

Warpspawn

By Roysten Crow

Warpspawn (summary)

In the darkness beneath the cities and soil of the Old World the Skaven muster and plan, scheming against each other and the lands above them. The progeny of Lord-Warlock Morskittar of Clan Skryre hatches a plot against Middenheim and only a small group of hardy adventurers stand between him and a massacre in the City of the White Wolf.

Warpspawn (synopsis)

Warpspawn (text)

'In our darkest time, when all Skavendom wars within itself and the very firmament resounds with the march of our enemies, from our midst will come a saviour, sent by the Horned Rat. Born of Warpstone and subterfuge he will lead us from ruin and to victory over our foes.'

Ancient Skaven Prophecy

Prologue

In the heart of a dimly lit chamber an altar of purest Warpstone throbbed with barely suppressed power. The surface bore an aura of terrible consuming darkness that rose and fell with its own grim pulse, the black light voraciously devouring its opposite and allowing only fleeting glimpses of the intricate runes and sigils etched deep into every portion of the stone.

Laid supine upon the altar a writhing figure was partially visible. Bathed fully in the diabolic halo it remained half-submerged in the unnatural radiance of the magical rock.

The creature might have been a white-coated Skaven female at some long lost time but now it was scarcely recognisable as such. Vile intent had cast it from a natural state and into that of a warped horror that offended the eye.

The left arm of the transmogrified wretch was a suckered and wriggling tentacle while the right had formed into an atrophied, feline paw. Its restless skin twitched and was peppered with scales and small thorny protrusions that left occasional space for a tuft of sweat-dampened white fur.

The head of the monstrosity was terribly distorted after being touched repeatedly by the eager taint of Warpstone. The bulging orbs that served as featureless eyes stood upon stalks of veined flesh and arose from a slack chin.

Above the extended eyes lay a pink rodent ear while to the left there existed a quaking nose, its ranks of whiskers now stunted and crooked. A circular mouth to the right was embellished with tiny hooked teeth, much like the yawning maw of a leech. From that needle-toothed maw came a shrill squeak of almost painfully high pitch. It was a scream of self-loathing and unendurable agony.

Morskittar watched without sympathy from the depths of the shadows. Loitering as a pernicious spectre he impassively studied the Clan Moulder Warpmasters tending the delivery of the female's young.

It had cost the Lord of Decay dearly to gain their unique services and even more to gather the quantities of Warpstone necessary for the experiment.

The female had been selected from the best slave stock to be his mate because

of her acute but latent sorcerous ability and of course, for her remarkable resistance to the eager fingers of mutation.

After their coupling, the Warpmasters had begun infusing her body with religiously measured amounts of the precious powder, suffusing her with raw magic, bloating every cell of her being with power.

As uncontrollable mutation loomed, the Clan Moulder Skaven had employed their extensive knowledge of transforming living organisms and made sure that as much mutating energy as possible was channelled away from the foetuses and into the hapless mother.

Despite her abnormal tolerances the sheer volumes of Warpstone forced into her system had gradually begun to twist and remould her flesh until she had been reduced to the repugnant thing presented before him.

Her cries to be granted release from her duress fell solely upon the purposefully deaf ears of the Warpmasters. They were accustomed to the pitiful, impassioned pleadings of their living subjects from their toil in the Clan nest at Hell Pit and were now quite unmoved by any such sounds of anguish.

As the first of his engineered progeny were vomited out into the world from the shrieking female the intrigued Lord-Warlock of Clan Skryre moved closer.

The frantic cries became all the more strident when she spied her first-born, though first-*spawn* was perhaps a more accurate term after considering its visage.

The mewling slug of distorted and pulsating meat was quickly carried away as it preceded an eerie reptilian creature without head or legs. This was followed in turn by a segmented juxtaposition of rodent and insect that was mercifully stillborn.

An obese, milky white infant emerged next. Despite its inflated size it seemed normal enough until its pale skin suddenly erupted with purple flames that struggled to be seen through the impenetrable shell of midnight wrought by the altar.

The unnaturally intense flames caused no harm to the source but were not so discriminating towards other tissue and the mother broke into paroxysms when the ignition of the incendiary infant scorched her legs.

Acting with celerity a Warpmaster grabbed it about the torso with some iron pincers and cautiously carried the infernal child away, hastening his movements when the metal began to melt and drip away because of the furnace projected from the babe's hide.

Another aberration was excreted, its body seemingly devoid of a skeleton. Rendered a loose blubbery sac it shuddered and hissed malevolently as a reedy, near fleshless abomination joined the monstrous litter and glared up with three compound eyes.

Morskittar glared intently at the proceedings with a sense of growing trepidation.

'This is all very entertaining but there must be a normal born. I *need* a normal offspring for my plan to work,' he thought trenchantly, his concern at total disappointment increasing with every disfigured arrival.

An inert and fuzzy feline hybrid was drawn away, the foetus' innards too malformed to permit it the initial spark of life.

A hideous Siamese quad was then expelled with some difficulty. Linked by the spine, the skins of the wriggling Skaven were completely transparent to flagrantly display the movement of each muscle and the throb of every pulse along its meandering network of veins.

Morskittar breathed a sedate sigh of relief when an apparently normal, healthy, hairless and blind Skaven infant emerged.

While permitting himself a concealed smile of satisfaction the last child chose to arrive and exploded into view.

The wowl of the mother rose in pitch to an impossible ultrasonic peak before

trailing into a dying gurgle, her entire abdomen launching upward to decorate the ceiling with a wet slap. Blood flew out and flecked everything within six paces of the altar as fragments of intestine rained lazily down over the entire area, the tune being a grotesque mixture of pattering drizzle and soft squelches.

The incarnadine child arose with rampant glee painted across its devilish countenance and four lithe arms unfolded from about its chest to reveal razor-edged claws adorning each digit.

The wiry physique of the offspring ran with obscuring gore but beneath could be seen the dark thorny skin it wore instead of fur.

A lumpy and elongated skull bore a lone eye of red beneath a heavy brow with long horns curling back from its nearby temples. The long snout of the beast held twin rows of curved teeth and the dangling shreds of meat that were currently lodged between the flesh-rending shards served to graphically confirm their purpose.

The Warpmasters hastily employed a fresh set of the long metal pincers. With caution they snagged the matricidal creature while it writhed in the bloodied pit of sundered viscera that was its parent's stomach. The creature squealed loudly in atrabilious protest, suggesting that the mere touch of the pincers somehow brought it pain. The abomination clawed at the metal, ploughing deep furrows before resorting to slashing wildly about its gore-dripping frame.

The Warpmasters dropped it into a cage before swiftly and securely locking the incensed monster inside. Returning to the altar a mere glance confirmed the fears about their organic product.

The female was dead and the eight other unborn siblings had been slain by the beast's impatient escape from the smothering confines of the womb.

The Warpmasters checked the remains and the air rang with metallic snarls as the murderous mutant clawed at its prison with psychotic vigour, squealing with indignation at being confined again.

Morskittar strode over to the only natural child and picked up the cloth-swaddled infant in his gauntleted hands. It was an act of gentleness that seemed surreal when compared to the dominating might of the wicked Lord of bleak sorcery. The newborn mewled softly in pips of ultrasonic, seeking attention and warmth from the parent.

'He will suffice,' the Lord of Decay silently decided, drawing it into the folds of his ragged, sigil-embroidered robes.

'What do you wish done with the others, Lord-Warlock Morskittar?' asked the piebald Warpmaster, the one with three jagged scars traversing his snout, no doubt gained from venturing too close to a dangerous creation.

The eldritch mutants were of no use to him but they could still prove beneficial in ensuring the Clan's silence on this most delicate of matters.

'Take them back to Hell Pit. Present them to Packlord Verminkin as a gift from Clan Skryre. He can do with them as he wishes because like this infant, they do not exist,' he said, striding from the room with his prize.

'As you wish,' the Warpmaster attested with poorly concealed joy. His eyes were suddenly flicking across the subjects with a rabid and inquisitive thirst, the possibilities and opportunities the warped infants offered making his hair visibly stand on end.

Chapter one

Morskittar lounged restfully in the familiar comfort of his age-old throne. The air in the great Council chamber was cool and dry, like that found in a vintage tomb. No noise save the deep rhythmic breath of the twelve Lords of Decay disturbed the serenity. But it was a pensive quiet, one that contributed immeasurably to the oppressive ambience of dread that had been fused into the very structure of this hallowed cathedral of

ultimate dark power.

The hall itself was too gloomy to allow its outer walls to be discerned, making it seem infinite and foreboding at most, intimidating at the very least.

A powerful spotlight of deep red lanced from above, issuing from an unseen source. The disembodied beam fully lit a copper circle that was six paces wide, making the metal glow with ghostly effulgence, highlighting the triangular symbol of the Horned Rat that had been embossed across it in jet.

A black stone table surrounded the crimson-lit disc of metal, running twelve paces from its circumference. This solid arena bore only one aperture, the breach being wide enough to permit three abreast access to the core.

Beyond this gap lay the huge dark doors that offered entry to the hall, but due to the deliberate abstinence of lighting the portals could barely be detected. Only the empurpling column of light provided clue as to their location, for the beam also served to scantily illuminated the fur of the heavily armoured elite guard at the sides, their albino pelts tinted via the incarnadine glow.

Directly opposite this entrance lay the symbolic seat of the Horned Rat, set to honour the great God of the Skaven who was the thirteenth member of the Council and its absolute authority.

Six places were equally spaced on either side by a looming dark throne that was occupied by a shadow-cloaked Lord of Decay. The wicked Skaven Lords were identified by an intricate Warpthread Clanbanner hanging before them, the enchanted material bestowed with a shifting unsettling life all of its own.

Morskittar sat to the left of the Horned Rat, opposite his nemesis, the Seerlord Kritislik. Those seats nearer to the spiritual throne of the Skaven God were allocated to the most powerful of the sinister Lords and had remained unchanged for centuries.

The greatest Skaven leaders were currently assembled and that in itself was a cause for no small measure of concern.

Morskittar had been taken unawares at this sudden convening of the Council. The sheer scale of influence and power needed to keep the matter at hand from his scrutiny pointed to the work of his greatest rival and adversary.

The religious caste fervently declared their impartiality, yet they seemed to strive against and oppose his plans with suspicious frequency. Now he faced a possible threat unprepared, without having approached and bribed, blackmailed or intimidated the other Lords into aiding him or into at least remaining neutral.

Scowling within the depths of his hood, the stench of his neighbour - Arch-Plaguelord Nurglitch - reached his nostrils.

Morskittar bore an intense animosity toward Clan Pestilens and would gladly see them crushed. He considered them far too ambitious and although this was a quintessential Skaven trait, the Plague Monks were avaricious to the point of reckless stupidity. Their Clan had twice plunged Skavendom into bitter civil war as a direct consequence of this.

The first occasion was roughly a century after the Manling named Sigmar took his crown in the year of Ratreturn. Thought to be a lost tribe from the time of the great migration one thousand and six hundred years before, the Clan had returned from the distant tropical jungles of Lustria with the powers of plague, mastery of disease and vastly inflated egos.

They had demanded absurdly, without caution or respect, and by their impudence instigated a full-scale civil war. Clan Skryre had been a staunch and brutal participant, bringing its potent arsenals against the would-be usurpers and those rebellious Clans that foolishly allied under the putrid banner of the Plague Priests. The defectors were intent on riding the wave of war into positions within the Council and Morskittar had been determined to stop them.

The hostilities had ended after Clan Eshin employed the purest terror tactics in the year of Shadowknives, systematically assassinating every major quarter of support

for Clan Pestilens.

The Clan created a cloud of such abiding fear that it left the Arch-Plaguelord with little alternative but to make peace. The mediator had been Nurglitch, whose name all successors took thereafter as a mark of veneration and tradition.

It was that first Nurglitch who slew Lord Vask in single combat, taking the title from the felled warrior and gaining Clan Pestilens the Council seat they held to this day.

The second instance of conflict had been the War of Blasphemy. The Clan had introduced the Empire to the delights of the Black Plague and thus wiped out nine-tenths of the human population in the year of Blackflesh. The ravages of their blight had almost permitted the Skaven to defeat the remainder but for the intervention of Manfred.

Rot his name and damn his eternal soul, thought Morskittar, bitterly recalling one of Skavendom's greatest missed opportunities.

Uniting the pockets of survivors, he had brought about coherent resistance that eventually foiled the Skaven's victory eleven years later in the year of Manfredbane.

Left with a swollen sense of self-importance, the conceited and haughty attitude of Clan Pestilens quickly inspired others to try and initiate their downfall. For over six centuries the Plague Monks built their power and bragged. When the wild boasts concerning the effects of the Red Pox upon Bretonnia in the year of Crimsondoom were not fulfilled, the Council gathered to discuss the penalty for this grand failure.

The expulsion of the Clan had been certain in what was sure to be a damning and unanimous vote. While they swaggered smugly the other Lords had plotted and prepared in secret, ensuring that the required verdict for banishment would transpire. Then in what seemed to Morskittar to be an act of sheer desperation the Clan staged an extempore coup.

As sporadic fighting spread throughout the Under-Empire, Morskittar's favoured agent, Ikit Claw, swept the foul Clan and all other warring factions from the capital, allowing Morskittar to become undisputed Lord of all Skavenblight for nearly five centuries. That year was named from the great loss of life that was a consequence of the war and became the year of Ratslaughter.

Morskittar had the honour of having no less than ten separate years named after deeds and acts he had perpetrated during this time.

The Grey Seers tried without success to negotiate peace, declaring this conflict a heinous heresy against the Horned Rat. But Morskittar's rancour brooked no peace with Clan Pestilens, only their utter extermination.

Then on one fateful night the Grey Seers called upon the Horned Rat and the great God answered with a manifestation to quell the ferocious conflict.

Every anniversary of that epic night was now celebrated by all Skaven as an exceptionally holy time. It was said to be the night for the prophesied Great Armageddon to begin, the time when the Skaven would ascend and finally hold dominion over all creation.

It was on that night that the avatar of their God forged the Pillar of Commandments for all to obey and to approve or slay potential applicants to Council membership.

Morskittar vividly recalled the moment he confidently put his hand to the thirteen-sided obelisk of purest Warpstone. Where so many aspiring candidates had been burned by black fire until rendered desiccated and charred husks, Morskittar had been blessed with the Dark Aura. The blessing had bestowed upon him near immortal longevity and staggering power whose limitations he was still exploring to this very day.

His rival, Kritislik, had arisen as Seerlord soon after, his predecessor having been the mortal sacrifice and the summoner of the greatest of Gods.

The year had been labelled the year of the Holynight in honour of the event and

the Great Doomwar immediately followed it. This simultaneous battle against the hordes of Chaos, the legions of the Empire and the armies of Kislev was ordered by the Council and had the desired effect of depleting the Clanrat and Stormvermin population.

Diminishing these bloated numbers helped erase the still festering bitterness and hatred caused by the civil war. The massacres allowed most of Skavendom to start afresh while further weakening their enemies in a moment of direst crisis.

Morskittar's sour musings concerning the Clan of corruption and pestilence were interrupted as the Seerlord slammed the Council Orb onto the table. The jagged ball of Warpstone was said to be the first meteorite ever to fall from the heavens and was struck once for each member present and once for the Horned Rat to make a total of thirteen. Each blow with the orb cast angry multi-hued sparks of magical power that spat outward in all directions, strobe lighting the glowering priest with thirteen rainbow pulses.

Morskittar quickly diverted his full ancient intellect to what would follow, listening to the subtleties of tone, syllable and nuance, seeking the hidden meaning in each word, phrase, and breath. A political tempest was brewing and it could only mean an ill wind for him and his Clan. Facing it would surely prove unwise, so seeking shelter was his preferred and only tactic.

Pasknt, the Warlord-General of all Skavendom was the first to speak, laying the foundations for the conspiracy. Using the Warlord-General to voice their plan meant that the Seerlord was using military matters as his weapon, which was strange considering Clan Skryre's sorcerous creed.

Morskittar wondered if Kritislik intended more Clan Skryre intervention in martial matters. Was all this merely a plot to force him into wasting resources better employed elsewhere?

'The matter I bring to the Council concerns the Manling city of Middenheim. Clan Skreek has demanded more aid to combat the sorcerous opposition the Manlings present.'

The keyword 'demand' was not lost on Morskittar. One did not demand of the Council, one petitioned it. A reaction to such blatancy was planned and it came from Lord Kratch Doomclaw of Clan Rictus with the correct amount of adopted anger.

'Clan Skreek dare demand anything? For generations now they have failed to produce even a minor victory. They give us only failures and endless waste. The Manling sorcerers in the city are mere priests and hedge wizards. If they were bolstered with wizards from those accursed colleges the Elves of Ulthuan founded, then they would have just cause for their whining.'

Morskittar promptly interjected, giving his voice a stern, knowing edge, a tone that whispered that he was fully aware of what was going to transpire here.

'And what would you propose?'

As if I did not know, the unspoken phrase screeched, momentarily throwing Kratch from his tutored text and confirming Morskittar's suspicions that he had been coaxed.

The ancient Warlock wondered what coinage had bought him and whether he could pay better.

'Perhaps we should fight fire with fire, eh Lord Morskittar?' said Warlord Pasknt.

The crass tone was sickeningly translucent to Morskittar, but perhaps it was designed to be so. Was he being goaded onwards into the Seerlord's web? Morskittar decided to remind the Warlord of the many debts that were owed him from past acts.

'As well you know, Warlord, I have always pledged Clan Skryre support for any cause justified as to be beneficial to all of Skavendom.'

'You disagree as to the strategic importance of Middenheim?' posed Pasknt by way of a beleaguered rebuttal.

Once more the Manling word had entered the conversation, the city's slurring title contrasting radically with the abrupt chitterings of Queekish, the Skaven tongue.

Morskittar began to gain some insight into what was unfolding. They wanted heavy Clan Skryre involvement, followed by a subsequent and orchestrated failure to damage his standing. The only way to evade it would be to deflect it, indicating that the problem was one of leadership. But then perhaps this was his anticipated response.

In a heartbeat Morskittar followed such avenues and came to the conclusion that they wanted either his son or his emissary assigned to Middenheim. Escaping the snare would be virtually impossible. The Council had been prepared for this trap and there would be no avoidance of it, short of a colossal blunder occurring on behalf of his foes and they were all far too astute to trip when so much was at stake. But perhaps he could still entangle his enemies in the tendrils of their own intrigue.

'No, but I believe that all Clan Skreek requires is some magical support in conjunction with spiritual guidance. Some Grey Seers, perhaps, to inspire our forces there?'

If he could force the Seerlord into sending agents, whichever of the two targets, be it his progeny or his emissary, then they would at least know where any treachery would most likely stem from.

'A splendid idea, and one I too had been contemplating,' Seerlord Kritislik confessed, adding false enthusiasm before continuing with a hint of premeditated glee.

'But it is assuredly a leadership problem we face in Middenheim. The main concern is who do we send?'

'Why not Lord-Warlock Morskittar's favoured offspring? Your first-son Maulokk would be ideal would he not?' proposed the Arch-Plaguelord with malignant smugness.

