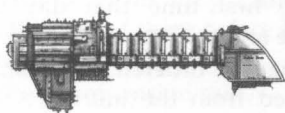
'He's had a narrow escape. This maniac was trying to stick him with a needle as long as my arm. But he's fine.'

Matteus breathed a sigh of relief. 'I'll meet you in the brig.'

'Acknowledged. Brock out.'

Eusoph raised an enquiring eyebrow, 'Who or what was in hold one-forty, captain?'

'I'll deal with that,' Matteus replied, trying to sound as neutral as possible. 'Eusoph, you have the bridge. Get us moving again.' He cast a nervous glance around him, as if expecting daemons to appear through the bulkhead, then strode hurriedly off the bridge. Eusoph stared after him, eyebrow still raised.



BROCK LIFTED THE woman's face up by her hair and looked into challenging black eyes. Manacled to the wall of the brig cell, she glared defiantly back at him, her mouth horribly swollen from where Gunnar had slapped her. Brock kept his expression contemptuous, but in truth the woman disturbed him. She was young, but her face had a haggard look that belied her youth, as if she had seen things so terrible they had aged her prematurely. It made him feel uncomfortable. She held him with her eyes and the depth of experience he perceived within them intimidated him further. A thrill of fear shivered up his spine.

She spat back into his face and the spell was broken. Eusoph smacked her hard around the face, angry at himself for losing concentration. She recoiled, ugly words pouring from her lips.

'Who are you?' Brock shouted, wiping the spittle from his face. 'And what in the Emperor's name were you doing to the child?'

A few seconds passed, and then she looked up, her face calm, 'I would never expect you to understand.' Her voice was soft and seductive, totally at odds with her weathered, beaten face; her words were tinged with a strange, melodious accent that Brock could not place. But underneath was an unmistakable undertone, like steel under satin, hard and unforgiving. 'All I know is that you will die.'

Chief Brock frowned, momentarily disconcerted, but he quickly regained composure.

'You can talk or you can remain silent. It matters not.' He smiled a thin smile. 'We are reviving that poor girl. She will tell us what we want to know.' He stepped back to see her reaction and was shocked by its vehemence.

Her eyes widened in panic and all composure fled her face. She had a slender frame but became possessed of a strength born of terror; words gabbled from her mouth and she struggled with her bonds, arms straining and fingers bent into talons.

'No, don't wake her!' she screeched. 'Keep her dormant. They will find her, it will find her.' Her last sentence was screamed at nerve shredding volume: '*You don't know what she is!*'

MATTEUS ENTERED the medi-bay, blinking in the unforgiving glare of the lights. The infirmary was a sterile white; a room of scrubbed surfaces and gleaming surgical-servitors. In the corner, incongruous amongst all the delicate machinery, hulked Gunnar Larson. His uniform was stretched to tearing point over his muscular frame, and with his giant hands he petted his huge rat, Leman. Gunnar cooed and warbled as the rat sniffed suspiciously at the air. Against the opposite wall was a line of about a dozen examination slabs, all empty except one.

Drant was examining the girl's eyes for signs of shock whilst chatting quietly. She perched on the edge of the slab kicking her legs back and forth, seemingly quite happy. She was peering at the polished floor with intense interest at her own vague reflection. Lank black hair like that of her mother's was draped in strands, obscuring her face.

Drant looked over when he heard Matteus enter the room. His genial face turned angry and with a final word to the girl that was duly ignored, he wheeled over to him.

'Are you well, my friend?' asked Matteus with concern.

'I was very nearly killed.' Drant narrowed his eyes. 'Gunnar told me, in his fashion, about the navigator. What have you done to us, Matteus?' he said.

The captain blanched and wiped his perspiring brow.

'That has nothing to do with your... incident. Or the stowaways. Coincidence, nothing more.' Matteus laid a hand on Drant's shoulder. 'The man is dead, the woman is in the brig and Eusoph will have us on our way soon. We'll just have to cover this up.' He glanced at the girl and whispered, 'Has she said anything?'

Drant sighed, placated for now. 'Not a word. I gave her a stim-drug to wake her and she seems healthy enough, considering her treatment.'

Matteus gazed at the child and was reminded of why he'd agreed to help them. There was little likeness between this girl and his daughter, but she was the same age and build as Nadia had been when she was stolen, and she exuded a vulnerability that Matteus responded to immediately. He felt a deep sympathy for the lost child who sat alone, still staring at her reflection and

swinging her legs in the air. He approached her, signalling Drant to stay back. He crouched and looked up into her little white face.

'What is your name, child?'

Her electric blue eyes regarded him levelly. When she spoke her voice was light and clear as dawn in spring.

'Are my parents gone?'

'Your father is dead,' he said gently. 'But your mother is in another room helping us.'

She dropped her gaze and bit her bottom lip.

'Child, your name?' She ignored him and turned away, scratching at the pink needle mark on her skinny arm.

'My friend is coming,' she said, suddenly brightening.

'What friend?'

'My friend. The one I feed sometimes.' She tapped the side of her head. 'I grow him in here.'

'I don't understand,' Drant said. 'Who do you grow?'

A tiny frown darkened the little girl's otherwise serene face. 'My friend,' she said.

Seeing that Matteus still did not understand she leaned close, tapping her temple with both index fingers. 'In here,' she insisted.

Matteus, confused and taken aback by the intensity of the child, stood up, obeying an unconscious desire that demanded he be taller than her and thus regain some initiative.

She looked up at him, smiling happily, her legs swinging like incessant pendulums. 'You'll see who soon,' she said airily.

Matteus, at a loss, shook his head, 'Drant, do you have any truth-drugs?'

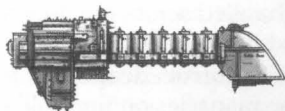
A ragged scream echoed upwards through the grilled ventilation cover set into the floor, rising in pitch then suddenly cut short. Silence fell for a split second then another cry followed, higher, and infused with so much fear and dread that Matteus felt his knees go weak.

For the first time that day he took immediate and constructive action.

'The brig,' he ordered. 'Gunnar, to me!' and dashed from the infirmary with the giant lumbering in tow.

Drant, shaking as the shrieks echoed around his infirmary, tentatively approached the girl. She was bouncing up and down, giggling and clapping her hands together. 'He's here!' she said gleefully. 'At long last, he's here!'

Drant grabbed her, sat her on his knee and whirred after the captain.



IT HAD TAKEN half an hour to prise open the navigator's chamber. He had been sealed within for decades and had since never left what had eventually become his tomb. Eusoph coughed in the stale air, holding a handkerchief over his mouth.

'Get the vents working. I can hardly breathe in here.' He cast an appraising eye around the chamber. 'No sign of forced entry, and the hull's intact.' He snorted. 'If it weren't we wouldn't be here any more.'

The secondary navigator had been revived from his self-induced trance and was getting ready to link up to the ship. He could sense the dead body even if he could not see it. Eusoph looked on in distaste as he crept blindly but with complete assurance around the small room.

'What do you think caused him to do this?'

For a moment the navigator was silent, probing the ship and the space around it with his sensitive psychic sense.

'Something on board,' he said in a blank monotone. He turned, empty sockets directed at Eusoph's own grey eyes as if he could see him. 'Something nearby, something close. And more are coming. They circle us like vultures.'

'Ensign Jagg!' Euposh shouted, louder than he needed to. 'Help our new primary navigator into his harness.' He indicated the former incumbent who lolled precariously from his straps. 'And get that abomination out of there before I vomit on the Emperor's holy floor.'

'Sir?' the young ensign said.

'What is it?' Eusoph snapped.

'I think I can hear something.' Jagg sidled up to the huge gothic window that commanded the entire forward facing bulkhead. An impregnable blast door had been lowered over it for protection. Jagg put his ear to the glass.

Eusoph tapped his foot impatiently.

'Ensign...'

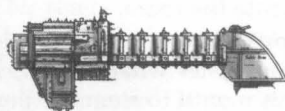
Jagg pressed his finger to his lips. 'Listen.'