He was a predictable conspirator and it would have taken little to gain aid from this quarter. Now Morskittar could not protest without being accused of putting his own interests ahead of the Council's and he was far too knowledgeable to amble into such an obvious and grievous political error.

The Arch-Plaguelord could not resist pushing on with the matter and joyfully did so.

'Yes. You have spent so much of your resources on the Warlock. Let him at last be of some expedient use.'

Morskittar stifled his dark rancour and listened with saturnine impassivity as the innards of the plan spilled out before him as though from a gutted sacrifice.

'An excellent suggestion and a good opportunity for Maulokk to prove his worth,' the Seerlord supplemented.

'And so that Clan Skryre does not have to overextend itself with accompanying Warlocks I shall send a regiment of my best Plague Monks to be of service to him,' said Nurglitch.

'Arch-Plaguelord Nurglitch is too considerate,' Morskittar replied insipidly.

'Think nothing of it.'

'I already do.'

The Arch-Plaguelord sneered within the shadows but remained calm, quashing the fervid Plaguerage for which his Clan was so renowned.

'Very well, let us put it to the vote,' announced Kritislik, knowing that further debate could only weaken his tenuous hold on the support of the other Lords.

The vote went as anticipated. Kritislik had done his work flawlessly by ensuring that enough support existed for the motion to allow him to vote against Nurglitch's solution. When his offspring failed due to sabotage, the Seerlord would be in the position to declare his reservations concerning Maulokk's competence from the outset. Morskittar would have no option but to cast his vote in agreement and show faith and justification in the expenses lavished upon Maulokk.

If Maulokk failed in his allotted task or did not perform to the high expectations of the Council then the future would look stark indeed for the Lord of Decay.

It was clear to him that he would be unable to aid or protect his progeny for two main reasons. Firstly, he would need to channel his resources into undermining Kritislik's work, to protect himself in the event of Maulokk's downfall. Secondly, any assistance would sleight Maulokk's achievements, something he had no wish to do. Not that it mattered, because the others would be ready to block any such extension of succour.

The Seerlord proclaimed the verdict after thirteen strikes of the Orb, his breath brushing aside the wispy trails of vapour that rose from the sparks.

'In accordance with the strictures of the great and all powerful Horned Rat, his Council of Thirteen have decided that the first-son of Lord-Warlock Morskittar of Clan Skryre shall be elevated to position of Commander of the Clan Skreek forces at the Manling city of Middenheim. Be there any more matters to bring before the Council's attention?'

There were none, the only issue had been dealt with fully and to the satisfaction of its perpetrators.

'As Seerlord of the Council of Thirteen I now call this meeting to a close. All hail the Horned Rat.'

After echoing the confirmation of allegiance and adding his voice to the chorus of his fellow Lords Morskittar withdrew, already planning his vengeance.

Chapter two

Maulokk looked leisurely out across the halcyon apparition of the Blighted Marshes, the swamps spreading out to each premature horizon from his position atop a Stormvermin borne litter.

Two Jezzail teams stood protectively beside him, their trained eyes also scanning the scene but rather for danger and with a far more piercing intensity.

A clinging mist skulked over the dark foetid waters and sucking mud, running ethereal fingers through the twisted clumps of black corn and the stranger, more unnatural growths that pock-marked the view like sores upon a diseased belly.

Occasionally an unearthly creature broke the surface of the thick sludge or scuttled from cover of warped vegetation to other such mutant flora, the disfigured beasts never fully entering into view.

The hazy landscape was bathed in dull light from the diffused orb that was the sun which hid fearfully behind the thick, broiling clouds as though afraid to soil its naked rays upon the birthplace of the Skaven hordes.

Maulokk lifted his telescope, pulled it open and examined the stolid form of the slave-hulk as it deserted the area. The structure of this mildewed giant appeared to be as contorted as the surroundings. Sagging wood, rash manufacture and haphazard repair distorted the decks and the hull was laced with festoons of slime and rotten rope.

A wild assortment of oars jutted from the flanks. The makeshift paddles seemed to be placed at random and their sluggish flailing conspired to push the ugly vessel on into the folds of the nebulous middle distance.

A cluster of small coracles buzzed about and scavenged in the craft's wake while the crack of the overseer's lash, screams of pain and the moaning cry of despairing slaves faintly echoed upon the languid morass breeze.

Maulokk panned back to view what the decrepit leviathan had deposited. Around twenty scrawny Humans blinked painfully in the feeble yet still unaccustomed light. Stranded upon a small island, surrounded by deadly guzzling mud they shivered with fear.

Clad in rags and scraps of cloth their flesh was pale from their subterranean confinement and criss-crossed with a plexus of deep scars from the unreserved lick of an eager scourge.

A few Warpstone tokens had gained the unruly specimens from the vessel's

foreboding belly but it was not so much the slaves he was purchasing, more the Hulk Master's silence.

The recalcitrant slaves had already been destined to the terrible fate of being abandoned in the swamps. They were destined to die in a bottomless quagmire or be devoured by one of the strange, unseen and eternally hungry beasts that dwelt in this realm of abused nature. If they lasted long enough they might even perish of starvation.

Maulokk believed it fortunate that their deaths would probably be quick. To him it was better than the rebellious and crippled Manlings deserved. At least through death they would serve Skavendom one final time.

'Begin the testing,' he bellowed to his three lieutenants, the trio located a short distance away to stand poised before his latest experiment.

There was Skrack, a piebald Warlock Master of twelve years who was clad in decorative crimson robes. His left eye had been lost in a fight with a Stormvermin and the jagged cavern was now home to a pulsating chunk of Warpstone. A long hairless scar ran from the stone up into the confines of his hood and trailed down beneath it to his collarbone.

Two ornate and enchanted daggers with rat skull pommels dwelt at the hips of his pouch laden belt while upon his cloaked back lay a curved, serrated sword in a scabbard of Ogre hide.

Skrack was intelligent, competent and highly ambitious but at present still feared Maulokk too greatly to risk challenging him to the Rite of Dominance. Maulokk suspected that the Warlock might have a well-placed patron but had yet to uncover their identity or even their existence to any degree of certainty.

His second aid was Kerick'k, a piebald Warlock Champion in embroidered robes of dark purple and black with a pointed hood and flowing cloak.

The seven-year-old Skaven had been badly burned during a skirmish with Orcs while travelling in the Dark Lands. A trio of Trolls had charged his unit and under the instructions of their Orc handlers the beasts vomited potent bile upon the Skaven regiment holding Kerick'k. Caustic splashes had landed on his face and instantly dissolved the flesh, stripping it away as those before him and more comprehensively drenched perished in agony.

The badly scarred meat of his features were now hidden and protected by a mask of tanned Black Orc skin, the rough pieces knitted together by fat leather stitching.

The Warlock was severely dependent on 'tcheeka', a potent painkiller that he needed most acutely when his acid damaged face blazed with residual suffering. It was a useful blackmail chip that Maulokk could exploit if the need ever arose.

Warpstone had also wrought its insidious effects upon Kerick'k, causing a single curved horn to curl from his brow. The skin mask made it appear to be nothing more than an impressive ornament but it was fully capable of ripping open the belly of an unwary opponent should the Warlock so choose to employ the appendage.

Kerick'k bore a belt of pouches and small bags and a swollen backpack of assorted junk. Being a hoarder by nature he lived to a private proverb of 'You never know when you may need some...' and thus always ensured he had the necessary supplies to cover almost any eventuality.

Maulokk knew that Kerick'k was 'secretly' in the employ of Clan Pestilens. Informed long ago, Maulokk had slain the betrayer of this secret to keep the knowledge of his discovery hidden. If Clan Pestilens ever made a move against him Maulokk would know where it would most likely issue from or gain its support. The added bonus of course was the perfect opportunity to feed the Clan false information through their trusted 'covert' agent.

His third lieutenant was Skrabic, a white furred, five years Warlock Champion in red and black robes with matching hood and cloak. Twin black swords with curved serrated edges lay in crossed back scabbards, the leather straps across his chest filled

with pouches and a row of three throwing knives. Skrabic often envenomed the blades with a toxin of his own devising, causing Maulokk to perpetually carry a small vial of the antidote that had been secretly created to battle this singular source of poison.

Two Skaven skulls, hollowed out and opened lay as shoulder guards over his robes, the bone pauldrons being the remains of his greatest foes whom he had personally slain in Rites and kept as trophies. Skrabic was loyal as much as any Skaven could be and it was he who had gained the stolen Nipponese rockets now ready to be test launched.

There were three projectiles set on a small wooden support rack. The exteriors of the black missiles were painted with mystic runes and Maulokk had significantly altered their interiors with a mixture of science and dark magics to forge a lethal hybrid.

Kerick'k pointed to a fuse, his finger lighting up with a steady opaque flame. The fuse erupted with a scintillating halo and the bloom of sparks crept steadily along the length before disappearing into the casing.

The tail of the rocket spewed a cloud of black sparks and thick smoke before lancing into the air with a tremendous hissing roar. The rocket screeched like a tortured banshee, leaving an arc of dark, acrid smoke as a trail to mark its passage.

Unbridled panic immediately settled on the targeted island. The Humans held their ears and screamed in a futile attempt to blot out the hideous wail while others ran back and forth, trying to locate a means of escape.

Maulokk watched studiously for the imminent effects on flesh but the projectile overshot its mark and pierced the swamp beyond.

A flash of engulfing black light pulsed over the surrounding area and a split second later a geyser of mud, water and dirty steam exploded upward from a broiling base of fire and sickly smoke. Scorched gobs of sod flew high into the air before tumbling lazily back into the water and then sizzling bitterly when the chill swamp robbed them of heat.

'Two paces back. Fire number two,' Maulokk proclaimed.

The second rocket howled into the sky, its cry slicing away the brief spell of dazed quiet.

Maulokk pondered on how the ghastly signal would affect trained troops, for the Nipponese device normally played havoc with morale but this Warpstone variant apparently instilled a paralysing fright that seemed to leave the Humans utterly prone to the impending impact.

The rocket struck solidly in the midst of the island. The pulse of black light issued once more and brought new questions to Maulokk's attention. Was it raw magic discharge? What effects would it have on a sorcerer? Maulokk made a mental note to research the phenomena before the weapon was used in combat.

A concussive shock wave tore outward, shredding the flesh and smashing the bones of the Manlings. Limbs were amputated, bodies were burst and mangled. Warpfire-scorched remains were hurled into the mud to be dragged tardily down into the hidden depths.

The oily smoke cleared, drifting aside under the delicate brush of the wind to reveal the wanton carnage that had been brought to the small isle.

The bestial squeals and groans of the dying and maimed arose to dispel the silence. Numbing shock was giving way to revelation as to the harm visited upon these test subjects.

'Excellent,' Maulokk whispered, looking at the charnel stains and shattered heaps with grim satisfaction.

'Remove the fuse from the third rocket and pack it away. Skrack can join me on the island.'

Maulokk ensured that the device was taken down before moving because he had no wish to be hit by an 'accidental' firing of the deadly missile.

Concentrating his will Maulokk drew on the dark forces within the unseen Winds of Magic that flowed across and saturated the globe. Channelling the accumulated energy into his body he spoke the complex words of Queekish sorcery that would aid in moulding the force. His Warpstone armour seemed to shift restlessly, the mystic metal sensing the kindred magic of the Horned Rat creeping through it.

Maulokk visualised being on the island, creating the scene about him from practised memory. As the picture formed he stood up and sprang into the air, vanishing amidst a ball of sulphurous smoke and rematerialising at the heart of the slaughter.

The soil about him was stained with a thick sticky carpet of spilt blood that still steamed in the cold air. While he began to casually assess the scene, Skrack deposited himself nearby, carried by the same spell.

New weapons were meant to be tested on the field of battle, but the damage to reputation and standing from failure resulted in the vast majority of projects being secretly field tested beforehand. The bribes and funds needed to achieve such sly experimentation were unrecoverable but such expenditure was a necessary investment in case of mishap or problem.

'The Warp Rocket is more powerful than anticipated,' voiced Skrack, drawing a dagger and prodding a limbless, broken torso. 'The kill radius seems to be...three paces?'

'Agreed,' said Maulokk, walking over to a moaning body. Its one remaining arm twitched spasmodically and its mouth drooled lines of red as steam rose from the punctured belly in serpentine curls.

The Manling gurgled pitifully, lost to the tempest of pain of his mortal injuries. Maulokk called Skrack over to verify his findings.

'The trauma seems quite extensive. Even beyond the assured kill area. This one for example...' he said, drawing his own blade and using the tip to indicate. 'Massive tissue damage.'

Employing the point to lift a flap of torn skin on the other arm he revealed the exposed and glistening bones.

'The skeleton seems only minimally damaged. Armour would serve as good protection from the effects of the outer area.'

The Manling under aloof examination reached out to the Skaven. Imploring and shuddering recklessly, the excruciating travail was clearly beyond all endurance.

Maulokk pushed the bloodied digits disdainfully away with his weapon and arose to continue his studies. The Manling exhaled in stuttering gasps and twitched into slow death, cursing all Skaven to his very last heart beat.

'Over here, Lord,' called Skrack.

Maulokk sauntered over, avoiding the deeper mounds of rent meat, viscera and the odd pawing hand.

'Oddly, this one seems less damaged.'

Maulokk looked over the female. Her body bore scorch marks, her left hand was a mangled ruin and her legs bore numerous incapacitating lacerations. Maulokk looked critically towards the smouldering crater at the epicentre of the explosion.

'She was shielded by that Manling,' he declared, gesturing to a ruptured body when he spied it.

'The obstruction's legs are almost non-existent, leaving these to the remaining effects. I think-'

'Lord Maulokk!' a voice called out.

Turning from the visual necropsy Maulokk saw one of Lord-Warlock Morskittar's personal messengers standing at the bank of the main island.

'What does my father want?' he questioned.

'He calls for your presence. In the Hall of Warlocks.'

Maulokk turned to Skrack and sheathed his dagger.

'Finish the assessment and return the last rocket to the workshop. I will join

you later.'

Recalling the power of the spell this time Maulokk focused upon the Hall. He pictured being in the high-vaulted chamber, the ancient Elven architecture covered in Skaven runic script, detailing the names and lives of the Clan's heroes and its mightiest deeds. He conjured the image of the silver and copper Warpstone braziers lining the walls, shaped like curled rats, releasing perfumed incense and acrid Warpstone fumes. He visualised the ranks of glass orbs hovering in the air, suspended by persistent magics, the lightning trapped within casting a flickering illumination about the hall.

When he opened his eyes he was there. A brief hint of pungent sulphur hung in his nostrils and Maulokk removed it by breathing in the heady aroma of the brazier's fumes. Instantly he felt their magical influence coursing through his body, invigorating his being.

The tall, powerful form of his father stood statuesque before him. Draped in black tattered robes only the tip of his armoured snout was visible against the deep shadow that was his frame. His red eyes glowed with a steady incandescent power deep within the folds of his pointed hood. Magic runes flowed along every uneven hem. Wrought in spun silver they sparkled in the reflected strobe pulse of the lightning orbs.

The furtive chink of covered armour sounded as he glided gracefully forward, every movement calculated and co-ordinated.

Maulokk went humbly to one knee, bowing his head to his master, sire and idol. 'Lord-Warlock,' he stated respectfully.

A clawed gauntlet of metal reached out from within the sleeves and touched his shoulder. Maulokk could distinctly feel the awesome enchantments upon the metal. The grip was deceptively gentle for he had once seen his father take hold of an Ogre Warlord, one who had accepted the Skaven's aid and then forgotten his obligations, and torn him in two for his lack of appreciation.

'Arise, first-son,' the ancient Warlock commanded.

Maulokk obeyed instantly, looking up at the Lord of Decay. Morskittar being fully three feet taller than him.

'You have been chosen to become the new Commander in charge of Middenheim. You will have Clan Skreek, several Grey Seers and a Clan Pestilens regiment under your authority. You are permitted to take your aids but no other Clan Skryre forces. Can you succeed in this task bequeathed you?'

'When do I leave, Lord-Warlock?' Maulokk asked with expectant confidence.

'Good. You have ten moons to prepare. Use the time wisely.'

Apprehension suddenly bit into Maulokk. His father would not suggest anything as obvious as caution unless the threat was grave indeed.

'I will not fail you, Lord-Warlock,' he assured in the face of this sudden escalation of jeopardy.

'How goes your work with the Warp Rocket project?' Morskittar enquired, moving from the topic of his appointment and testifying to his inability or unwillingness to elaborate further.

No matter what Maulokk did to keep his work secret from everyone, the Clan Lord would always be fully informed. It did not matter to him because it was no disgrace to have the ruler possess one's secrets. If anything it was an honour to have him take even cursory interest in one's work.

Normally Maulokk would be eager to talk with the parent he so rarely saw, but now he was far more intent on taking on this duty, to finally give his father cause to be proud of his sole offspring.

'It goes well. The first testing indicated great promise.'

The Lord of Decay paused, sensing the restless impatience within the Skaven Warlock. He reflected on how akin Maulokk was to himself as a youth. The sands of a short life span were pouring away with terrifying alacrity, pushing into living at a whirlwind pace. There were so many plans and plots and so little time to implement

them.

The need for haste was no longer a factor in Morskittar's life, his longevity gave him time enough to achieve all his ends at any pace that suited his purpose but because of his mortal origins, he could appreciate Maulokk's desire for speed.

'No doubt you wish to start your work. I shall leave you to commence it.'

Maulokk bowed deeply and brought the teleporting sorcery back to the forefront of his mind, for the Hall of Warlocks bore no doors. Such isolation ensured that only a Warlock who had been considered worthy enough to be carried in by another could even enter the sacred location. Once there they could commit its appearance to memory and be able to return on their own power from then on.

Maulokk wanted to walk and think awhile, so he chose to rematerialise in the dark labyrinth of lightning orb lit tunnels that was the underground district of Clan Skryre.

Strange chemicals, pungent gases and exotic drugs created a distinctive cocktail of smells in the rough passages where the Warlocks of the Clan walked. They were the masters of magic and science who contrived to build ever more deadly devices for Skavendom's pernicious arsenal, and in this district they had power absolute.

Apprentices trailed the Warlock-Engineers from the greater levels of sorcerous proficiency. These attentive students were either the offspring of Clan Skryre Warlocks or those taken in for possessing potential and bought like so much chattels from parent and Clan.

Some would be those sold to Clan Skryre by wealthier Skaven who hoped to see their progeny become a Warlock-Engineer or simply to relieve the family of their presence and therefore the burden of another hungry belly.

The slave-like service of the apprentices to their masters prepared them for initiation into the ranks of Warlocks. If they were not judged suitable for arcane training it also helped them be instructed for lowlier positions.

Mingled amongst the wandering ranks of Warlocks and the eager hopefuls such distinct lesser castes could be seen going about their singular business.

There were Poison Wind Globadiers who were each smothered in the complex and ornate protective mask that verified their caste. Throwers of deadly glass orbs filled with Warpstone gas they generally wore their fume shielding masks for prolonged periods. This allowed them to accustom to the heavy, sense restricting equipment and operate unhindered on the battlefield.