Eusoph was about to scream blue bloody murder to the man who had dared silence him when the blast door jolted in its runnels and a piercing scraping sound jarred their ears. Jagg stumbled back, terror etched onto his youthful features. They watched as the bottom corner of the door tilted upward, juddered and then dropped back, as if something with unimaginable strength on the other side was trying to force it open.

Eusoph, eyes wide with shock, did his best to rally the startled crew.

'Jagg, get the navigator hooked up at the double. And seal off this chamber from the bridge when you're done. I want that door welded shut, understand? Everybody else get out, now! I want the engines ready to fire as soon as the navigator's in position.' As he walked with unseemly speed from the chamber he asked himself: where is Matteus?

The new navigator primus said nothing, even as the blast door undertook another brutal assault, shaking the ship from prow to stern.



THE BRIG LAY in the squalid bowels of the ship, directly below the kitchens. Some said the worst part of being there was to smell the swill that the cooks produced that overpowered even the all pervading odour of promethium fuel. This pungent cocktail was whipped sluggishly by slowly rotating fans on the ceiling.

Matteus stepped off the ladder, wincing as his boots struck the metal gantry with a clang. The brig corridor was dim, lit only sparsely by orange glow-globes set low in the bulkhead. The noise of the engines would normally be more profound here

than anywhere else on the ship, bar the engine rooms. The narrow walkway was usually filled with the powerful throb of the warp-drive and the faint cries of the engineers and crews as they toiled with the giant machines. But now it was quiet, except for the mellifluous murmur of ventilation pipes.

Gunnar followed, along with two security ratings who wielded power mauls. Matteus was hefting a heavy piece of pipe; Gunnar needed nothing more than his mallet sized fists. Matteus motioned for silence as he crept down the corridor. The door to the brig cell hung at an angle, the top hinge torn from the frame. It was buckled outwards, as if something with tremendous power had smashed it open from the inside.

'That door's made from solid titanium,' the security rating whispered.

'Put your mauls on full power,' Matteus said softly, and was heartened as the buzz from the weapons increased behind him.

'Gunnar go first,' a voice as deep as a chasm intoned behind him. Matteus was startled, not by the volume but by the fact that the gigantic man had actually spoken, something he rarely ever did.

'Thank you, Gunnar,' Matteus said, patting him on the arm, 'but I should go first.'

After reaching the door, he hugged the wall and preyed silently, while the other three looked expectantly at him. He turned to them and mouthed, 'One, two, three', and burst into the room.

He stopped short, mind taking several seconds to register what he saw; he put a hand to his mouth to stem the flow of bile that rose up his throat, bitter and sharp. The others barged in around him, brandishing weapons. Their war-cries died on their lips.

The entire opposite side of the cell was stained crimson. Red streaks spattered the brown hued steel in garish rainbow patterns, which dripped down to pool in viscose puddles at the base of the wall. Two bodies lay on the ground, one on top of the other, as if locked in a lover's embrace. They seemed fused together, loose flaps of skin and torn flesh overlapped to such an extent that it was impossible to judge whose body they belonged to. Matteus could tell the one on the bottom was Brock only because he

could see his ornate security officer's epaulette, almost obscured by a mass of human offal.

The warm air, heavy with a nauseating tang of copper, caught in Matteus's throat. His mind reeled as the violence of the scene hit him like a kick in the stomach. He heard one of the ratings moan as he vomited in enormous, raking heaves. He dropped his club which rolled across the floor and came to rest next to the gently steaming corpses.

Matteus's horror deepened when he noticed the manacles on the wall. Dangling grotesquely like meat joints in a butcher's window were the woman's arms. Gunnar was pounding his fists on the cell wall, his simple mind unable to cope with what he saw.

When Matteus heard the lift door rasp open at the other end of the corridor he found his senses again. He slapped Gunnar hard and indicated for them all to be quiet. They edged back against the wall, grim faced and trying to ignore the terrible vista of death that lay before them. The security rating who had been sick wiped his mouth with a shaking hand. Matteus caught his eye and nodded encouragingly. The rating nodded back. They turned their eyes on the door and waited, with weapons at the ready.

They exhaled in relief as the familiar whine of Drant's chair grew louder towards them. They could hear the little girl's voice over the noise of the motors.

'Don't bring her in here,' Matteus called, but it was too late. They rounded the corner and glided into the cell.

Drant gasped.

'Damn it, get her out of here, will you?' Matteus ordered, but the girl slipped off Drant's knee and padded barefoot into the room.

'Mummy?' she said. The men watched her, not knowing what to do. She turned to Matteus, her blue eyes shining in the gloom. 'Is that my mummy?' she asked.

Matteus looked again at the bloody mess in the middle of the floor, for the first time noticing the coal black hair spread out like a fan.

'Yes,' he said, voice cracking, trying desperately to think of something comforting to say; but the scene of

devastation around them negated all words of succour.

She crouched down next to her mother, the bottom of her white dress becoming saturated with blood. Glancing up and cocking her head, she sniffed the air. She looked perplexed, as if inwardly struggling to take in what had happened.

'He's been here.' She fixed her gaze on Matteus. 'Mummy must have made him angry.'

Being under her scrutiny unnerved him. There was something old within her eyes, something old and wise. 'It's best not to make him angry,' she continued.

Matteus swallowed, attempting a smile.

'Best not to make who angry, child?'

'My friend.'

'What is your friend like?'

She looked appraisingly at Gunnar who stood at the edges of the room shaking his head as if trying to clear it of heretical thoughts.

'Bigger than him,' she said. 'Much bigger. He looks after me. But sometimes he can be very messy.' She gestured to the scattered flesh parts and liquid pools around her. 'I can make him come back, if you like.'

'No!' Matteus said, too loudly.

She frowned. 'But I want him here,' she said petulantly. Bowing her head she began to soundlessly mouth words. Instantly the atmosphere in the room became heavy and time seemed to slow down; the temperature plummeted as the girl became the epicentre of a psychic storm, her long black hair standing on end, electrified in whipping blue bursts of energy. It looked like her elfin face was wreathed in headless, writhing snakes. The air around her thickened and shimmered; to Matteus her outline became hazy. The only point of clarity in the unearthly vision that had once been a petite and seemingly innocent child, was a look of hatred centred in her once sky-blue eyes which were now deepest black and vacant of humanity. Leman the rat squealed and leapt from Gunnar's top pocket and dashed out into the corridor. Gunnar bellowed, lunging for the child.

Quick as lightning she spun round to face him. A fleeting look of fear and confusion swept over her face but it was gone as soon

as it had appeared. She spat an ugly command and the giant was lifted clean off his feet and hurled bodily out of the door as if he were rag doll tossed aside by a bored child. He smashed into the corridor wall, rupturing pipes. Hot vaporous steam erupted with an explosive hiss. For a few seconds Gunnar sat there, stunned, then he leapt to his feet and pounded off after his beloved rat, weeping in distress.

The other men stood aghast as the child spun to face them with an expression of malevolent fury. The security ratings sprang towards her, power mauls swinging in deadly arcs. She uttered something and they were catapulted into the ceiling, skulls impacting with wet thuds. She held them there, then let them drop to the deck like unstrung puppets.

She turned her gaze to Matteus and Drant, her tiny mouth chanting words of arcane power. Matteus felt them invade his mind and take over his senses...

The chase was over. Rain fell about them, soaking the walls of the blind alley; and she shivered as it ran down her neck. Her parents clutched her to them as the gang advanced. The tallest stepped forward, boots splashing in shiny black puddles. She looked down, frightened, catching her reflection in the water at her feet. She struggled to master her emotions, but did not know how. Something inside her, powerful and possessive, began to surface.

The man pulled back his hood. His face was hard, but his mouth hinted at amusement as he watched the family shiver. Rendered in blue on his high brow was the Imperial spread-eagle.

'Elusive, aren't you?' he said. 'But no one slips through my grasp. The Inquisition will not be mocked by you, Chaos filth.'

'Do as you will,' her father said. 'We serve the true powers of the warp. Soon you will weep before her gaze.'