A Globadier unused to the vision distortion of the mask's eyepieces could hardly be expected to place these short-ranged, hand-hurled and exceedingly fragile missiles with reliable accuracy.

Warpfire Throwers ambled in steady columns, ferrying parts, weapons and empty or battle-ready fuel barrels. The teams always strove to excel in every aspect of their duty.

The Skaven operator trained his aim and meticulously cleaned and tended his entrusted weapon. To be able to clear a blockage or repair a fault in a crisis situation he had to become intimately familiar with both it and its mechanism.

Meanwhile his partner, the fuel barrel carrier, built the capabilities of his body by carrying rocks and other heavy weights. He practised to support the volatile mixture of Warpstone powder, flammable chemicals and Warlock-Engineer magic with speed and above all steadiness. Any jolting would aggravate the incendiary brew within and result in a catastrophic and consistently fatal explosion.

Warplock Jezzail teams carried their decorated and massive firearms with no small measure of pride. Those with less experience held the firing rest and watched the other. Learning all that they could from such study they strove to one day be bestowed a prestigious Jezzail of their own.

Only the most favoured were elevated to a level of stature where they could be entrusted with the mighty weapon and its valuable Warpstone ammunition.

The upper echelons of the Clan hierarchy deliberately cultivated the rivalry between teams in feats of marksmanship. This ensured a high degree of competitive accuracy and rapid reloading that would be of great value on any battlefield.

The frequent contests were held with ordinary lead ammunition, the explosive Warpstone bullets being far too precious to squander. Those who won such tournaments could enjoy substantial rewards such as Warpstone Tokens and authority over other teams. Such alluring prizes were greatly vied for.

Other Skaven scampered about amidst the various other classes. Walking domesticated giant brethren, carrying messages and packages, running errands they facilitated the day to day running of the Clan and kept the Skaven war machine ticking over.

The Skaven thus allotted were the lowliest Clan caste, a body of menials and borderline Skavenslaves whose exertion and loyalty kept them safe from being returned to the terrible overcrowding and starvation that was rampant in all Skavendom where even the fittest found survival a perpetual gruelling feat.

Such a fate would be for the fortunate because most who displeased their masters would be sent to the lower levels in slavery. There they would toil amidst the crumbling, flooded tunnels as part of a short and very painful existence.

Maulokk was locked in intense thought now that his mind had been further stimulated by exposure to the Warpstone fumes pervading in the hall's atmosphere. His brain thundered onward at a rapid pace, evolving ideas and taking them through to varieties of conclusions, assessing eventualities and myriad variables.

Strolling through the winding network of tunnels, the Skaven parted before his brisk march as they did for all Warlocks possessed of rank.

The area was replete with labs, workshops, and halls where the Warlocks tinkered and which were often lit up with the discharge of an experiment or the flash of a mishap.

The air reverberated with the squeaks and squeals of triumph, failure, frustration, pain and disappointment. The assorted howls and screams even rode over the incessant clang and rattle of metal being wrought.

A particularly loud thunderclap drew Maulokk's attention with its close proximity. Flame, debris and scorched bodies belched into the tunnel ahead, spilling from an adjacent workshop. Skaven ran out, their bodies completely wreathed in bright flames.

Maulokk detoured to avoid the congestion caused by what was just an everyday occurrence in the district.

Walking past the four black-furred Stormvermin guardians posted outside he entered his own warren, calling for his servant the moment he was in.

Crot was an elderly Skaven who torpidly limped out, his dark fur balding in places to reveal pale skin amidst the clearings.

'You summoned, master?'

'Yes. Go to Ekritik. Tell him that I want to know who presented the order to have me placed as Commander of Middenheim. Also, have him uncover how Seerlord Kritislik voted and have my escort sent here immediately. I have business outside of our district.'

'Very good, master,' Crot replied blankly, departing with a speed usually absent from one of his advanced years.

Ekritik was the primary contact for Maulokk's organisation of informants. The ears and eyes he had set within the Clans and in Skavenblight were well placed and well paid for their fealty, although he still maintained a small body of exceptionally trustworthy agents situated in the spy ring to monitor the informers. Such spies were to reveal any wavering allegiance or possible treachery. It was a common practice and a precaution most Warlocks of stature undertook to ensure their self-protection from rivals or spiteful ill-wishers.

Maulokk sat down and removed his sculpted helm. The spiked and horned armour had been expertly infused with Warpstone during its forging, as had the entire suit. The dark Skaven runes upon its surface not only provided him from added protection from physical harm but also failed to inhibit his sorcerous abilities. It was a drawback that all armour save that forged by Chaos held for all spellcasters, leaving them terribly unprotected at close quarters.

The armour was also vindictive when struck. Able to absorb the impact energy of a turned blow it could transform it into a burst of retributive, malicious power.

The suit had been a gift from Morskittar on his first birthing moon and was Maulokk's most prized possession for that reason alone, although its dense shell often served him superbly.

The Black Hunger was beginning to curl and tighten in his guts, playing his intestines with anxious fingers. If he was to concentrate on something other than eating it would require sating. Wandering to the food hoard he removed a side of salted Halfling and began idly gnawing upon it.

Maulokk filled a Warp pipe as he munched. Stuffing the blend of powdered Warpstone, Arabian tobacco, and various potent herbs into the pipe he created a magic flame with a demanding click of his fingers. Lighting the mixture he drew in a deep draught of the spicy vapours and instantly slumped back.

The concoction quickly permeated his synapses, expanding his awareness, refining his thought processes to a crystal peak as he sank into the tornado vortex of contemplation that was a Warp trance.

Why was he being granted the command? He was only four years of age, which wasn't even fully mature by Skaven standards. True, he was many times more powerful than others of such early years, a fact borne out by his attaining of Warlock-Engineer Lord status.

Maulokk's preternatural affinity for magic had him swiftly surpassing his tutors and to continue his education Morskittar had appointed Chief-Warlock Ikit Claw to supervise the more eclectic studies in sorcery.

Ikit Claw was his father's most trusted and loyal agent. He was the genius behind the Doomwheel and was a master of the magics of Skaven, Elf and Manling, good and evil alike. Ikit had raided the repositories of lore throughout the world and assimilated all he could find to gain an arcane mastery that was virtually unequalled by any outside of the Council.

The intricately-masked Skaven had lost hair and flesh from his skull and right arm to a failed experiment and had built an exoskeleton of iron, crystal and brass to bestow strength and mobility to his withered limb.

The capabilities of the artificial arm greatly surpassed those of the natural, but not without sacrificing much of his manual dexterity as indemnity. Such a drawback was amply compensated by the incorporation of a condensed Warfire projector, which was a useful surprise to give any enemy in the heat of battle.

Ikit's knowledge of hermetic matters was comprehensive. He had conversed with the greatest of Daemons and stared unaffected into the Stygian bowels of every horror and terror existence could offer.

Ikit was always kept busy on Morskittar's various quests and errands, making Maulokk's periods of tutelage under the great Warlock rare and exceedingly precious.

It was akin in some ways to the situation with his father. But the longer periods with the Lord of Decay were spent teaching him the intricacies and dealings of politics and leadership and how best to use and exploit the complex and vague strictures of the Horned Rat to his advantage.

A Skaven who could master the serpentine maze of commandments which were so readily open to endless interpretation could evade most dangers and justify almost any actions. Intelligible and decipherable religious laws were for Manlings and Elves. The Horned Rat preferred confusion and vagueness to rule his beloved children.

From the pit of the trance he became aware of Crot's return. The old Skaven had been a long time retainer of Lord-Warlock Morskittar and since Maulokk's birth and his mother's simultaneous death, Crot had undertaken the raising of the infant Warlock. It was not much of a duty because most of Maulokk's time was taken up by military, martial, academic, and sorcerous training.

The wizened figure addressed him without inflection or tone. It was a neutral voice that one could almost evade understanding because of its blandness.

'Ekritik will get word to you, master. Just as soon as he finds something.'

Maulokk nodded absently, the move so minute as to almost be unnoticeable. His mind was thundering with other matters.

The instigator of the post, if not his father, would only be a mouthpiece for another agency. Even so such knowledge could still prove useful.

Maulokk was sure that Morskittar would have shared the secret if he were the one behind the promotion, so the appointment came from a possible enemy. Such an act meant that he was expected to fail either to destroy him or as was more likely, to disgrace his father. Well he would not flounder. He would succeed and would use this command to further his own wealth and standing in the process.

To aid him in meeting the rigid demands of the task ahead he would need a reliable fighting force, one whose iron loyalty could not easily be swayed. It was time to bring his long running plans to fruition.

The intoxicating vigour of the Warptrance began to ebb, letting his pulse slow and his mind settle like the sediment in an agitated wine bottle.

Maulokk donned his helmet and straightened his cloak before heading out. The awaiting escort of Stormvermin fell in about him as wall of sable fur and spiked steel.

Maulokk traced a direct path to the edge of the blue tinted, sorcerously lit territory of Clan Skryre. The perimeter was manned by loyal Skaven troops who ensured that no other Clan could easily enter the realm of the Warlocks. Not that any Clan was that stupid or suicidal. Ranks of Jezzail and Warfire thrower sentries were ready to butcher any trespasser long before they even reached the defence cordon.

Beyond the barricades lay sprawling twisted tunnels. The crooked passages were lined with methane burning cressets that gave a paltry illumination via assorted wild bursts of red and blue flame.

The sedate and infrequent radiance revealed discarded remains of skin and hairless tails that were mostly Skaven in origin. Amongst the organic refuse scuttled the Skaven's less evolved kin. The little brethren diligently picked at what few edible morsels they could find.

The stink of excrement and rampant decay was overpowering and stung Maulokk's nostrils with every ammonia-saturated breath.

The tunnels were in no single district and were thus populated almost exclusively by rogue slaves and small Skaven warbands, all of whom scuttled for cover before the Clan Skryre group passed them by.

At the end of a corridor a large metal cage accepted the group and lowered them down a vast shaft by the rotation of a huge treadmill. Several battle-crippled Rat Ogres were tethered within to have their plodding gait pay out the stout chain connecting to the uppermost corners of the square cage.

Water droplets from high above continuously fell upon them, the leakage from the surface bringing chill drizzle to the subterranean world. The rain filled the shaft with the frenzied cacophonous drum roll of droplets dashed upon the stone.

Brought to the seamy lower levels they disembarked and began to march past the dense mobs of slaves and lesser Clans that choked their route.

These Skaven fought to survive amidst the squalor and the filth, adhering to the Skaven proverb of 'the Horned Rat created the aged, weak and crippled to be food for the strong'.

The walls ran with reeking effluent from the upper levels, washed down by the

steady flow of swamp moisture creeping in from the Blighted Marshes.

Barbarous overseers forced teams of miserable Skavenslaves into fierce labour. These tyrants were generally former slaves themselves and therefore they were dedicated to their cruelty to avoid being returned to such a fate.

The Skaven group Maulokk sought was currently engaged like so many others, in propping up the crumbling passages. The slaves strove to defeat the everlasting rot while submerged waist deep in freezing sludge and goaded on by the lash.

Maulokk approached a burly overseer and told him to fetch the Stormvermin known as Karikk. The Skavenslave driver quickly delegated his current role to a lesser and scuttled off into a gloomy side tunnel where strings of thick water cascaded down in lumpy torrents from the many cracks above.

Karikk had been a Stormvermin warrior in the minor Warlord Clan of Rakib. The Clan had proven its ability and had been commissioned with numerous tasks from many sources, working for whoever paid the most. The mercenaries became so adept and ruthlessly efficient that the Grey Seers had even entrusted them with the awesome responsibility of retrieving a Warpstone meteorite that had been spat from the skies onto Kislev.

Prior to this, rumours had started circulating in waves that grew more potent with every victory the Clan earned. It was said that the Seerlord himself was grooming Clan Rakib for some insidious purpose. It was also posed that the albino guard of the Seers were actually transformed Stormvermin. Many thought that Clan Rakib were on their way to becoming a new regiment of elite guard for the Priesthood.

Through his network, Maulokk had discovered the Clan's mission a few hours earlier and had promptly sent his own agents into Kislev to recover the precious heavenly body. He also sent along an agent whose loyalty he was having serious doubts about, ensuring that the turncoat knew nothing of the real objective.

The agents reached the site first and as instructed, posed as Grey Seers. With this authority they proceeded to enlist a small Warlord Clan from the local area and had them raid the nearby villages. Afterwards they left a distinct trail back to where Clan Rakib would most likely emerge from the Under-Empire.

The untrustworthy agent was slain in his sleep. The meteorite was encased in a protective lead orb and secreted within the body of the terminated Skaven and both were carried back to Maulokk in secret.

When Clan Rakib rose up from the darkness it was into a Manling ambush. The Clan was victorious over the paltry militia, but it only impressed upon them with sterner gravity that they had been set up. When they reached the crater and found it bare, all lingering doubt was expelled.

Never renowned for their tolerance of failure, the Grey Seers, brooked no excuses, especially since Maulokk's covert rumour mongering had suggested that perhaps the Clan had stolen the Warpstone with the intention of using it to buy themselves free of any problems arising from its loss. This would then allow them to keep the remaining, considerable wealth for themselves.

The Clan leaders were publicly devoured alive and the rest of its forces were hurled into slavery as a lesson to any others that planned treachery against the Horned Rat's clergy.

It had not matter whether the Grey Seers believed in the rumours but it mattered that the Clanrats did. This had been the force responsible for forcing the Priesthood into acting in such an extreme manner. If they had failed to exact retribution against even possible traitors, then they would have lost some of the fear that made them so powerful. It was fear that quelled even the slightest disobedience through mortal dread of the physical consequences and spiritual ramifications. Without it Skavendom would show the Seers no respect and little mercy.

The overseer pushed Karikk out before him with a petulant shove. The powerfully built Skaven was clearly a demeaned mess. His bristly black fur was

saturated with stagnant water and hung flat, displaying his huge frame to the full. Although thin and malnourished it still had strong muscles lingering beneath.

Karikk's movements were listless, like those of someone psychologically broken and simply waiting for death's claws to strike. He was offering no resistance or fear to the welcomed end to the burden of living.

'This is the one you requested, Lord,' said the overseer, regarding the despondent wreck with disdain and then kicking into the backs of Karikk's legs to bring him to his knees. The Stormvermin dropped into the waters and snarled with the pain before sagging slightly in defeat.

The rank odours of fur that was soaked with sewage assailed Maulokk's nostrils. The stink was dizzying in its unwelcome intensity.

'Grab him,' Maulokk stated flatly to his guards.

There was a sudden clatter of armour and the overseer was instantly pinned to the side of the sodden tunnel. His feet left the ground and he was held firmly against the wall by two of Maulokk's guards.

Emitting long, ultrasonic squeaks of submission he whipped his tail in fear and churned the foul water with the hairless appendage. The Skaven's whole body was quivering with baffled calamity.

Drawing his dagger, Maulokk presented the enchanted blade hilt first to Karikk. The weapon had been mixed with Warpstone dust during its forging and inscribed with mystic runes to pierce all but enchanted armour. Furthermore it had been treated with many Skaven hearts so it would cause grievous trauma to that species of flesh.

'Take it and kill him,' Maulokk lightly offered.

As Maulokk predicted, Karikk was obviously perturbed but could not pass up the opportunity to kill the Skaven who had so frenetically flogged and brutalised him. The Stormvermin's elevated position in society had made him a recipient of the most hateful treatment and now he could exact his vengeance.

Karikk took the blade and held it hesitantly, weighing up the alternatives. Suddenly resolved as to his course of action he sprang up and thrust the blade into the overseer's stomach.

Slitting upwards, Karikk used the serrated edge like a saw and closed in to witness the agonised gaze of the minor tyrant. The freed intestines slipped out and splashed into the shallow river of foetid fluid covering the floor.

The Stormvermin slave tugged the blade free. The teeth were now clogged with morsels of rent muscle and the last breath of the overseer issued into Karikk's features.

The eviscerated body went limp and the guards let the lifeless form fall into the waters to be carried away on the sluggish current. The cadaver twirled gently while trailing a polluting slick of guts behind it.

Karikk turned to Maulokk, wondering if it were now his turn to die.

'You are Karikk,' Maulokk announced. 'Stormvermin of the now extinct Clan Rakib.'

The Skaven nodded even though it was not a question but a rather a statement. His grip tightened on the hilt of the dagger with the recollection of his Clan's downfall.

The guards saw the move and readied to protect their charge should Karikk choose to attack. If Maulokk were injured while in their charge they would be working in these tunnels as slaves, or floating next to the overseer.

'You were made a slave at the whim of the Grey Seers. They set you up to destroy you. They did not like you having power.'

The words were clearly fitting Karikk's patchy knowledge of events so Maulokk decided to let him piece the rest together more convincingly by himself and chose instead to simply make the offer.

'I require loyal warriors, an elite who will receive my favour and my protection. You now know that to trust any other risks deceit and treachery. Being the first-son of Lord-Warlock Morskittar I have many foes that would use my forces against me and

then dispose of them afterwards to obfuscate the trail. So here is my proposal - accept my patronage and find twenty others to join you who will not jeopardise your position with my betrayal and you will be taken into my service and out of slavery. What is your response?'

'If I refuse?'

'You are wondering whether I shall have you executed for murdering the overseer?' said Maulokk, but such things were actually far from his mind. 'Nothing so petty. I shall say that it was I who slew him because it suited my purpose to do so. No one will question such a statement.'

The Stormvermin paused in thought. It was a trait that Maulokk approved of because it showed that Karikk was not rash and worked through the consequences of his actions. He wondered briefly whether it had always been so with the warrior or if this was a new aspect of his psyche that had bloomed since his fall into servitude.

'Then I accept...my Lord,' he certified.

'Choose your comrades carefully and return here. I shall send one of my aids to escort you to your new warrens.'

Maulokk instantly turned and marched away, intending not to linger and waste valuable time that could be better employed in more profitable tasks.

During the return trip a Skaven Clanrat fell across his path, mumbling incoherently, having successfully hidden himself from the scrutinising gaze of the guards. The Stormvermin quickly raised weapons, cursing their lapse of security.

'Halt!' announced Maulokk, recognising the coded phrases lodged within the rambling litany. Plus, no normal Clanrat could deceive the eyes of his guards to such an extent.

'Leave it,' he commanded, and put his foot to the Skaven's stomach.

He felt the message slide secretly into his greave and then with a hiss he kicked the Skaven agent away with a disgusted warning.

'Begone scum, before I have my guards tear open your gullet!'

Once he was back in the spice-scented privacy of his warren, Maulokk sat down and began to read the coded script upon the neatly folded piece of parchment.

'Appointment - Clan Pestilens. Grey Seers and Plague Monk regiment present. Seerlord Kritislik voted against.'

With distraught effort he channelled incendiary force into the paper, allowing it to be devoured by black flickering flame. Casting aside the ashen husk he considered the situation.

Clan Pestilens may have presented the idea but as he had suspected all along, the Seerlord was its conjurer. Voting to conceal his involvement and dissolve any link to Maulokk's expected and engineered failure was an indication and the sending of Grey Seers the proof. The fact that there was to be more than a single priest hinted that one or more would be expendable and could be executed for sabotaging Maulokk's plans or even for directly assassinating him.

He would also need to be wary of the Plague Monks because they would hold hidden agents of the blackest conspiracy, ready to make use of their incognito position and plot against him. Plus there was the added threat of an ambitious Monk, eager to impress his superiors by ruining Maulokk via an audacious, independent attack.

His three lieutenants arrived together and Maulokk spoke frankly with them.

'I have been made Commander of Clan Skreek at Middenheim.'

'Congratulations, Lord,' said Skrabic warmly.

The others seemed equally eager, seeing an opportunity for wealth and personal advancement. Maulokk continued and spoke with adopted zeal to lend authenticity to his bogus plans.

'So that you may ready with full knowledge of my objectives, my plan is to mount an extensive period of tunnel expansion, funded by raids and abductions while a steady build up to an invasion takes place. It may take a few years but the taking of

Middenheim will grant us all places in the Hall of Warlocks. You will need to prepare for the journey immediately. Work on the Warrockets will continue at the city so pack the relevant equipment and the rest of the rockets. We only have ten moons, so make haste.'

Maulokk called back Skrabic after the trio bowed and began to leave. The others would be rapidly heading to various contacts and instigating a convoluted subterfuge of plots.

If their masters were of lesser status then these patrons would expect him to do the opposite of the declared plan and respond accordingly. But his aids had masters of considerable stature who would take such reasoning further and penetrate such simple deception. Initially they would assume he would again do the contrary and act as he had actually announced.

While they readied to thwart his invasion they would no doubt think their prey ignorant of their deviousness. The notion of them realising their folly gave Maulokk a sobering sense of satisfaction.

He waited until Skrack and Kerick'k were out of earshot before speaking to the slightly more trusted Skrabic.

'Go to the lower levels. There are slave teams working on the collapsed Clan Creok tunnels. A Stormvermin named Karikk will be waiting there. Take him and those accompanying him to the warren opposite Nekick's dwelling. I want them tended well. Have them fed, purchase several good females, get them washed, dressed, and see to any other needs they may have.'

Maulokk gave the underling a pouch of Warpstone tokens to settle any debts from pandering to the new warriors and sent him on his way.

Two moons would pass before he visited his new recruits. Any who succumbed to the temptation to flee would be gone and well rid of by then, while those that remained were to be equipped in the best armour and with the best weapons. Maulokk had already secured the services of top Clan Gnarsh blacksmiths in preparation. The skills of the renowned and greatly proficient Clan armourers were highly prized and certainly not cheap. Their unparalleled skill at forging the tools of war made it a cruel irony that their Clanrats were such lousy fighters, rarely fielded in battle because of an innate capability for getting butchered.

Once his troops were outfitted for conflict he would have them trained and fed food laden with stimulants and drugs to enhance their speed and muscle development. They would become the core of a completely loyal and most deadly fighting force.

If this hypothetical recruitment procedure worked there were many more slaves in the same situation as Karikk and his fellows, all superior in mind and body from existence in the lower levels. There existed in Skavenblight an untapped well of heartless killers that was just waiting to be offered the greatest things Skaven hearts could desire. Freedom, power, luxury and a chance at redemption and revenge were sought after prizes to all, but for these doomed and wretched Skaven slaves they would be infinitely more cherished.

In the forthcoming days he would begin to issue payments and open the eyes he had cultivated in the midst of Clan Pestilens.

It was difficult to find anyone receptive to bribery amongst the devout, pseudo-religious Clan but Skaven slaves and servants were not so arduous to persuade into placing their allegiance elsewhere for profit. Fear of the Clan made such informers expensive luxuries and like most others, Maulokk could only use such agents in time of direst need. This was such a time though.

His main priority would be to try and discover whom amongst the regiment of Plague Monks was newly assigned and therefore possibly an agent placed by the Arch-Plaguelord to ruin him.

Another problem would be the Warlord of Clan Skreek. This general would be most resentful of Maulokk's appointment, especially considering that it was a Warlock

casting him aside and not a Grey Seer or another warrior.

Maulokk's predecessor at Middenheim was superfluous to the scheme and therefore had to be dealt with before he harmed any plans. Maulokk knew that he could not move directly on the Warlord and a Clan Eshin assassin could still be traced back to him by a Lord of Decay. Maulokk knew he would require a subtler plot to deal with the troublesome leader.

Ruthlessly cogitating on the task ahead he took the moment of assured safety to remove his armour. Discarding his hooded black cloak and unbuckling his belt of pouches he accessed the dense metal skin.

With a stretch he lifted the scabbarded bastard sword from his back and set it aside. He had enchanted the notched blade of deep crimson himself after successfully creating a prototype that he had sold to a Chaos sorcerer in possession of a large Warpstone meteorite.

The sorcerer was powerless to take advantage of his treasure because he could not make use of the holy rock. Rather than waste resources on killing the owner for it, Maulokk had him agree to the exchange.

The three minor magical Runes upon the weapon's length were a product of ancient Dwarven lore that had been stolen or tortured from Dwarf Runesmiths when the Skaven vanquished or invaded that race's subterranean strongholds.

The Rune was a magical vampire. During creation it drew in the Winds of Magic like a small hungry vortex. Holding this energy within itself the Rune used it as fuel that allowed it the ability to replenish its power by leeching fresh energies directly from the Warp.

The hazard was that the draining effect was not just limited to the Winds and the Rune would permanently devour a sorcerer's magical ability just as greedily unless the inscriber could resist its parasitic potency. The innate magical resistance of the Dwarven people protected them fully, hence their development and subsequent mastery of this esoteric art.

Maulokk's blade bore a Rune to enhance accuracy, another to affect the speed of the weapon and the last allowed it to cause terrible harm to all it struck.

The sword was joined on the floor by his gore-encrusted dagger and then sections of plate began to drop to create a large, pile of midnight metal.

Removing his lightweight Gromril shirt that had been looted from Zhufbar, he replaced the two magical amulets that had come away with the chiming garment of preternaturally tough metal.

The Manling amulet of thrice blessed copper was a warder and detector of poison and a limited shield against mundane weaponry. The other was a Warpstone amulet, created in his own forge which could weaken and disorientate a close combat adversary providing it overcame their mental resistance to such diabolic tendrils of force.

Maulokk was now stripped to his amulets and his last defence. The enchanted ring on his clawed finger had been with him from his infancy and served to protect against injuries perpetrated by fellow Skaven.

Maulokk vigorously rubbed his armour-flattened fur, stretched again and began grooming himself.

At last he had the scope to commence his ambitions. Maulokk knew that the Horned Rat watched over him, as he did over all his children, but Maulokk believed he was destined to rule. Perhaps he was destined to take his father's seat some day, or to steal another's to augment Clan Skryre's power.

With fanatic dedication to sorcerous and martial ability it might be possible for him to defeat a lesser Council member from one of the Warlord Clans in a few years but he would need wealth, power, respect, fear, and standing to keep it. These treasures his parent could not give, for bestowing them negated them. Maulokk was well aware that some things in the world had to be earned alone.

The Horned Rat had declined to guide or protect Maulokk as he had done for others, but this only served to help prove the Warlock's suspicions. Maulokk believed that the great God was testing him, letting him achieve on his own, to see if he were worthy of greatness.

Turning his attention back to the task at hand Maulokk realised that he would need to draw the indigenous Beastmen away from Middenheim. There were enough problems brewing about him without adding any exogenous threats.

Pausing in his cleaning ritual Maulokk opened an insanely decorative box and removed a crystal orb. The Warpstone heart immediately began to glow expectantly, seemingly excited at the prospect of use.

Without delay he activated the artefact with his spittle and blood and a sprinkle of Warpstone dust to help send the insubstantial tentacles of the orb reaching out under his mental guidance to those of Clan Skryre in the north. Warp Orbs were a fairly reliable instrument of communication so privacy and accuracy were very likely.

The owner of the desired Warp Orb answered and Warlock Lord Feskrit's slow and precise voice issued with clear tones.

The Warlock was a reliable ally of Maulokk's and he could speak candidly with him.

'I need you to patch into the Chaos cult network. There is a force of forest goblins massing in the Barren Hills. Tell the strongest cult that the Imperial forces will mobilise to try and confront the greenskins. It would be preferably if the cult has ties to wilderness dwelling Beastmen or at least connections to a Warband or two.'

The Warlock curtly affirmed and broke contact, leaving Maulokk in his debt. It was guaranteed that the obligation would be called upon in the future and the value of it would rise along with Maulokk's standing.

Maulokk had known about the withdrawal of the Imperial troops to confront the welling horde of Forest Goblins for three days now. Such movement would cause the Chaos followers and Beastmen to be more bold in their reaving, thus drawing attention well away from Middenheim and granting him added leeway in his own operations.

Chapter three

Two moons before they were due to leave, Maulokk summoned his forces. The twenty Stormvermin had now been readied to fight and kill under his banner.

Each of the warriors wore a dark chainmail hauberk over which was laid a segmented cuirass. A collar-like bevor lay about their necks and spiny pauldrons covered their shoulders. The left was embossed with the triangular symbol of the Skaven in deep crimson.

Circular besagews were engraved with the Horned Rat's silhouette and hung from the plate shoulder guards to shield their armpits from attack. The silhouette was considered a symbol of good fortune amongst warriors, especially Stormvermin.

Sculptured and viciously spiked helms followed the contours of their skull and snout with the chainmail hood of the hauberk trapped beneath.

Black vambraces of opaque steel with added couters covered their powerful chain-sheathed forearms and elbows and they had encased their taloned hands within spiked gauntlets.

Cuisse, poleyn and greave protected their legs and only their clawed feet were devoid of midnight metal skin.

At their waist was a wide leather belt that bore a scabbarded curved dagger and a pouch. A flowing hooded cloak of crimson was pinned down by a bulky backpack with a sheathed serrated sword attached to the side.

Each of the shadowy Skaven troops held a tall halberd. The blade was wickedly notched and the back of it was lined with three curved spikes. The head was anchored in place with cruelly barbed langets and the base held a studded counterweight,

making the primary weapon of his forces lethal at either end.

Maulokk deserted the lieutenants who were standing at his side and chose to walk with his troops. After only a few moons he trusted them more than his aids.

Without discussion they marched for the Under-Empire tunnels and then travelled rapidly out beneath the city. Instead of pursuing this route, Maulokk diverted and led them up to one of the slave hulk quays to view the scenery.

Groaning captives struggled to carry baskets of black corn from the moored hulks into a towering mill house. The ramshackle building echoed with the grinding squeak of the great treadmills that ground the corn between Warpstone wheels in a bid to feed the masses. The overseers could also be heard, fervently lambasting those who lagged under the weight of dark bushels or in the turning of the gargantuan querns.

Maulokk pointed back and spoke to the Stormvermin who steeled their hearts at the all too familiar sound of the scourge at work.

'Remember this sight. Be your memories fond or ill, Skavenblight is where we shall return victorious or not return at all. Your experiences have created you. Now you must use this knowledge to survive and to succeed.'

All eyes turned toward the city after he spoke, the ever-present dull grey mist still clinging to the Skaven birthplace, giving perspective via shades to the crazed cityscape.

The mist ran its crawling tentacles over the scene, stroking the buildings that protruded from the mud and spattered the area.

Cracked, crumbling paving slowly emerged from the cold swamp to form twisted streets where great swarms of Skaven milled. The little brethren, the corpses and the thick quilt of filth remained hidden beneath this bristle-furred carpet of bodies and scampering paws. It was facet of the city that was lost to the eyes of the casual observer but recalled by those who had trodden the streets.

Towards the centre of Skavenblight the land boldly reared up to bear broken ancient houses. The once regal dwellings had failed to resist the insatiable rot that was the Skaven's gift unto the city of allied Elf, Dwarf and Manling.

There was now little discerning a difference between what was window and what was hole in the taller buildings. Sickly flashes and tinted lights could be glimpsed within the spectral towers, the upper reaches being places where often dangerous and deranged pseudo-sorcery was practised by those not of Clan Skryre or of the Seers.

Broiling steam and acrid smoke curled up from tunnel mouths and ragged cracks, emanating from forge and fire deep within the ground. The smoke tainted the sheets of pale mist, corrupting it as the Skaven corrupted everything. The fumes manufactured a dark sooty fog that clasped to the ground about these rough chimneys in dense smothering sheets.

At the very core of the city was Skavendom's heart. The temple of the Horned Rat stabbed truculently into the heavens in defiance of all the Gods its architect's pandered to. Dark clouds gripped the cancerous place whose stone was now black from soot and dried blood. The once elegant and exquisitely wrought design was now cracked and warped from the wriggling roots of raw magic that wove into every brick and layer of mortar.

Within the unholy cloud-piercing spire dwelt the Skaven priesthood and their elite albino guard who feared no mortal beast and who would kill Seer or self at a word. The fanatic warriors formed a unique force that protected and served the sacred place as a private army.

Somewhere inside the temple lay the Great Hall of the Council of Thirteen, wherein Maulokk could see his only true destiny.

Before this symbol of the Skaven's dominance was the symbol of their God's. The Pillar of Commandments took the form of a thirteen-sided obelisk of the purest Warpstone with thirteen blocks of burning runic text marking each face. The Horned Rat had told his children to obey these complex scriptures when he had manifested on

the Holynight, placing the pillar in the wake of his coming. Thus the Skaven had been accurately guided ever since.

Maulokk knew he would have to touch the holy relic to be granted opportunity to face a Lord of Decay in single combat. If he were not worthy of the chance he would be engulfed by black fire and slain like so many aspiring candidates before him.

However, Maulokk had a secret faith that his deity would not desert him when the time came. Other Skaven might be aided by the Horned Rat during their lives, making them heroes and legends, but Maulokk believed that only one who had made it to the Pillar alone could hope for the Horned Rat's protection. The God was fickle and whimsical and would surely have only so much favour to give those he chose for divine attention.

If such attention were squandered to give succour then clearly the remainder would be insufficient to meet the demands of the awesome blessing that was the Dark Aura. The halo would protect from the pillar's deadly radiance and bestow unfathomable power and energy. It was also the lone variable Maulokk could not account for in his plans.

A Lord of Decay would have fully explored and accustomed to the unknown parameters brought forth by the Dark Aura and Maulokk would have mere moments to assimilate the most basic capabilities before facing a master of its usage.

Such damning factors were no doubt the reason for the Council's membership remaining unchanged for all these centuries.

Looking over Skavenblight, the glorious hub of Skaven rule meant something different to each of them. To the Stormvermin it was as Maulokk intended - a painful reminder of treachery and bondage and a place they would never risk seeing the lower levels of again.

To Maulokk it was a second womb. Here he had grown, been nurtured, fed knowledge and developed. Now he was truly born. Now his life began in earnest.

With a glad heart he curled his tail and turned to walk down into the darkness and the tunnels, brooding on the situation and eager to see the Manling city where he would confront his foes.

The musty ancient passages deep beneath the surface ran to every corner of the globe, forming a colossal network. The subterranean highways were filled with Clanrats, slaves, foetid remains and waste. Although many were starving and desperate, none raised a paw or bared teeth to the entourage, knowing that to do so would mean instant death.

They skirted the Skaven lair of Putrid Sump to the east and marched hastily north beneath the Vaults and Grey Mountains. Once they were deep within the sky-piercing ranges the Skaven group branched off towards the Manling city of Nuln before moving northwards to the middle Mountains and thus to Middenheim.

During the last portion of their voyage the news of a huge Beastman attack upon Carroburg reached their ears. The extent of the assault came as a surprise to Maulokk but served his needs all the more.

Chapter four

'Keep it down over there!' Hergar grumbled irritably.

The Dwarf locked his arms over his spiked hair to cover his ears but the baritone chanting was still audible. Hergar sat up and bellowed angrily, his animal roar repeating on through the trees until it dwindled into silence.

'Be quiet you ignorant oaf. You interrupt my prayers to Lord Ulric,' the Cleric retorted with a snarl.

'Well, pray quietly or I'll tear your stupid priestly head off.'

'Oaf!' Dieter hissed, returning to the sombre litany.

The Dwarf looked at him with fixed rigour as the man continued with the source

of his irritation. The stare was quickly detected by the Cleric.

'What?' Dieter questioned, vexed with the constant interruptions and wondering what the problem was.

Jakob hauled himself up. Having already been awoken he was now being kept awake by bickering that bore little indication of stopping.

'Hergar, be quiet and lay still. Dieter, will Lord Ulric burn out your eyes for cutting the prayers short tonight?'

'No, but-'

'Then *please* let us get some sleep?'

The Cleric issued a disgruntled huff and got up off his knees. Brushing back his ragged mane of long brown hair he stroked his thick goatee with some irked motions and climbed into the folds of his coarse blankets.

Listening to the undisturbed sounds of the wilderness, Jakob made sure it remained unbroken and then gladly settled down as well, his eyelids heavy and yearning to close.

The four of them were on edge. They were heading to face an unknown enemy and for this reason the villager's money seemed to dwindle in value with every passing hour.

Hergar was probably the only one looking forward to meeting the opposing force because only if he failed to get himself killed would the Dwarf actually be disappointed.

Despite Jakob's years with the stout warrior he had yet to garner even the slightest particle of understanding with regard to the bizarre Slayer mentality. He could not help but wonder what warped Dwarven ideology had spawned such suicidal self-destruction? Yet despite his incomprehension, Jakob knew he could always rely upon Hergar, especially in a fight.

Jakob and the Giant Slayer had been comrades for just over two years now. They had initially met when Jakob was still working as a judicial champion for a group of young noble rakes after he had quit the military to pursue his own goals.

The pay had been decent but it meant putting up with the haughty and arrogant youths and guarding against the trouble and offence they caused. Every time they crossed someone's path they seemed to conjure problems that Jakob was committed to settling either through bribery or through threat or use of violence. More often than not he felt like a petty bodyguard or commissioned thug for fops.

The Dwarf had been sprawled in the streets of Altdorf with a jug of ale in one hand and his axe in the other. Soaking up the sun and basking in his inebriation, the rakes ordered Hergar to move aside and became angry when he simply belched by way of an answer.

When they promised to teach him a lesson the Dwarf retorted with several lurid suggestions that included the noble's inclination towards coitus with the Undead.

Jakob's employers called upon him to duel against Hergar in a fight to the death to satisfy some illusionary sense of honour.

After months of enduring such tantrums Jakob had reached his limit. He promptly refused to enforce their outraged arrogance any longer and summarily quit their service rather than fight the Dwarf. Leaving the fops to fend for themselves he retired to a bar to buy Hergar a drink as payment for giving him an excuse to get out of their employ.

Since that day they had followed a meandering career path, accepting legitimate and nefarious work alike, forging a loyalty to each other that ran deeper than either of them would ever admit.

Chapter five

Golden rays of lambent morning sun bored through the forest canopy and fell upon the

three sleeping forms. The campfire was slowly dying when Jakob awoke, the charred embers shimmering with a flare of inner light whenever the light breeze fanned them.