The inquisitor barked a laugh. 'Then I sentence you to return to her.'

His band of hunters drew forth weapons from their robes.

'Fire at will.'

She felt her mind flex like a muscle, and the air around her became stiff with cold fingers of energy. In her head she formed a shape with claws and a soulless heart. She screamed, clutching her temples as the vision became solid.

She continued to look down at her reflection as the cries of the inquisitor mingled with the sounds of renting flesh and splitting bone.

The vision ended and Matteus found himself on the other side of the closed door with Drant breathing heavily beside him.

'Cultists,' he whispered, almost to himself. 'And the girl...' He looked with uncomprehending eyes at Drant. 'They used her to channel the fiend that is now on my ship.'

'At your invitation, Matteus,' Drant said sullenly.

Matteus heaved on the cell door, but it was wedged shut, held there by the child's incredible psychic strength.

'Where's Gunnar when you need him?' He activated a vox-com: 'Bridge, what's our status?'

Eusoph's voice crackled over the speaker, his usually commanding tones steeped in barely controlled panic.

'We're under attack; they're trying to get through the blast doors.' In the background Matteus could here fearful cries mingling with the sound of tearing metal. 'There's something already on board. Reports of an intruder are flooding in from all over the *Bess*. I can't get hold of engineering. I sent a squad down to see and they haven't come back. We can hear screams in the vent shafts...'

'Calm down, Eusoph. How's the navigator doing?'

'It's too late for that. Didn't you hear me? They're already on board!'

Matteus slumped against the bulkhead; feeling like someone was filling in a grave over his head. He could hear Eusoph's irregular breathing magnified over the speaker, and behind that, shrieks of terror. Someone was shouting: 'Back to your posts, or I'll drop you where you stand!' Chaos was reigning supreme on his craft. Matteus knew it was time.

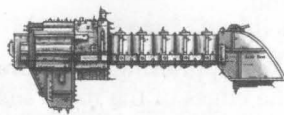
'Eusoph, I'm authorising a ship-wide abandonment. All crew to the escape pod, at the double. Tell them to stop for nothing. Don't wait for me. As soon as all personnel are accounted for and I've got the ship out of the warp, abandon her. Just get the navigator hooked in to the ships systems before you go. Do you understand?'

'I understand. Eusoph out.' Mercifully, the sounds of turmoil on the bridge clicked off.

Matteus knelt down next to Drant. 'That means you too: bail as soon as we drop out of warp.'

'We'll go nowhere without our captain. Besides, you must be held accountable for this, old friend.'

'Get to the pod, you old fool.' In the cell the little girl wallowed in blood. She dangled her fingers in it, giggling, and began to daub patterns on the wall; stylised runes in the shape of ever wakeful eyes. They glowed like beacons. The feeding frenzy in the warp increased in violence. Deep in the ship, something responded.



THE SHIP BOARD vox-com had been left on an open channel. As Matteus shinned up ladders and sprinted down gangways on his way to the bridge, he heard the shrieks and dying prayers of his crew from the vox-pickups dotted around the vessel. It was obvious that many were not going to make it to the escape pod. He charged across gantries, legs pounding on the steel floors, tormented by the cries of the murdered as they echoed around him. His boots were spattered with blood and several times he slipped in the wetness.

He reached the bridge with the ship quaking under the escalating attack from the warp-creatures as they scratched and lacerated the hull. He stared, awestruck, as part of the blast-shield was peeled away with a tortured screech. He turned his eyes away from the dizzying whorl of distorted stars outside and dashed into the navigator's chamber.

The navigator lay curled on the deck, twitching and jerking spasmodically. Cables sprouted from plugs in his head attaching him to the ship.

Matteus shook him roughly, 'Awake, blast your eye! Get us out of the warp! Drop us out, now!'

The navigator whispered, voice barely audible above the din of the attack, 'So much malevolence t'ward us, strain's too much...'

'No! Get us out, for Emperor's sake, don't condemn us!'

'Trying...' the navigator murmured. A grating sound filled the room as the blast door was at last torn from its housing; a victorious gibbering filtered through from outside. Warp light streamed in, Matteus shielded his eyes and cried out in fear. The navigator screamed as his frail body succumbed to a final violent spasm; the warp-light died and silence descended.

'It is done,' he said, his face tranquil.

Matteus collapsed onto the deck, relief flooding through him.

'We are free,' the navigator whispered through raking gasps.

Before Matteus could thank him, a vision from his worst nightmare lumbered into the chamber, bringing with it a cloying stench of death. Walking upright and fully four yards tall, it stooped under the door; a black shadow of catastrophe. Its grossly swollen head turned left and right, as thick drool streamed from slavering, fanged jaws. Long arms, ending with lethal white talons, lashed out with deadly speed and impaled the navigator through his belly. He let out a weak bleat of pain, and fell silent.

Matteus acted instinctively, dashing through the monster's muscular legs and diving over his command chair on the bridge. He scrabbled underneath and found the shotgun he kept there for emergencies. Training the gun on the door with shaking hands he fumbled for the safety catch; but the creature was on him, foot-long claws raking his arm and sending the shotgun skittering out of reach.

Matteus had a second to register the enormous beast that towered over him; jaws wide in a silent scream of malignant rage; hot, rank breath blasting his face. A part of his mind screamed when he noticed an ear attached to a length of flesh dangling from a gore stained incisor. Matteus shut his eyes and waited for death.

'We go.'

'We wait.'

Eusoph looked at Drant incredulously, 'He's dead. Nearly everyone's dead. I'm in command. We go.' He reached over to the launch icon.

Drant grabbed his wrist and pulled Eusoph's face close to his own.

'We wait for our captain,' he said through clenched teeth. 'I insist.'

Something in the old man's eyes told Eusoph it was dangerous to argue. He backed off, chastened.

Ensign Jagg sat in the hatch to the escape pod from where he could see the fifty yard corridor leading back into the *Bess*.

'All quiet at the mo, Drant.'

'Let's hope it stays that way, lad.'

Drant fingered the handle of the autopistol he kept hidden under the armrest of his chair. 'Let it come', he thought.

He thought of Nadia. Soon, perhaps, he would join her in whatever afterlife the Emperor had prepared for them.

The staccato rattle of an autogun broke his reverie. He looked up to see the creature careen away, puce fluids bursting out of its carapace skin. Gunnar burst through the bridge doorway, howling with rage. He emptied the magazine then wielded the gun like a club, laying into the stumbling creature, bludgeoning its swollen head and roaring like a man possessed. It fell over, crashing into a gantry rail, blood oozing from a dozen wounds.

Gunnar turned to Matteus and pointed to a pulsating bulge in his breast pocket.

'Found Leman in kitchen.' He patted the now buckled autogun. 'Found this also.'

'Thank the Emperor! Let's go.'

Behind them, even as they made their dash for freedom, the creature stirred. It knew this ship and where they were heading. It pounded after them with a hunter's instinct to cut them off.

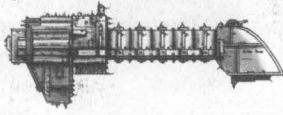
'Two more corners and we're there,' Matteus cried euphorically. Gunnar grabbed him suddenly by the collar and clamped a gigantic hand over his mouth.

'Leman frightened. He smells it.' He pointed to the corner up ahead and whispered, 'There.'

A vast misshapen shadow was cast on the wall up ahead; the creature had beaten them! Matteus crouched onto the floor, broken at last.

Gunnar tapped him on the shoulder. A grin slowly crawled over his face, the cognitive process for this action taking

some time. He pointed up to the ceiling. Matteus followed his finger and managed a smile.



JAGG LET OUT a cry. 'Something's there, at the end of the corridor!'

It came at them in a stooped charge, a solid mass of glistening muscle and scything claws, wide shoulders taking up the entire width of the passageway. Drant scabbled for his pistol, levelled it in shaking hands and fired a wild volley of shots that ricocheted off the walls, puncturing coolant pipes. Scorching steam gushed out, burning the creature which jumped back, suddenly cautious.

Drant stared at the awful apparition that crouched just yards away, now wreathed in hissing vapours.