An exceedingly light sleeper through necessity rather than nature, it took little to stir Jakob from what he regarded as a time of unprecedented weakness. The only useful purpose for sleep that he was aware of was to dream, and seeing as he either did not dream or failed to recall them, he cared little for slumber and would all too willingly like to be rid of it once and for all.

Prompted by the morning chill a shiver ran through his frame. Shuffling closer to the fire with his blanket wrapped tightly about his shoulders, Jakob hurriedly put the spare logs upon the cinders and watched contentedly as the heat arose and started to soak into his cold flesh.

The only thing Jakob disliked more than wearing no armour was donning chilly armour when he was just as cold as it was. So once again, like countless other mornings he commenced his habitual rite of drawing over his collection of armour and holding each piece of the metal skin up to the radiating warmth.

Banishing the icy touch that was resident within the steel he recalled the many memories the segments of battle-worn armour brought out into his thoughts. He treasured the experiences be they bad or good because he had little else to show for his years of mercenary conflict other than his life, which he had so stubbornly refused to give up no matter what the odds.

Pulling on his hood and mitten free hauberk and a pair of battered chain leggings he buckled his dented breastplate about his chest. Holding his pot helm's insides to the fire for a moment he placed the cosily warmed interior over his cropped blonde hair and felt instantly secure within the weight of the shell.

Jakob yawned and stretched his stiff, muscular limbs to the clattering chime of metallic links. His hastily chiselled features bore two white scars that had been etched into the tanned skin. One wiggled on his jawline while the other dug into his right eyebrow and trailed into his hairline with jagged steps.

Brushing his trimmed slender moustache with his fingertips he ignored the thick unkempt stubble upon the rest of his face and proceeded to take up his weapons.

'Come on, wake up!' he commanded, slipping his longsword and parrying dagger into their respective belt scabbards and then looping the thick combat net over his shoulder.

With a despairing groan Dieter gradually crawled his way upright. Despite his years in an early rising monastery the Cleric still had difficulty coping with mornings.

Dieter's unkempt brown hair and thin goatee were wild from the night's deep sleep and his chest was bare save for a silver wolf's head pendant and a latticework of deep scars. The slashed lines had been torn into Dieter when he had still been a hopeful initiate in the frozen wastes of Kislev. He had tackled a wolf barehanded and now wore his adversary's grey pelt with reverent pride as both cloak and stern symbol of his devotion.

The Cleric dressed himself in sturdy robes of black and then put on and straightened his belt of pouches. The small linen bags contained his ingredients, these being the strange collection of oddities that fuelled his ecclesiastically born spells. Dieter slipped his bow and quiver of arrows onto a shoulder and knelt to give morning prayers to his deity while facing the unseen holy place of his Cult - the distant city of Middenheim.

Dieter had only recently joined their ranks and was motivated not by money but by a need to seek spiritual fulfilment, enlightenment and to smite the enemies of his Lord.

Jakob on the other hand was not a religious man. Steel and gold were his gods and he relied upon one and sought abundance of the other. He saw faith as somewhat of a weak man's folly but would never think of showing open disrespect or contempt for any God, not even those of evil or Chaos. One did not tempt fate with such a level of

stupidity.

'Does he ever stop?' moaned Hergar.

Standing up sharply the Dwarf wore nothing save his loincloth and seemed to defy the cold with supreme effrontery.

Methodically running his stiff spines of hair through his fists to straighten the crooked stilettos he drew them out to their usual foot of rigid length. The bristling starburst of hair was crimson at the base and faded to a bright yellow tip. It was a wild colour scheme that his tightly braided beard also employed with the addition of a dense gold weight affixed at every end.

Hergar's ears, nose and lips were pierced many times with golden rings and his powerful robust body was no less heavily decorated. The hands and feet of the Slayer were totally tattooed crimson as though they had been dipped in a well of blood. The fierce colour gradually melted via shades into curling yellow flames that reached up to thigh and shoulder. The belly and back of the Dwarf bore a screaming burning skull with dark curls and whirling patterns spreading about each, the detailed coils incorporating several Dwarven religious runes in their rolling designs.

Grumbling softly about the Cleric, Hergar pulled up his torn trousers and laced his hobnailed boots. Buckling his wide belt with leather purse and dagger firmly attached he hefted his great warhammer with gratifying effort.

The weighty bludgeoning device was the Giant Slayer's favoured weapon of mass carnage and Jakob could not help but absently recall the rationale behind it.

'Swords are fer pansies and axes are fer woodsmen. But a hammer? Now there's a real weapon for you. Who wants to hear a cut anyway? Cuts are for the womenfolk in the kitchen. I'll tell yer this - there ain't nothin' in this world more satisfying than hearing bones-a-crackin.'

While they packed away the blankets and skillets, Elldrigar returned from his watch and gathered his possessions without word. The Elf seemed young in Human terms, perhaps in his mid-twenties, although his true years would be vastly greater.

Silken hair the colour of sun-kissed corn glided across his head to gather into a flowing pony tail, leaving the acute, delicate features of his race free and unhindered. Clad in sturdy but weather worn clothing of browns and greens, a thick hooded cloak hung about his shoulders and a slender longsword dwelt at his side. Elldrigar chose as always to carry his elegantly carved Elfbow. It was a precious family heirloom and with it he was a most deadly shot.

Elldrigar always earned a great deal at the occasional archery tournament, but was just as adept at putting arrows into the eyes of Goblin, Orc or Human as he was into the bullseye of a target. He could also do either with equal indifference. Maybe it was part of his Elven heritage, maybe a product of his many accumulated years but the Elf seemed seldom moved by anything.

Once all was secured the group set off, marching with speed along the acutely overgrown pathway towards the village. For much of the voyage Jakob had thought the Elf was having them trudge directly through the forest, but Elldrigar's keen senses were able to distinguish a path long since lost to the duller abilities of Humans.

It was late afternoon when they finally reached Senkgrube after a string of days had been spent drearily stomping through the wilderness to reach it.

Situated deep in the Laurelorn forest and northwest of Middenheim, the place was not wealthy and consequently its defences primarily consisted of a simple ditch about the perimeter. The houses were crude log cabins that were fortified against weather rather than enemies.

From the tanned hides, drying furs and tall stacks of lumber concentrated about the dwellings it seemed obvious where the settlement drew its feeble wealth. It was a source that hardly worth hassling the village to acquire.

Yet the villagers had banded together and raised the money to pay for outside protection. The gold they had offered was very little but the resources of the group were

drained, making the prospect of free lodgings, three meals a day and some extra cash quite appealing.

Hergar was not all that keen to spend time in an isolated tiny village, but with homelessness and poverty looming there was little alternative but to accept. It was that or gain actual employment which was a concept more terrifying to Jakob than the most fell Chaos Daemon.

Alternatively, there was the work up at Carroburg. A massive Beastman attack had poured into the city and stripped it. The reavers were rapidly merging back into the deep forest and vengeful Imperial forces were hiring every mercenary who could lift a blade to help scour the area for the culprits. However, the group had faced Beastman before and had no pressing desire to cross swords with such unpredictable and varied foes again if they could help it.

'What a dump!' Hergar said querulously. 'Not a bar in sight, and I bet the ale's about as strong as Snotlings.'

'There are more things to life than alcohol, Dwarf,' Deiter rebuked virtuously.

'Like what?'

'Leading a full and faithful life in the service of one's deity. Though I don't expect someone like you to appreciate such things.'

'You sound like the Elgi,' said Hergar and then gave a coarse parody of Elldrigar's musical voice as he continued with the adopted tone. 'You don't appreciate anything of real value.'

After a derisive snort he dropped the impression and returned to his usual gruff manner.

'You make me vomit. Both of you.'

Elldrigar frowned and concealed a vindictive smile before responding, his mental trap being concocted before he set loose the bait for Hergar to snatch at.

'You are a brute Hergar, like all your race.'

'Did a race of brutes forge the Great Dwarven Empire?' stiffly answered the Slayer.

'Not much of your paltry system of rough caves left is there, stubby one? And don't try to deny it, we Elves know that it collapsed from poor stone work. The Goblinoids were just an excuse to cover your negligence, stupidity and outright cowardice.'

'Watch your mouth, Elgi. I'm warning you.'

Elldrigar ignored the threat. Having seen how easily the Slayer had blundered into this line of abuse he was in no way disposed to end his verbal harrying of such an easily provoked target.

'Lost it all to Goblin and Snotling. Such valiant, courageous, yet ultimately feeble and moronic warriors-'

'That's it!' roared the galled Dwarf, throwing his hammer up, his enraged face becoming as red as fists.

Issuing a mighty bellow Hergar charged towards Elldrigar, whose slender longsword slipped from its scabbard before anyone could even blink. With a nimble side step the Elf let Hergar storm past upon the momentum of his incensed assault, an amused and spiteful grin still loitering on his lips.

Jakob acted with sudden celerity, leaping between the two with his sword drawn. Tugging his net free he spread open the tangling folds with a flick, ready to catch a blade within the dense mesh should the hostilities continue.

The long and boring journey had frayed tempers and violence would definitely ensue unless he defused the situation.

'Hold fast! Both of you!'

Hergar paused, his mouth frothing, his jaw quivering with suppressed bile. Elldrigar took a step forward with sword poised and a squinting sneer tickling his countenance.

'I said *both* of you,' ordered Jakob with stern tones.

The pair halted, glaring at each other with age-old animosity. The hate between their peoples had been diligently carried down through the generations and honed by each descendant until it had been developed to a keen zenith that denied reason or calming if fully allowed to kindle.

'Hergar! You want glory to redeem yourself? Then what's more important to you - finding a worthy foe or scuffling with an Elf?'

The Dwarf sneered but seemed to respond to the persuasion.

'He's not worth it, Hergar. Why bother? Save your strength for the foe these villagers face. I bet it's a terrible force and one only a true warrior could vanquish. Or die facing it.'

More than anything the Dwarf was swayed by these last words. The chance of earning death against insane odds was tempting and caused him to ease the tension.

Hergar's hammer lowered and after spitting on the ground he turned and walked reluctantly away, every muscle tensed and twitching. The Slayer stopped a short distance off, trying to smother the furnace of his tempestuous rage.

With Hergar safely out of earshot, Jakob turned to the Elf.

'You brag endlessly that your people are noble yet you bait a disgraced Dwarf over the fall of his people. For some one of your years you behave as a spiteful child would.'

The Elf stiffened at the insult, forcing Jakob to try a different track and appeal instead to his innate goodly nature.

'These people face an unknown danger. They have called on us for aid, gathering what few coins they have and accepting the burden of our food and lodgings. Yet you would happily fight before their eyes over a trivial sleight.'

Elldrigar looked to the villagers who were now watching them. The small pockets of farmers had been distracted from their mundane chores by the considerably more interesting spectacle occurring before them. Elldrigar reversed his sword and sheathed it.

'Now, could you check the area for any tracks that might tell us what we're up against,' asked Jakob, intending to separate the two non-Humans for a short while and let their tempers cool.

'Very well,' sighed the Elf, backing up warily. Merging with the treeline like a spectre he vanished from view.

Elldrigar's tracking skills had served the Wood Elf well during his first years in the Empire when he stalked wanted criminals for the bounty upon their heads. Those same acute senses had warned the group of ambush and enemy on numerous occasions and his invaluable ability could tell numbers, race, if the opponents were heavily armoured, wounded and even how quickly they moved. If there were any clues to the identity of the enemy within the wilderness, Elldrigar would unearth them.

'I need food,' scowled Hergar.

Gripping irritably, the Slayer wandered off, crossing the bridge of logs and dirt that reached over the defensive ditch the village had placed about their meagre settlement.

With the Dwarf following his nose Jakob could safely let him go. He had to find the village spokesman, Gregor Beredt, and the pugnacious Hergar would only be a hindrance to negotiations until he had drunk or feasted away his surly attitude.

After gaining directions from the locals they found that Gregor was the sole owner of the settlements only supply store. The Cleric and seasoned mercenary made it their first destination.

The shop was filled both inside and out with farming tools, provisions and agricultural equipment. A bald, middle aged man of sturdy build manned the counter in town clothes only a few seasons out of date, suggesting a good living drawn from the

exclusive and vital business.

'Can I help you?' he asked flippantly, opening into a standard beaming smile to the strangers.

'Mr Fest contracted us. He said you need aid of the mercenary variety.'

His salesman's grin instantly transformed into a smile of genuine gladness. The man extended a hand that Jakob took hesitantly and without emotion. He was seeking to give the impression of a brooding, battle-hardened soldier because rural types were often impressed with such a stereotype. They saw it as the 'right way' for a real warrior to behave.

'Gregor Beredt, village storeowner and their unwilling spokesman,' he introduced.

'Jakob Gerecht. This is Dieter Kreigwolf, Cleric of Ulric.'

'Greetings, sir,' Gregor said, giving a curt nod to the priest who followed Jakob's lead and chose to sedately reciprocate the welcome.

'I believe you have a problem that we can resolve for you?' formally inquired Jakob, unwilling to dither with annoying pleasantries any further. In many ways he preferred the clear-cut simplicity of battle to that of talk and negotiation. The only exception was nights spent before the campfire, drinking and talking of the exploits of war.

'Aye,' he affirmed, drawing a bottle of brandy from behind the counter. 'Drink?'

Jakob nodded while Dieter waved a dismissing hand. The storekeeper took up two mugs and filled them with a shallow measure before replacing cork in bottle. Pausing in thought, he knocked back the contents in one shot to gain a scowling grimace and then courage enough to speak.

'Dark forces plague us, my friends. Although we are not alone because others have been beset by this tragedy, we of Senkgrube seem to bear the brunt of the terrors...'

He began pouring another measure. Gregor was reluctant to speak of it and was trying to steel his nerves with alcoholic encouragement.

Jakob grew rapidly impatient at this superstitious trepidation and goaded him on by leaning in close to offer the illusion of confidentiality.

'What terrors do speak of?' he asked quietly, looking over both shoulders.

'People...whole families, vanishing, abducted. Never a body left behind. Thefts of food, tools, equipment, livestock.'

'When does this happen?'

'The attacks occur randomly over the whole area. Sometimes days, even weeks may elapse without incident. At other times several raids may occur in rapid succession, often in the course of a single night.'

'Has anyone seen the culprits?'

'None who remained to tell of what they saw.'

'What of the authorities?'

'They care not for us 'mere peasants'. They say we should form a militia and seek out the slavers. Slavers? What piffle! Slavers do not take babe and infant, young and old alike. Slavers do not pilfer worthless mundane items like hammers, spades, and rope. Even nails are taken. Do slavers steal such trivialities and then leave gold and jewellery behind?'

'What do you suspect?' said Jakob.

'Wild talk places the blame upon monsters. Beastmen, or worse. I wish I could think of something else to accuse but I have little option but to concur with the gossip. Will you help us? Now that you know?' asked Gregor, his voice saturated with worry.

When they had first been approached by Mister Fest, Jakob found him purposely drawn on the subject of their foe when they spoke. The recruiting villager had talked of outlaws, probably to ensure that the group went to the village.

Fest presumably thought that once they were appraised of the true gravity of

their enemy, it would be easier for the band to stay and tackle the menace rather than trek all the way back to the city. But from Fest's reticent behaviour Jakob had already known that it was no Human menace they were to face, and it was this subterfuge that had intrigued him enough at the time to accept. He was fairly sure it wouldn't be Beastmen. They would all have been drawn to Carroburg and even if it were Beastmen it would be a weak band, one lacking the confidence or strength to join in the assault on the city. Such a force would be easy for the group to handle.

'You still offer food, lodgings and a gold crown a day while we protect the village?'

'Aye. I have two spare chambers that you may use, and the village will provide you with food. But we are not very prosperous and cannot give as grandiosely as you might wish.'

'And we would not expect you to, Mr Beredt. Now, please show us these rooms, and when our colleagues return, escort them there also if you please.'

Taken to the small upstairs chambers, Jakob ensured that Hergar shared with him, keeping the Dwarf away from the Elf and Cleric as a precaution against further outbursts of choler. Once their baggage was stowed they began looking about the village, familiarising themselves with the layout.

Their survey brought them to Hergar. The Slayer was slumped against a barn with six drained bottles of local apple wine piled beside him. A seventh was at his lips.

'Whassa problem?' he slurred, using his hammer to help him up.

From the intensity of his meandering swagger, the wine had obviously been stronger than he had anticipated. It was a discovery that had definitely picked up his soured spirits.

'Raids, abductions, thefts. No clues, no suspects,' said Jakob.

'Great. Dumb Humanses,' he grumbled.

With a great sweep of his arm he indicated the village, offsetting his balance so severely with the motion that he had to steady himself on his weapon for a moment before continuing.

'Lookit-it. I've sseen berrer defencess about a damn pig pen! No wondering they gets raided. It'ss a tasty morselss of a target even fer brainlessness snotss,' he rambled.

Burping under his breath he dropped against the barn for more support and failed to notice the bottle falling from his grasp. He lifted the digits and flexed them before his eyes, fairly sure that there should have been something in them but unsure what or where it had gone.

'Except that the raids are occurring all over the area,' Dieter corrected.

'Exactly!' the Dwarf boomed with conviction, jerking upright once more and waving the baffling hand aside.

'Pardon?' said Dieter, frowning with confusion.

Hergar again belched loudly, raised a finger, opened his mouth to speak and then collapsed with a resounding thud face first into the grass. As the unconscious form began to snore loudly into the soil, Elldrigar appeared from the corner of the barn.

The sudden arrival caused Jakob to wonder whether the Elf had been deliberately waiting until the Dwarf passed out before choosing to emerge.

The bitterness between the two was fierce and unyielding. They argued viciously and constantly, yet in battle their differences faded and they would co-operate totally, mixing nimbleness and speed with savage, unstoppable brute strength. They were total opposites in life but when fighting for their lives, their diversity complemented one another perfectly and made for a most deadly cocktail.

'Did you find anything?' Jakob asked.

'Partly. There are many tracks but most are mundane, save for several which were almost impossible to detect. Human eyes would have certainly missed them.'

The Elf seemed tense and was so visibly choked by repressed emotion that he had trouble finding the words to report his findings.

'Bandits? Outlaws? What?' asked Jakob.

'No, they were not...Human.'

'Beastmen?' offered Jakob, hoping that he be wrong.

'No.'

'What then? If you've found something tell us, dammit!' Jakob demanded stridently.

Elldrigar clearly did not want to reveal his discovery but seemed to voice what he could.

'Some sort of large biped. Rodent perhaps,' he reported fearfully, not meeting their eyes. His hands were wringing themselves into fists, his knuckles white with vehement emotion.

'You mean rat,' interjected Dieter.

'I mean *rodent*,' Elldrigar snapped, as though the word 'rat' did not cover the terrible meaning he attached to this finding.

'Let's not quibble over terminology. Do you know what they are?' Jakob interrupted.

Elldrigar paused briefly in consideration and gave no reply. Looking to Jakob with a blank intensity his eyes were apologising for not being more forthright and trying to explain that it was simply beyond him to talk of this matter. Dieter was not so forgiving.

'Pah!' spat the Cleric and petulantly marched off, jerking his hands against his robes to straighten them.

'Damn secretive Elven weirdoes,' he uttered harshly to himself as he stormed off, removing himself from the irksome presence.

Elldrigar was excelling at antagonising everyone today, first Hergar, now Dieter. Sometimes Jakob wondered if he were not more trouble than he was worth.

Jakob also suspected that Elldrigar knew much more about the culprits than he was letting on, and it wasn't just their identity either. The long-lived Wood Elf was wise about the Dark Races and could speak with some authority on Chaos and other such dread matters. Why then the trepidation to speak of this force? What could be more feared than the encroaching powers of entropy?

Jakob looked at him severely, ensuring that he left no doubt as to the existence of the suspicions he bore.

'Continue the search,' he stated.

'The surrounding area?' asked Elldrigar, breathing a sigh of relief at the cessation of the probing questions he could not or would not answer.

'Yes.'

The Elf gratefully withdrew, leaving Jakob to his gnawing doubts and to drag the unconscious Dwarf to a bed. It was a feat that strenuously taxed his muscles, especially with the addition of Hergar's warhammer.

Chapter six

Maulokk left the main group waiting in the dark tunnel. Taking Karikk for protection and Skrack and Kerick'k to make them believe he actually still trusted them they entered a narrow, roughly etched side passage and began to ascend.

Weaving upwards they finally reached the natural cave system that permitted access to the surface. After traversing the mire of pale stalagmites and strange mushroom shaped rock formations, Maulokk led them out into the late evening twilight of the surface world.

The Skaven had to shield their eyes even from these dull rays, so total had been the perpetual darkness below.

Beyond the dense, warmly foreboding Drak Wald forest rose a range of cold

mountains. The towering mount upon which Middenheim stood would have been vastly taller than all the others save that its peak was absent, leaving it almost flat across the top.

The mile wide plateau bore the sprawling Manling city, a crenelated wall entirely encompassing the perimeter. Slanted tendrils of dark smoke curled up from hundreds of sources to maintain a broiling sooty cloud that lurked above like some predatory beast of awesome dimensions.

Sturdy viaducts wove elegantly up to the fortified gates, feeding the city like arteries to a heart, pumping in people and heavily laden vehicles and spewing barren ones out again.

Eating unseen and unknown into the mountain were the tunnels in which his forces dwelt. The basic Dwarven network had been expanded greatly since the Skaven had infected them with their malign presence and now they had their own access to the sewers, the city, and numerous underground locations.

From his learned researches Maulokk knew that there were other threats within the labyrinth such as Beastmen, rogue mutants, Chaos cultists, Champions and darker forces of Undeath and monstrosity. He would have to cope with it all in addition to the hindering efforts of Manling, Longbeard and especially those of his fellow Skaven.

Having gained the exterior view, Maulokk started to return to the tunnels.

'Was that it?' asked Skrack irritably. He had taken care to address his words to Kerick'k, but had made sure Maulokk overheard them so he might safely express his displeasure at such a pointless detour.

'Skrack, it is always wise to look on a problem from every angle. I wanted to take an exterior one. Does that bother you?' he asked lightly and then turned round to fix the Warlock with a severe look.

Almost as though reading Maulokk's thoughts the armoured form of Karikk moved closer to his saviour. The Stormvermin did not draw a weapon or even level his halberd. Instead he obviously tensed, flexing his brawn in a way to declare that should Maulokk even suggest it, Skrack would be looking in surprise at a halberd in his stomach.

It was a display of allegiance Maulokk found most gratifying. Even though Maulokk knew he could handle Skrack alone, one never knew how a fight might go and it was always best to have superior numbers and force on one's side.

'Of course not, Lord. I was merely momentarily confused and you have explained in full,' he answered, keeping his eyes to Maulokk and refusing to acknowledge his awareness of Karikk's actions.

With a possible situation resolved they continued back and set out to reach the interior where the Skaven held dominion. Merging back with the main force the entourage continued toward the sky-gouging peak.

Into the dark Dwarven passage at the mountain's base, figures suddenly began to emerge. The keen sight of the Skaven could make out the soft pink bodies of Manlings, but they were no longer legitimate members of their foul race.

The great powers of Warpstone and Chaos had changed them, causing them to hide their deformities from the gaze of sun and that of their brother Manlings.

Maulokk drew on the Horned Rat's power, unlocking it from within the Dark Wind, moulding it with his will and with the words of power whose tone and pitch helped sculpt the force.

The foe moved forward, seeking the source of the sounds. Bestial faces drooled, claws and warped fingers clenched, tails lashed. The near blind Manlings clearly expected easy prey but instead they met only the lethal punch of Maulokk's sorcery.

The unwholesome rapture of the foetid energy coursed through his frame, passing from his body and into the gibbering opposition. The spell streaked forth to engulf the leader, sending a repulsed quiver through the very fabric of the darkness

about them.

The mutant instantly began to shake as he fought against the effects, but Maulokk applied magical force to crush the target's resistance. The spell poured in without reserve and its effects were instantaneous and ghastly.

Sweaty beads grew upon the mutant's tiger-striped flesh. Then they began to run in streams over his swelling joints, budding pustules, and the bloated boils that were proudly puffing up across his patterned skin. The growths bulged, pumped up by sorcery until they could sustain no more. When they burst with a wet, putrid squelch, the grotesque eruptions mixed their cargo of pus and blood with the cascading waterfall of agonised sweat and the lumpy, thick yellow sludge that was dribbling lethargically from his pores.

His teeth fell from blackening rotting gums as his eyes rolled back and withered in their sockets to leave dark ragged pits. The mutant's horrendous squeal of pain became a gurgle, fluid and phlegm starting to swiftly fill his lungs.

Racked by hacking coughs he toppled and dropped to his knees, bursting several large buboes as he did so, the pestiferous bulbs spraying their reservoir of fluid across the stone.

With a reedy exhale he rolled onto his side, mouldering blood dripping from his nose and sightless eye sockets.

The rancid claws of the spell released the cadaver and invisibly slashed into the next mutant. Maulokk's powers effortlessly tore down the Manling's feeble resistance and allowed the magical plague to pour into every cell.

The rot set in just as quickly and began devouring the tissue of its target with gusto, conducting the same grisly rota of deadly contamination with precise exactitude.

In moments the Manling sank indolently to the floor with a croaking death rattle as the plague moved on once more, its enthusiasm to corrupt in no way diminished by its efforts thus far.

The toxic magic ate rapaciously through the mutant ranks, meeting no effective denial against such weak bodies with such sparse wills.

One by one they dropped in rapid succession until all ten were reduced to no more than twisted diseased carcasses. The virulent plague then dissipated now that it had no more bodies to devour.

Although there was no possibility of the terrible contagion infecting them, the Stormvermin warily avoided the rank corpses as they stepped cautiously passed them. Each warrior was awed and terrified by what they had borne witness to.

Maulokk could have reduced the magical expenditure by using less energy-consuming sorceries to achieve the same annihilation, but he had wished to impress upon his troops the extent of his power. Besides, he had barely touched the well of energy held within his enhanced body.

After the initial skirmish there were no other encounters until they reached the Skaven lines, for few were the beasts that could thrive in such barren depths. The occasional glimpse of twisted monstrosities bobbed in the shadows or set a gibbering hiss upon the still air, but nothing entered into full view to trouble them.

Weary from the steep ascent they came to a rough barricade in the tunnel ahead. For a brief moment the defence seemed unmanned and then it suddenly filled with Clanrats, armed with an assortment of pilfered bows and crossbows.

'Who go? Tell-tell,' a voice called out in squeaking Old Worlder.

Maulokk made his authoritative reply in Queekish.

'Warlock-Engineer Lord Maulokk and his escort. I have been appointed by the Council of Thirteen as the new Commander of your forces.'

There were sudden spates of harried chattering from the defences as the rumours of a change of leadership were confirmed.

'Come forward, Commander. We have been expecting you,' proclaimed a Stormvermin officer, shouldering his crossbow as he emerged into view.

Maulokk walked confidently over and clambered across the piled stone blocks. Keeping his tail outstretched to help with his balance Maulokk evaded the gouging stakes. The sharpened wooden teeth jabbed out into the corridor in close banks and were clearly flecked with rusty shades of dried blood from the bodies of attempted invaders.

With a nimble spring, Maulokk jumped down before the officer. The Skaven immediately bowed deeply and humbly introduced himself.

'I am Kriktishic. Chief sentry for this barricade, Commander.'

'Take me to Clan Skreek's Warlord,' Maulokk bluntly demanded.

The rest of the escort was traversing the blockade and accumulating behind him as the Clanrats shied fearfully away. The Stormvermin officer straightened and showed them deeper into the Skaven tunnel network. Kriktishic gave temporary command to a subordinate, giving him a chance to try and ensure that Maulokk would recall him by his helpfulness and eagerness to show the new Commander every possible courtesy.

The air was thick with the smell from generations of living and of the abandoned, devoured or decaying dead.

Maulokk and his forces passed rows of warrens filled with Skaven, where females tended litters and Clanrats rested. There were fair numbers in the Clan but they seemed idle and that meant they were weak. Weak in body meant that they would be equally weak in mind.

Maulokk knew he would have to get them working, whether the work was useful or pointless, just to strengthen their flesh and get them functioning as a cohesive unit.

The Stormvermin warrens he passed were bigger and cleaner and the females were of a considerably better standard. The exceptional treatment was nothing unusual in Skaven society. The reputation of all Stormvermin as lethal killers was well deserved and ensured them respect and a considerably higher living standard.

Kriktishic brought him to an entrance manned by Clan Skreek Stormvermin. Maulokk had little choice but to leave his own escort behind and entered with the guide.

After travelling down a short corridor he was shown into a squarely cut hall with a low ceiling. Clearly of Dwarven construction the chamber was lavishly decorated with trophies and spoils and was occupied by an armoured form.

The Warlord was a black-furred Skaven of powerful built. Clad in tarnished plate mail, the surfaces of it were armed with many spines of assorted length and etched with many ordinary runes.

Upon his back lay a serrated blade, the two handed weapon shaped into the style of a scimitar. A fat and ugly cleaver also hung by the handle from his belt. Maulokk could see no other weapons on him.

The Warlord wore a necklace of rat skulls. Each was painted with a Skaven name and it was presumably representative of his vanquished adversaries.

The Warlord stood up and arched his back threateningly, trying to intimidate Maulokk, who would be commanding him unless dissuaded from employing his authority. Acting instinctively the Warlord began to sniff the air, ruled by his animal heritage as most warriors were.

The guide prudently withdrew, leaving them alone.

Maulokk marched sternly up to the Warlord and stared deeply into the leader's eyes with a fixed and unyielding gaze. Neither spoke, moved, or even blinked.

Maulokk's unchanging, almost lifeless stare proved highly disconcerting and soon forced the Warlord to flutter his eyelids and briefly look away. His hand instantly darted for the cleaver as he did so.

With his muscles already tensed in anticipation of this act, Maulokk retaliated with a flash of motion. From the hidden sheath beneath his vambrace Maulokk drew a slender, razor-edged blade. In an instant it was between the bands of the Warlord's beaver and pressing against the skin covering his carotid artery.

The Warlord's eyes glittered with distressed confusion and anger but he was too afraid to move. Every cell of his being was roaring for him to chance it, to try and break free and then kill the Warlock. However, he hadn't gained and kept his status as a Warlord by succumbing to every sanguinary impulse.

With a resentful long drone of ultrasonic he acknowledged his defeat, adding suitable inflections to dissuade attack and admit his submission.

The fear shown amidst the Warlock's arrogance was Maulokk's goal, for the position of Commander would not allow the offhand killing of the Clan's general.

To terminate him he would need an indisputable reason lest the slaying be used against him by his enemies to diminish his achievements and perhaps even provide justification for Maulokk's own execution. This crime alone wouldn't be enough, but it could well be used in conjunction with other iniquitous events he might have to perpetrate here to attain victory. When collated, such misdemeanours might tip the balance and damn him.

To successfully rid himself of this superfluous leader he would have to allow the Warlord himself to grant the reasons.

'You sleight me with your actions,' Maulokk hissed coldly. 'I should kill you now, but I shall give you just one chance to redeem yourself. Understand?'

The Warlord moved his hand from the cleaver handle and nodded slightly, his body quivering with suppressed bile, aching to simply spring forth and risk all in an attempt to reverse his defeat.

'You have failed in your sacred duty here. That is why I have been sent to replace you. What is your excuse? Why should I keep you and not send you back to Skavenblight as a slave?'

Pushing the knife closer, Maulokk drew out a trickle of blood that wound down the blade towards the hilt. The Warlord spoke with extreme haste as he grimaced and felt the spectre of death welling around him.

'The city has a captain. He knows of us. He is wary to our methods and he has the ear of many powerful Manlings. His suspicions block all my plans.'

This was no surprise to Maulokk. The Warlord might be a good soldier, but he was no strategist. His best weapon clearly lay in his scabbard and not in his skull.

Maulokk stared into the Warlord's eyes for a long moment, examining the emotions and feelings portrayed there and connecting them with various rationales and plots. He pulled the concealed knife away and sheathed it without expression or breaking eye contact with his foe.

The display of physical prowess had shown him to be the Warlord's superior so he was safe for the time being from any direct challenges.

'What is your name?' Maulokk questioned.

'Warlord Kritish,' was the stoic reply as he checked his neck to make sure the bleeding had stopped.

Maulokk bared his fangs upon an angered snarl, curling his lips back to reveal lethal shards of enamel. The Warlord took heed of the warning and begrudgingly added to his words.

'...Commander Maulokk.'

With a constant scowl and eyes wild with ferocity, the Warlock issued his demands in a tone that would tolerate no dissent.

'I want a full meeting, here, in one hour. Have the Clan Pestilens monks and Grey Seers arrived yet?'

'Earlier today, Commander.'

Maulokk realised that he should have anticipated their arrival before his own. It was fortunate that he had left Skavenblight early, otherwise the Monks and Seers would have had a full forty-eight hours in which to scheme and prepare. It riled him greatly to think of the lapse and he swore not to be so lax in the future. Maulokk had made his first error, and while not a grievous one he swore it would be his last.

Maulokk could ill afford any slip in his work here because the enemies gathered about him were deadly and expert. When their attempts were made to ruin him they would not be sloppy and Maulokk would have to be utterly prepared else be defeated or killed.

'I want them present,' he said, backing up three paces and turning about to deliberately expose his back to the Warlord.

Maulokk tensed and listened for even the slightest sound of attack. There was only abashed quiet. Maulokk waited a few more moments, testing the Skaven warrior to the full and when no rabid assault came he walked triumphantly away and to his new quarters.

The warren was spacious and bore an adjoining chamber that was accessed by a single hole. The lair was as he had desired and suited his purpose well.

Settling his Stormvermin in all the neighbouring and opposite warrens he checked that all of his personal baggage was present before beginning a sweep of the chamber for any unwelcome devices.

The warren had been recently cleared out, making the search a lot easier and considerably less time consuming. Other than a few poisoned needles placed where he might accidentally prick himself there was nothing of consequence and his abode was secure by the time his lieutenants arrived. They had no doubt been less attentive in their own searches for they had far less to fear.

Maulokk instantly noticed the vaguest hint of corruption's stink clinging to Kerick'k like a badge of honour. The taint of warm, disease-wracked sweat betrayed the Skaven's contacting of his Clan Pestilens masters and although he had tried to disguise the aroma with pungent chemicals from the workshop supplies, the hint was enough to reaffirm Maulokk's distrust.

The aids were set to readying the laboratory and workshop for use and two of Maulokk's own guards were stationed at the entrance on a permanent basis. Unless it was dissuaded, sabotage was certain in such an obviously sensitive and highly volatile place. An explosion there would be seen as a normal occurrence and could hide assassination with ease.

The allotted hour quickly elapsed as Maulokk scanned the chamber once more and then unpacked his belongings and tools. Each was methodically examined for any foreign objects that might have been added en route.

To fray a few tempers and perhaps prompt the odd slip of the tongue he delayed a further fifteen minutes before going to the Warlord's chamber with Karikk and two other Stormvermin as his escort.

The assembled Skaven bowed to varying degrees and individually introduced themselves. Maulokk scrutinised their outward appearance and more importantly the nuances betrayed by their eyes and manner as each spoke. Accurately interpreted minutia could reveal volumes as to character and allegiance and while studying it in the assembly Maulokk did his best to obfuscate his own demeanour and keep his tone confusingly blank.

'Grey Seer Tikric,' boasted a mottled grey Skaven.

Tikric wore flowing robes of dull grey that were heavily embroidered with religious runes. Beneath them glinted the dull sheen and bulky angles of what could only be Warpstone armour. The sorcerous shell only covered his body, legs and shoulders because his arms were bare save for several bracelets and a short, flat handled dagger that was affixed along his left forearm. The left ear of the Grey Seer bore a deep slice in the centre and several rings dotted both lower rims.

In his left hand Tikric held a dark wood staff. The haft was peppered with thorny spines and the head had a Skaven skull mounted upon it. The skull was covered in blunt studs and was further supported by a haloing frame in the form of a point down copper symbol of the Horned Rat. A pair of rune-painted banners draped from the edges of the symbol like slender ribbons.

'Grey Seer Bilquik,' uttered a deep grey Skaven, his introduction offered without inflection as he stared angrily at Maulokk, almost with disgust.

The Skaven wore light grey or soiled white robes with a hood and cloak. The unragged appearance of the cloth hinted at construction from enchanted fabric.

The Seer wore a close-fitting spiked helm about his skull, the metal tarnished greatly. Bilquik also bore a belt of assorted pouches with a scabbarded dagger on his flank. In his hands he clutched a smooth hafted spear with pious runes etched down the entire length. The tip was barbed and more horned teeth lined a full foot of the haft below it.

'Grey Seer Skarbitik,' a dirty white Skaven stated with harsh asperity.

Skarbitik wore pale grey robes that had been laced with detailed runic script. A heavy cloth hood hid the Seer's features and allowed his curling hircine horns to emerge through two vents.

The bowed length of an ornate falchion lay scabbarded on his back and the strap across his chest bore the symbol of the Horned Rat in jade, a pouch and a curved, baroque knife.

Skarbitik wore a slingbag and a wide belt, the buckle of which was set with a rat skull. Two long daggers of almost shortsword length were crossed beneath it in black sheaths, each painted with devout white script.

'Plaguemaster Festrik,' rasped a croaking voice, the distortion hiding tone and intent.

The Clan Pestilens leader wore a filthy, ragged robe of sickly purple. His arms, hands and feet were crudely bound in loose, dirty bandages that were stained with streaks of crimson and yellow.

Festrik's hood hung loosely upon his withered snout, hiding his features and supplying a concealment that was probably for the best. The Plague Priest wheezed unhealthily and a dull liquid rattle echoed deep within his lungs. His fur was balding in places to reveal flaking skin, bulging yellow boils and bloated pustules, several of which languidly wept a thick obnoxious fluid.

The unwholesome reek of the rotten Monk was noticeable to all. The distinctive salty sweet, cloying aroma of fevered perspiration, rancid flesh and fresh pus was more a trademark of Clan Pestilens than any banner of war.