'It has come,' he breathed. 'Emperor preserve us, it has come.'

'We go, now!' Eusoph yelled, reaching for the launch icon.

Then a body fell down in front of them from the ventilation shaft in the ceiling of the corridor. It was quickly followed by another larger one. They tumbled inside.

'Launch!' Matteus screamed.

Eusoph hit the icon, and as the creature reached the doors they slammed shut with a resounding clang. A gaping mouth, spraying juices, lashed violently against the glass. The men cowered back, crying out in shock. Gunnar pressed his face to the window, howling in delight,

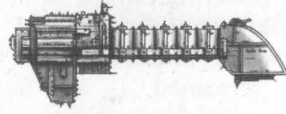
'Gunnar won! Gunnar won!'

Launch thrusters ignited with a roar, pushing the pod out into the void. The fiend, cheated of its prey, stood framed in the doorway for a second, and then retreated back inside the *Bess*.

'Now they are together, child and beast,' Matteus said, exhausted. 'Which is the bigger fiend, I wonder?'

He glanced around, eyes bright with grief. The shuttle was built to take the full crew compliment of one hundred and forty-five men. A tally revealed twelve left, including him. No one spoke. No one could think of what to say.

Matteus stared out of the window as the *Sable Bess* faded from view. A blinding flash and she disappeared entirely, swallowed into the fathomless netherworld of the warp, and taking with it the girl and her Chaos spawn.



ON THE EDGE of a giant radiation cloud that was drifting across the Imperial freight route connecting Vrantis III to Jared's World, a hunter lay in ambush. From hooked nose to elegantly tapered fins, the eldar raiding vessel was a study of harsh, lethal beauty.

'Death can come from anywhere. She waits, then takes you into her embrace.'

And so spoke her captain, Khorach Wyche, who sat poised in her command chair, the very embodiment of a deadly predator, waiting patiently to strike.

'We have a contact,' her pilot informed, relish fairly dripping from his voice.

'Details?'

'Single vessel, probably a freighter, low readings, minimum power. A fat human maggot for us to burst.'

Khorach smiled the coldest of smiles. Easy pickings, yet she felt a twinge of disappointment. It was too easy. The cruel nature of her soul demanded a challenge, a foe that would wriggle and fight in her death grip. This prey would barely whimper before it fell to her guns and boarding crews.

Her pilot was looking at her expectantly. She made her decision, the only possible one.

'Assemble my raiders, I board with them today.'

'As you wish,' her pilot said. 'I have a designation on the ship. It's the *Sable Bess*.'

Khorach waved her hand dismissively. 'Unimportant. I just hope she puts up a struggle.' She licked her thin lips and looked hungrily at the lumbering vessel as it hove across the vision portal.