An arthritic paw held a crooked, twisted staff, the surface of which had been assailed by intense mildew and dry rot. Three twisted thighbones formed the Horned Rat's symbol at the top, bound together with dried ligaments and tendons. Rusty chains draped from the centre to hold rune-inscribed brass bells and an empty censer.

Two Plague Monks skulked in the darkness of his shambling shadow, watching solemnly from deep within their own disgusting vestments.

Maulokk's three lieutenants stood impatiently to the left, opposite the Warlord who had adopted an impassive stance with the reassuring support of four officers lurking in the darkness behind him.

Maulokk panned his gaze across the assembled leadership caste and began by outlining his plans without any deception or subtlety. The Skaven leadership caste was as adept at he in finding flaw in word and deed and they would be alert for any sign of deception at this meeting.

'My first act as Commander is to order the recall of all raiding parties from the surrounding territory.'

'And how shall we feed ourselves? It is they who bring us food and equipment,' the Warlord announced with surly tones.

'And slaves?' Maulokk lightly retorted.

The Warlord stopped in mid reply, the words dying away as they formed in his throat. If Kritish was having his marauding Clanrats pillage food and equipment, it would be logical to assume that they would take Human captives as well, not only to help carry the loot but to be enslaved afterwards. The young would be raised in

bondage, the old used in experimentation and sacrifice.

'We keep few slaves. Too much bother,' the Warlord ineptly lied.

Maulokk now knew that he was selling them secretly, probably for personal wealth. Such knowledge gave Maulokk another lever on the Skaven leader for his post here at Middenheim required that three-quarters of all spoils were to be extracted through Council tax. It was a standard life-sucking levy that was imposed on all Skaven leaders but it was tribute no one could ignore. One did not stand up against the will of the Council unless one was looking to die in excruciating agony over the period of a few years.

Maulokk acted as if he bore no such suspicion and changed the subject, answering the initial question.

'We shall supplement from the Manling's stores.'

'You risk our discovery...Commander,' Grey Seer Bilquik scornfully remarked.

Tikric sneered and nodded in agreement.

'Not if it is conducted in such a way as to indicate another culprit,' Maulokk rebutted.

'Who for example, Commander Maulokk?' inquired Skarbitik, genuinely intrigued.

'Leave Beastman clues in the Manling stores. Leave no trace in Longbeard stores. If the Manlings act, they will concentrate on the mountain base for departing culprits. The Longbeards will say nothing without solid proof because they keep their tunnels secret from the Empire and will not reveal their existence lightly.'

'Suppose they post guards?' the Warlord obstinately posed.

'Herd in some Beastmen or mutants from the upper tunnels. There are bound to be plenty since you no longer bother to secure them adequately. The Longbeards will leave no survivors and so there will be no one to contradict the assumption that Chaos was the felon.'

'So what are all these warriors to do?' Warlord Kritish continued, refusing to be chided and not speak up.

'Dig.'

'Dig? Dig what?' Kritish said, bemused by such a cryptic response.

Grey Seer Tikric scoffed softly and examined his claws while sedately shaking his head with derision. Maulokk ignored him and continued laying out his battle plan.

'You have left your troops idle, Warlord. I intend to revive their unity. All of them are to begin fresh excavations. Send me maps and I will give you the locations, but I want no respite in their toil.'

'For what purpose is all this excavation? There would be more productive methods to achieve what you intend. Why this one?' Grey Seer Bilquik snarled with condescending disdain.

'You intend an assault?' Grey Seer Tikric stated without any degree of certainty.

'I have no solid plan as yet. I shall fully assess the situation before making any strategies, but whatever I decide, I expect full co-operation and a strong fighting force which this task will furnish.'

'Your plan stinks as badly as the Plaguemaster over there,' Tikric disputed.

In answer to the insult, the mouldering heap that was Festrisk merely chuckled and wiped a line of putrescent excretion off himself. Taking a deep sniff of the green lines of vapour winding up from it he flicked it onto the wall where it tardily slithered down. Several of the assembly blanched visibly.

'We should attack, and soon. Impress the Council,' hissed Tikric.

'Your plan is a Clanrat's plan, Grey Seer,' said Maulokk.

'It would work.'

'Save that it is rash, stupid, and would end in heavy losses and defeat. Would that impress the Lords of Decay? I thought you Grey Seers were supposedly smarter than that. It seems that your intellect is as false as your impartiality,' stated Maulokk.

'At least we are here through achievement and not a father's influence.'

'You dare speak thus to me!' Maulokk hissed with unleashed rancour.

'I dare!' the Grey Seer exclaimed, instigating the challenge without pause.

With a hiss of indignation, Maulokk drew his sword and brought it before himself in a single fluid motion.

The Grey Seer stepped away from the others, gripping his staff in both hands with the chatter of teeth and expeditious ultrasonic growls of choler.

The Plague Monks quickly backed up, as did the Warlord. All hands were going to weapons. Each of them was not sure as to what unseen eddies were moving beneath the surface of this imminent confrontation. It could all be an elaborate cover for an assassination upon another and none were willing to risk their lives on even this most remote of possibilities.

Eyes darted to and fro, the paranoia so thick it almost gained a physical presence in the room.

While Maulokk and Tikric circled, sniffing the air and sizing each other up, Bilquik and Skarbitik began drawing their blades.

Skrabic spied the covert provocation and moved towards them with Maulokk's Stormvermin, all of them staring directly at the two diabolic clergy. Claspings hilts they made it perfectly clear that interference would not be tolerated.

The Grey Seers quivered with rage, incensed at being treated thus by those they considered so much lower in stature than they. But Karikk and his fellows believed that the Grey Seers and the treachery they spun had been the force responsible for their nightmare bondage. As a consequence they were eager to seize any excuse to hack them limb from limb. Even the slightest provocation would have them act and the Grey Seers could see it in the effulgent loathing that radiated from each of the armoured Stormvermin.

Skrack and Kerick'k maintained predictably neutral stances, noticing not only the imminent confrontation but also the additional flare of hostilities about to occur between Maulokk's guards and the Grey Seers. The hall was about to become a blood bath and they were readying to run rather than entangle themselves either in it, or its ramifications.

Maulokk edged forward, keeping his eyes upon the Grey Seer's hands and not his staff.

The Grey Seer lashed out, sweeping the base of the weapon at Maulokk's legs. Noticing the Skaven's left hand shifting along the haft towards the tip in readiness for a counterstrike, Maulokk chose to leap up. The base whistled beneath his feet and he readied to parry the presumed attack, then retaliate with a manoeuvre his battle tutors had taught him.

Acting as predicted, Tikric reversed the blow and hurled a downward lunge at Maulokk. The ribbons flapped in the turbulence behind the weighty head of bone and copper.

Holding his sword in both hands, Maulokk caught it at the prickly base. Countering the velocity he halted it barely an inch from his shoulder.

Moving with agile speed, Maulokk's left hand relinquished its grip on the blade and the elbow launched savagely into Tikric's snout.

The Grey Seer jerked back, holding his staff out protectively, his nose bleeding, his eyes watering from the blow to the sensitive organ. Due to impaired vision and debilitated senses he was now unable to fight as effectively, granting Maulokk the massive advantage such a strike was designed to achieve.

Maulokk grabbed the wavering staff by the haft and pulled it aside, diverting the Grey Seer's attention into restoring some measure of a guard. Maulokk followed with a sweeping kick that cut the Skaven's feet from beneath him and with a simultaneous shove he pushed the staff away and let the Grey Seer collapse clumsily onto his back.

Although winded and jarred from the impact, Tikric still managed to keep one

hand on his weapon.

Maulokk saw the signs that were indicative of the Grey Seer's stubborn refusal to relent, so he stomped onto the wooden shaft before the downed Seer could recuperate.

With the Warlock's full weight resting upon the pole, Tikric grimaced as his fingers were painfully trapped beneath. The Seer lunged for another weapon and then froze suddenly as Maulokk held his sword in both hands and placed the point to the Skaven's throat, ensuring that the pommel was before his own stomach. Should Tikric kick up at his back, then the Grey Seer would be skewered when Maulokk's body thrust the sword in.

The defeated Skaven fought off the instinct to continue the conflict and forced himself to remain passive. Giving a deep sigh with a drawn ultrasonic tone he expressed his defeat in the natural way of their species.

'So!' Maulokk announced sibilantly. 'The first attempt occurs.'

He then paused, regarding the Seer beneath him as lines of red wove from his throbbing snout.

'I will not fall into the trap of killing you, Tikric. At present I do not have enough cause to defend your termination, but remember that I am wise to your master's plans, and next time...'

With a flick of his blade he opened a small gash on the Grey Seer's neck. The cut was not deep but it was painful and placed where movement of his head would constantly make the wound felt.

'You will die, and not quickly,' he whispered softly and then withdrew from the chamber, confident in his Stormvermin's ability to protect him from the belaboured Seer.

Tikric tried to haul himself up, nursing his throbbing fingers and virulently shrugging of the aid of his fellow Seers. All three glared blackly at the deserting Warlock.

Once back inside the seclusion of his warren, Maulokk thought on the problematic subject of his aids and where their true loyalties lay. How might he twist their allegiances to be of use to him?

Maulokk called for Skrabic. The white furred Warlock warily entered, probably expecting a reprimand for an offence he was currently ignorant of.

'I have a task for you. Head north to Hell Pit and take four of my Stormvermin with you as escort. I will require thirty Rat Ogres and the appropriate handlers as soon as possible. The tokens will be left secretly in the fourth Warpstone chamber in the workshop. Ensure no one sees you retrieve them.'

'You have a plan then, Lord?'

Maulokk cast a warning glance to the Skaven, who sensibly took heed and dropped the line of enquiry. Maulokk wanted to ensure that this task was done properly and he also hoped to keep his only semi-trustworthy aid out of the gathering maelstrom of conspiracy. Such cabal could easily snare Skrabic with deceptive clutches and would either result in his untimely death or worse still, compromise his loyalty.

'Make preparations and if you are asked say that you are on a reconnaissance mission in the tunnels. I gave you no specifics, just a vague order.'

The Warlock bowed and strode out with emphatic pride. Moments later a Clanrat messenger delivered the tunnel plans via the Stormvermin sentries and fearfully departed.

Maulokk carefully looked over the cracked sepia parchments and began to plan the excavations.

It would take several hours to complete his work, for he had to hide the true passages amidst pointless expansions and tunnel work. In addition, he had to create a bogus objective that was also to be camouflaged with purposeless work, but not well

enough so that his conspirators would fail to discern it. The scheme forced Maulokk to negotiate a gossamer thin line between the undetectable and the suspiciously obvious.

Chapter seven

The loud, crashing bang of the chamber door flying open and striking the wall roused Jakob and Hergar with a violent start.

Instinctively they both grabbed weapons and leapt from their cots before they were even partially awake. Through bleary eyes they turned and saw Dieter standing in the doorway.

'There's been another raid!' he panted, his breath rapid from the run to inform his companions.

'When?' Jakob slurred, his mouth dry, a wash of nausea galloping through his gut from the overtly swift rise.

'A few hours ago. Old man Zankisch was out for an early morning stroll and heard sounds of distress from the Landwirt place.'

Jakob began pulling on the armour he had neatly arranged before the fireplace and collected his array of weapons, cursing under his breath when his fumbling digits failed to operate a buckle as swiftly as he wished.

'This better not be a false alarm,' Hergar warned in chafed tones, draining the dregs of his bedside wine bottle before donning his boots and hoisting his hammer onto his shoulder. A satisfied belch declared his readiness.

The Dwarf noticed that half of his hair was flat from where he had been sleeping on it. Witnessing Jakob still in the process of getting combat ready, Hergar began tugging the stiff spines back outward.

'Have you told Elldrigar?' asked Jakob, contorting his arms behind him to access the straps of his breastplate.

'He is preparing himself.'

Jakob guessed that the Wood Elf's acute hearing would have detected Dieter's charging approach and forewarned him of the alert.

Jakob was certain that something was clearly troubling the Elf. He had been pensive these last days at the village, almost melancholy. Some unknown weight was visibly weighing on his brow.

Hoping that the funereal attitude of his companion would not affect his fighting performance, Jakob slung his net onto his shoulder and ran out in pursuit of the Cleric.

Hergar began at a slower pace, sprinting forth and almost being knocked from his feet when Elldrigar nimbly wove past him in the corridor.

'Come on, Dwarf! Move those stumpy legs or you'll miss all the action!' he said with derisory mirth.

'We Dwarves don't need speed, you lanky stick, because we don't ever run away!'

'I can believe that. By the time you reach the battle it's either over or all your foes have all died of old age.'

Hergar gritted his teeth and ignored the Elf's sarcastic banter. Instead he concentrated on negotiating the stairs that Elldrigar seemed to dance so effortlessly down.

Taking them three at a time the Slayer pounded down like wild thunder before charging through the back room and chasing after the others who already stood outside in the morning twilight.

Taking their bearings at a prolonged glance, the two days they had spent gaining a good knowledge of the circumjacent area was offset by the darkness which hampered their awareness of the layout, making the landscape considerably less familiar.

'This way!' testified Dieter with confidence, being the first to recall where the Landwirt's lived.

The Cleric turned and ran, traversing the ditch and sprinting down an overgrown track, his wild hair and robes flowing behind him in fluttering rolls. The others quickly gave pursuit, the direction fitting their own prompted memories.

The air was cold and a thin mist humbly wove about the undergrowth that glistened with a light glaze of dew. The plant-life snagged and pulled at the motley band but they sprinted onward regardless.

Within minutes the cleared area bearing the Landwirt farm honed into view between the encompassing curtain of trees.

Elldrigar was the first to leave the treeline, the tangling plants not hampering him in the slightest. He leapt out with his bow notched and used his aim to scan the scene.

A gasping Dieter emerged next. Two small balls of solid sulphur were in one hand and his sword was in the other.

Delayed by his encumbering armour, Jakob arrived and ran to the front. He adopted a fighting stance with his longsword held back and his parrying dagger held forth in readiness to catch any incoming assault.

They gazed studiously about the area, seeking foes or hint of movement amidst the halcyon rural dwelling. There was only a dim silence that was broken solely by the close humming passage of an insect or testing chirp of a bird.

'I shall take an aerial view,' said Dieter, putting away the sulphur and drawing a small hawk feather to replace it.

The Cleric's eyes glazed over as he devoted his attention to the task. Opening his arms he started to speak strange chanting words in some unearthly tongue. Dieter's hand closed into a fist and he strained, moulding the energy like clay, throwing out waves to conquer gravity, redirect it and use it as a means of propulsion.

When he unfurled his tensed digits the feather was gone and sparks of golden motes drifted up, carried by an invisible force to twirl around him and then vanish.

A soft blast of displaced air rolled out and the robed form lifted into the air, his hair and clothes billowing in a personal gale that allowed him to rise high over the scene.

No matter how many times Jakob bore witness to such sorcery it always made him feel uneasy. It did not seem natural to perform such feats, even if they were for a just cause.

Such eldritch and arcane matters were beyond his understanding and thus his deeply rooted distrust stemmed largely from the unknown.

Hergar burst from the bushes with a snarl and an upraised hammer, rivulets of sweat sliding down his tattooed body.

'Where's the priest?' he rasped, puffing and panting, a slight sway affecting his stance after the rigours of his frantic dash.

Jakob pointed up, causing the Slayer to follow and look upon the hovering form without interest before returning his gaze earthward.

'He spotted anything?' Hergar asked, bending over and leaning on his hammer as he tried to recover his breath.

Jakob responded with a shrug and spoke after a short pause. His mesmerised eyes were still fixed on the eerie sight and could not leave it.

'Unknown. He hasn't said anything yet.'

Drifting back to solid ground, the winds died the moment Dieter softly touched down, his ruffled locks falling limp once more.

'There's no sign of anyone about the farm, but the treetops are too meshed to be sure whether the same applies further out.'

'I'll go and search for tracks,' said Elldrigar, disappearing back into the woods.

'Be caref-' Jakob began, but the Elf was already streaking through the thick

plant life as though it were open road. 'Let's check the farm. Dieter, you take the barn. Hergar the back. I'll go in the front.'

The group prowled towards their respective goals, weapons presented for immediate use, their eyes alert for signs of danger.

Dieter burst into the barn while Hergar charged around the rough, single storey farmhouse without any hint of stealth or caution.

Jakob sighed at the excessive noise, kicked open the front door and immediately whirled aside and into cover. After a brief moment he jerked his head in to check the interior. Satisfied that it was safe he finally entered at a careful rate.

The sound of splintering wood under a heavy hammer blow signalled Hergar's aggressive entry via the back door. The heavy footfalls of the Slayer allowed Jakob to keep constant track of where the uncouth warrior was at all times.

Working from opposite ends the pair had soon checked the rest of the rooms and found no living thing. Only ransacked chambers and signs of calamity and resistance remained. Their paths met in the hallway.

'Anything?' Hergar asked, tossing his hammer up onto his shoulder and grumpily kicking a toppled chair from his path.

'No. Only signs of search, theft and abduction.'

'Tools and food?'

'Aye, strange indeed,' Jakob gravely acknowledged.

'Let's hope *his lankiness* finds some tracks, or we're back where we started,' grumbled the Dwarf, the local wine starting to prove a less ready replacement for his aching thirst for hectic combat.

Growling up a ball of mucus from his throat he spat it on the floor and kicked over a small set of drawers. An assortment of personal trinkets spilled out and he started to crudely comb through them with his boot.

'If they exist I'm sure he will, but let's get out of here first. There's nothing more to be done,' stated Jakob.

Hergar noticed a few coins amidst the trinkets and reached down to gather them up. To his surprise he found a few gold ones amidst the brass and silver.

'Money?' he wondered with a frown, and flipped a coin towards Jakob.

Snatching the spinning golden disc from the air, he looked across it, turning it over again and again as though seeking the image of the attackers in its burnished surfaces.

'It's like I told you. They've stripped this place of tools and raw materials, food and everything else. Yet anything of real value has been left behind. It's bloody odd,' Jakob commented, and then placed the coin in his pocket.

'How many were there?' Hergar asked, placing the other coins in his purse as they strolled for the front door.

'Landwirts or attackers?'

'The farmers,' said Hergar.

'Six. I think. Husband, wife, three kids and the grandfather.'

'And whoever did this took all of them.'

'It wasn't Beastmen. That's for sure. Not a single person dead? Now that isn't likely,' the Slayer declared, shaking his head at the troubling thoughts.

'Aye, and why would Beastmen bother themselves with young and old? For food? Work? I think not. Especially with all the useless junk they've pilfered.'

They ambled out into the herb garden that spread before the house and made towards the barn. Dieter was standing indolently outside the entrance, drinking in the rustic delights of the wilderness.

'Anything?' Hergar called out.

The Cleric swatted at a bee that cruised dangerously close to the snaring mesh of his hair and shook his head.

'Nothing. Including grain and hay. Whoever did this stripped the barn almost to the last sheaf of wheat. What about the house?'

'Same story. No bodies, no tools, no food, nothing,' replied Jakob.

'Dammit! When do I get to smack something?' spat Hergar, slapping his palm to the reassuring head of his hammer. He was jiggling with frustration that he had been denied yet another chance to get killed.