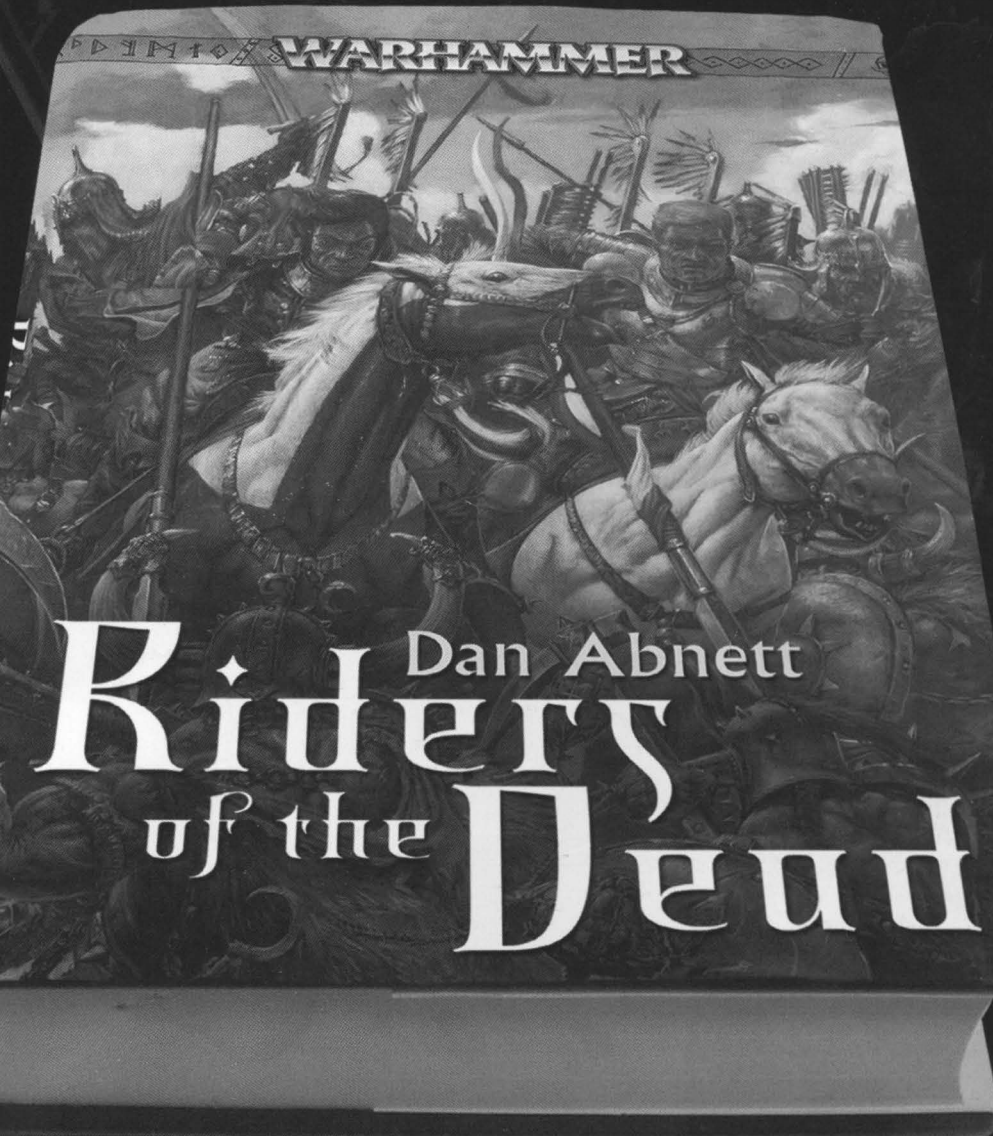
'Good hunting, lady, and good luck,' her pilot called.

'I won't need luck for this. I anticipate no problems.'

With that she turned and strode out of the bridge. *

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- **A SHIP CALLED RUMOUR by Dan Abnett**

Corsairs, swinging on lines, were now swarming over the poop rail. Tende, hefting a long-handled stabbing axe of curious and no doubt Ebonion design, led a repulse with ten men, including Junio and Fahd. Backing away, wondering where on earth he could run to, Sesto heard the swishing of steel, the crack of breaking bone, the yelp of the dying. Blood ran across the decking, following the lines of the boards.

- **THE BEGUILING by Sandy Mitchell**

Something shrieked in the darkness, and burst through the surrounding under-growth. A smoking crater had been gouged out of the left side of its body, a mortal wound to any normal man, but it just kept coming. Jurgen fired once, exploding its head, and it fell in a shower of putrescence.

- **TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT by Stu Taylor & Shane Oakley**

THE TALE OF THE WIDOW

'Could have flung a decent amount of gold your way, considering the number of funerals I've caused'.

- **MEAT WAGON by C.L. Werner**

Suddenly, from the darkness of a dozen doorways, from the shadows filling alley and lane, horrible shapes loped into the fading light. Each was lean, pale skin stretched tight over lanky limbs and wasted bellies, tattered mockeries of garments draped about loins or cast over shoulders. Long claws tipped each of the creatures' hands, talons more suited to a vulture than anything resembling a man.

- **WARP SPAWN by Matt Ralphs**

'My friend is coming,' she said, suddenly brightening.

'What friend?'

'My friend. The one I feed sometimes.' She tapped the side of her head. 'I grow him in here.'

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