Jakob rolled his eyes and exhaled softly to help him garner some patience.

'So what's our next course of action?' Hergar asked glumly. Slouching down he laid back into the grass and let the warm rays of the exposed sun fall on his bared hide. Jakob crouched, balancing on his sword as the point sunk a little in the soft turf.

'We wait for Elldrigar,' he answered.

'Great,' the Dwarf moaned, 'Now we're hanging on that effeminate reed's every word.'

'Can you track?' Dieter said irritably.

'Who wants to track? You leave finding the enemy to the ones who can't fight, and fighting's the important bit,' he declared with glee, tapping his hammer like a favoured pet as it lay next to him on the grass.

'Don't you think of anything else?'

'Nope.'

'So you really are that shallow a creature?'

'Yep.'

'Pah!' Dieter spat with a dismissive wave of a hand in the Dwarf's direction.

'Pah,' mimicked Hergar with open disdain, distorting his face into a warped sneer. 'What sort of fool worships winter anyway?'

The lack of opponents had left the Slayer in a cantankerous mood and it was an attitude that was quickly developing into aggravated hostility.

Dieter was not so disposed for a conflict, but the Dwarf's remarks were at the expense of his precious faith and thus were successfully stoking his gall.

'You blaspheme my God! Dwarf! I'm not like those Sigmarite fools you hoodwinked. I bear no stricture to force me to constantly aid your wretched race. So one more heretical word from those fat lips and I'll roast you like the painted maggot you are!'

'Oh! So you wanna have this painted maggot put a hammer in your face, eh priest?' snarled Hergar, leaping up from his reclined position.

'Apply that baby rattle to your own! It might improve those grotesque looks of yours!'

'You're gonna be the grotesque one, Umgi!' roared Hergar, throwing his hammer into the air and running forward, strands of drool stretching from his lips.

Jakob spotted Dieter drawing nuggets of sulphur as he quickly backed up, his eyes flickering with pulses of unleashed energy. The Cleric's skin was flushed and his lips were bringing up the words to forge sheets of incendiary doom. Hergar had pushed him too far; the priest was definitely not bluffing.

Acting to protect himself as much as the Slayer from indiscriminating eruptions of fire, Jakob jumped into his path and clapped hands to the brawny torso of the Dwarf. A forceful shove that would have easily felled most Humans merely brought Hergar to a halt.

'Out of my way, Jakob. Or I'll dreng you just as happily!' the Dwarf warned with venom, his hammer still hanging in the air, ready to rain down and bring destruction.

'Not without a bloody hard fight you won't, now sit down!' Jakob said with a snarl, hoping to defuse the enraged Dwarf.

Continuing to shove into the Slayer to hold him back, Jakob regretted not having stepped in earlier. He had been distracted by nostalgically thinking on old battles as he often did in dull moments.

'I don't take insults, you gutless grumbaki!'

'Then do not start strife by giving them!' yelled Jakob.

Hergar gave a wiggling throe, his arsenals of muscle throwing Jakob off with ease.

'You insulted his God, old friend,' he said, jumping back and grabbing his weapons in readiness. Jakob was intending to try and entangle the Dwarf in his net and subdue him somehow. It would be a vain effort and the appeal to their friendship stood more success. Already a clammy sweat of fear was rising across Jakob's back. He had a Cleric ready to vaporise them both standing behind him and a psychotic Slayer immediately before him.

'I was jesting!' Hergar roared stridently in his defence, stepping with agitation from foot to foot. He wanted to fight not talk, but Jakob kept pestering him with arguments. Hergar hated arguing, he much preferred a few choice insults prior to smashing someone's head in.

'And what if Dieter jested so about Grimmir?'

The possibility of a slur against the great warrior God of the Dwarves made him respond impetuously, his eyes aghast with appalled rage at the mere notion of such an atrocity.

'Why I'd rip his fu-'

'Point proven,' Jakob interrupted sharply.

'Hmmmph, that's entirely different,' the Dwarf added dourly, the hammer starting to lower.

'No it damn well isn't, and you know it, Hergar.'

The Dwarf edged closer, his Slayer rage boiling volcanically, more so for having been vanquished in the verbal portion of the dispute. Hergar could not face defeat in anything.

'You should be facing your death against a great foe, not an ally. And what if you win in a fight with Dieter? Would a priestly man who you goaded into conflict make a fine addition to your tally of slain enemies? How impressive!' Jakob said.

He knew little of the Slayer's code and had to bluff as best he could from what he suspected.

The Dwarf paused in thought, his fury still burning fiercely. With a throaty bark he lashed out, venting his frustration on the nearest inanimate object. The solid weapon of war cut a giant gash through the barn wall, causing splinters to fly out in all directions from where the weapon cleaved back outward.

Exhaling heavily, he let the head drop to the floor. Turning on his heels he stomped off, his boots punching deep prints in the soil with each incensed stamp.

Dieter carefully replaced his ingredients after pausing to ensure the retreat was no sly facade designed to make him drop his guard. Silently sitting down, he started absently tugging out clumps of grass in pinches and tossing them aside while regarding the scene.

Long minutes passed before Hergar had calmed sufficiently to permit his return.

The Dwarf splayed himself against a post a short distance away, wringing the haft of his hammer in his painted hands. The habit was one of his least irritating traits.

An uncomfortable silence prevailed until Elldrigar appeared upon the scene. His approach had been inaudible to the entire group and made them jump with a startled flinch and swing around with weapons ready as he simply began speaking.

'I have located a trail.'

'Dammit, Elldrigar,' whined Jakob, steadying his suddenly racing heart and lowering his sword.

'There were sixteen of them. They came in from the south and took all the people and tried to hide their tracks as they headed north. I can only give an estimate that they are about an hour or two ahead of us.'

'Do they still have plunder?'

'Aye, it's no doubt slowing them up considerably.'

'Well the quicker we set off, the quicker we catch them,' said Jakob, groaning as his legs strained to lift his armoured form.

'Not unless we get Hergar some stilts, they're travelling directly through the forest,' he smiled.

The Dwarf turned and regarded the Elf with rigour.

'Unless you want to carry him, Elldrigar, cut the taunts.'

The Elven marksman mumbled about the lack of humour in the group and walked on a short way towards the trees before looking round at the torpidly arising party.

'Are you coming then? They went this way,' he announced, trying to encourage some measure of haste because he was closer now than he had ever been before.

Chapter eight

Skrack lounged upon the soft fur and straw provided in his roomy warren. He was currently using his time alone to try and assimilate the intricacies of the plague sorcery Maulokk had used against the mutants.

Kerick'k was off on some iniquitous errand of his own again, and Skrabic was preparing to depart on some task of Maulokk's. This left Skrack with little to do save catch up on his private studies.

From the thick shadows of the entrance he caught a glimpse of movement. Turning another of the grimoire's dry and tainted pages to give the momentary illusion of unawareness he suddenly darted for his sword.

Bringing the spell of Warp Lightning to his mind, Skrack slipped the enchanted weapon from its Ogre skin scabbard. The black length burst with an ardent pulse, the blade suddenly wreathing itself in a shroud of raging yellow flame.

The intense magical fire illuminated the chamber, casting back the heavy oceans of blackness and revealing a grey robed figure. It had an ornate staff and a badly bruised and swollen snout.

Skrack carefully sheathed the blade but kept the spell at the forefront of his thoughts just in case the Grey Seer was here for something other than discussion.

The reassuring feel of the Horned Rat's tendrils of force latching to his forebrain gave him considerably more confidence in dealing with this black priest.

'Warlock Master Skrack,' said the Seer.

'Grey Seer Tikric,' he acknowledged with hollow tones, closing the thick book and turning to face the stationary guest.

'And what brings you here?' he inquired suspiciously.

'It concerns Maulokk.'

Skrack had anticipated an attempt to steal his loyalty. If it were indeed such an attempt then he wanted no part in it. The nefarious Grey Seer could be setting him up for a fatal tumble, or worse.

'I am loyal to my Clan and to those it appoints over me, Seer. Tell your masters I am not to be bought,' he reported with an indoctrinated, deliberately even pitch.

'I'm sure that's true, but spare me the trite nonsense about loyalty,' Tikric replied patronisingly.

'You doubt me?' he rebutted, considering whether the Grey Seer was perhaps testing his fealty as part of some tedious survey.

'Of course not. But perhaps that perfunctory and ill-deserved loyalty might be affected if you knew that Warlock Engineer Lord Maulokk was being...groomed, by his father. Why else the exceptional training, the protection, the nurturing?'

'A Warlock's desire to provide the best for his eldest and only offspring,' professed Skrack with a teasing smile.

'How amusing. Such sentiments in a Lord of Decay? I think not. No. Maulokk is

being methodically and meticulously prepared.'

The Grey Seer's taciturn state was infuriating. Skrack continued to maintain his steadiness, issuing his questions with only partial interest.

'For what? To become his agent? Secede Ikit Claw as Chief Warlock? To -'

'Become a Lord of Decay?' the Grey Seer uttered with subdued gravity, smashing Skrack's mask of indifference as though it were brittle bone. The words made the Warlock's full attention grossly evident.

With a private hiss of fury Skrack cursed the loss of control and hastily patched his facade of impassivity back together. The repairs were far too late to hide the damage.

'That's impossible. No one has defeated a Council member since the War of Blasphemy. It cannot be done.'

'That matters not. What does matter though is that Lord-Warlock Morskittar has great plans for Maulokk. He wants his son on a Council seat to make his Clan the strongest, more powerful even than the Grey Seers. We both know that disrupting the balance that currently stands will not be tolerated, Skrack. War within Skavendom has been made for far less and besides, Clan Skryre versus the Grey Seers in open conflict? It could destroy our entire race once and for all.'

'What motivates you to say such things? And why do you direct them at me?' said Skrack, but he already knew the answers. He just wanted them confirmed from the Grey Seer's own lips.

It was clear how Tikric knew, for the sinister clergy had informants everywhere. It was also clear why the Seer was saying this, for surely he could not bear any favour towards the one who had just recently and publicly defeated and humbled him. The Seer was pulling at whatever strings he could, using loyalty, envy, even patriotism to try and sway Skrack into helping him.

'I want Maulokk dead,' divulged the grim Skaven.

'You expect me to...? Maulokk must have softened your brain with his blows. Why should I-'

'Examine this hypothesis, Warlock Master,' he interrupted dissonantly before continuing with a more measured tone. 'If Maulokk were slain, what would happen to he who avenged the death of Morskittar's favourite offspring and killed the assassin?'

'He would be...' Skrack began and fell quiet, gaining insight into the Grey Seer's discreet ploy.

'Greatly rewarded,' Tikric finished for him, intent on leaving no part of this scheme to supposition. 'In addition, the avenger could apply Maulokk's plan and further embellish his success with it, passing the victorious strategy off as his own creation,' he added seductively.

'Only if the Grey Seers refused to involve themselves in the situation,' Skrack indicated.

'I am sure that they would not interfere. Some may even be glad that Maulokk were dead and would consider such a thing a weighty favour. One that could be called upon some day.'

'I take it that this conversation never occurred?' said Skrack.

'How could there have been a conversation when I never came here,' replied Tikric.

Skrack tickled his maw with a crooked grin and nodded in agreement. The Grey Seer gave a token bow and withdrew with the sedate smug smile of someone whose plans had come to full fruition.

Chapter nine

The wooden box was coloured a dark crimson whose shade bordered on black. The edges were elaborately decorated with a ridiculous amount of rune-engraved brass and

a small, smooth dent was sunk into the top of the lid.

Maulokk avoided the lock. He had concealed a poisoned flip needle trap within and instead he traced the back with his fingers until he felt the three tiny studs that would open it. With a simultaneous push there came a soft click and the lid popped up.

The velvet-lined interior was solid save for a hemisphere indentation in lid and base that crafted itself perfectly about the fist-sized ball of crystal. A black radiance emanated from within the Warp Orb's heart, the light throbbing with an even cadence.

After closing the box Maulokk gently laid the sphere on the lid. Settling it on the accommodating dent he glowered at the artefact.

Maulokk concentrated, expunging all other matters from his mind while pushing his magical will onto the device.

The Warp Orb suddenly went black, falling into a darkness without equal or comparison. Misty streaks of green arose and could be distinguished from the terrible night. An arcane hurricane that was trapped inside the crystal span the slivers of fog, whirling them around beneath the glass surface.

Relaxing a little, Maulokk leaned over and spat onto the Orb. It hissed as though it was scalding hot and the spittle evaporated in seconds. Without delay he bit his finger and as the blood welled in the cut he drew a little Warpstone from his pouch.

With extreme care Maulokk sprinkled the pinch of refined powder onto the Orb and let his blood drip and mingle with the supernatural dust. Where they met there was a spark of red incandescence and both particle and droplet vanished.

'Who seeks, and what do they seek?' asked a soft, emotionless voice.

Maulokk was now sure that the link was good. But was it accurate?

'Warlock Engineer Lord Maulokk of Clan Skryre seeks the services of Clan Eshin.'

'What service do you require?'

The link was correctly placed. The Orbs had an occasional habit of malfunctioning, their rarity making them unpredictable if they were not mentally pile-driven. The adding of Warpstone greatly increased the chance of success when employing a Warp Orb but even so, there was still a chance of failure. They were costly items but one that all who could afford them paid for.

Their communication privileges were a tremendous asset, allowing contact with the distant places where the Skaven dwelt. It would have taken him weeks to send word all the way to Araby by messenger and now he talked with Clan Eshin as if in the same warren.

The cost for his purpose was immense, yet so was the need for unbridled success here. Nothing could be left to the spurious whims of chance.

Chapter ten

Elldrigar hastily warned the others when the tracks began to grow fresher. The group began to take more care in their steps, keeping conversation to a minimum and forsaking speed for added stealth.

They were gaining rapidly when the Wood Elf froze, holding up a hand as he sank into a crouch. The others who were staggered a short distance between each other, stopped and lowered into the concealing foliage. With weapons ready and bodies tensed they piqued their senses in anticipation of combat.

Elldrigar seemed to merge with the vegetation. As his tall, lithe body vanished, all knew he had detected something of importance.

Jakob's guts knotted like they always did when danger loomed. Hergar clenched and loosened his grip on the hammer, wringing the haft, eager to die and fulfil his Slayer vows. Dieter ran over the power words to spells in his mind, giving silent prayer to Ulric for protection, courage and strength against adversity.

Protracted minutes of intense apprehension doddered past with a frail gait.

Each of them could not help but wonder if these were perhaps the last moments of their life and whether fate had finally grown tired of shielding them.

Elldrigar emerged from the long grass surrounding Jakob, his passage as gentle as a breeze. He indicated to Dieter who beckoned to Hergar while edging forth. Elldrigar visibly winced at the Giant Slayer's heavy crass footsteps.

'There is a camp ahead,' Elldrigar whispered once all had arrived. 'There are only a few present, the rest have moved on.'

'How many?' asked Jakob.

'Six. They are packing the remaining plunder and obliterating tracks and other...evidence.'

'What evidence,' asked Jakob.

'Bodies,' he testified sullenly.

'Human?' inquired Dieter.

'Some. Animals and their own kind otherwise.'

'What are they?' Jakob asked.

Elldrigar paused and then frowned, his voice unwilling to soil itself with the passing of the identity.

'Some sort of rat Beastman. Shorter than a man, tail, fur, rodent head.'

Jakob noticed Hergar look surreptitiously up, taking unexpected but concealed interest in the Elf's report. The two non-Humans exchanged a knowing, sinister glance.

'Armour? Weapons? Sorcerers?' Jakob questioned, trying to fathom the furtive behaviour of his companions, which was out of character enough to raise weighty concerns.

'Scavenged or adapted armour. Swords. Axes. A few have bows. None look like a Shaman or Sorcerer.'

Jakob paused, forming his tactics from experience but still without any real idea of what he faced. It was a disadvantage he was sure Elldrigar could rectify if he were thus inclined.

'Elldrigar and Dieter hit them with your missiles. Hergar...'

It was obvious that the Dwarf could not easily sneak around the camp. The enemies were proficient in woodcraft and would detect his reckless tread long before they attained suitable attack positions.

'Stand at the front. These creatures will probably rush them and you have to intercept and block that.'

'So where will you be?' the Dwarf inquired brusquely.

'The other side of the camp. If any seek to flee or warn the others, I can stop them or drive them back into you. Any problems?'

The plan suited all, especially Hergar who stood a good chance of having to face the entire pack alone.

'Give me a count of a thousand to get set, then attack,' Jakob declared and crept into the grass.

He did not need to concern himself with being struck by wayward missiles because Elldrigar's arrows rarely missed and Dieter's sorcery never strayed from the intended paths. His only worry was if the entire enemy force rushed him in a bid to escape once the fight began. If they were that cowardly, he hoped that they would scatter rather than attack when he arose amidst sufficient howls and intimidating roars.

The others waited patiently while he moved slowly onward. Jakob gained his bearings on the camp by the abrupt squeaking chitter that issued from his left. The sound worried him because it meant that they had a language, which meant they were intelligent and thus posed real danger.

Weaving through the undergrowth, careful not to disturb any tall plants that might shake and point to his position, he gradually completed a rough semi-circular path. Then he began crawling towards the source of the strange and unearthly

conversations at an even more cautious speed. Jakob's palms became slick with sweaty solicitude.

At a count of eight hundred the rest of the group moved off to home in on the camp. Elldrigar halted them when he felt sure they were close enough and could go no nearer without the possibility of altering the foe.

Drawing four arrows he slowly removed his bow. Running his tongue along the feather flights to straighten them he pushed three into the dirt and notched the fourth.

Dieter opened a pouch and removed two compacted balls of sulphur while slowly drawing his sword with the other hand.

Hergar crouched and firmly cradled his warhammer in his right hand, while absently rotating one of his nose rings with the left.

'A thousand?' Dieter uttered with hushed tenor, seeking confirmation of his own mental count.

Elldrigar nodded in agreement and with a bolstering inhale they sprang up. The wall of wild grasses dropped away, opening the scene to full examination.

A short distance from their position lay a natural opening in the dense mesh of interlocking trees. The canopy above parted, yawning wide to allow the sunlight to stream in as a golden spotlight upon a depiction of horror.

The resident plants were trodden flat and the sooty stain of old and disused campfires scarred the greenery. Three others smouldered and slowly died from lack of attention, each with a wreath of stones arrayed about it.

Six figures moved within the area, their brown pelts of bristled fur rippling in the light. Clad in dark or tarnished armour, the metals were decorated with studs and unholy runes. Their heads bore sculpted helms and hoods which kept their beady eyes hidden in shadow and protected from the lash of the unleashed sun. The emerging snouts of the beasts bore long bushels of whiskers and chisel-like incisors. The unhealthy yellow fangs were large and stained red with fresh blood.

Each bore several weapons and all had a serrated sword or notch headed axe as their primary armament. Some had shouldered bows and all had at least one dagger and a shield with a strange, triangular symbol of heraldry embossed upon it.

Their hairless tails twitched irritably while they gathered the items that dotted the clearing. Placing them into patchwork backpacks they hurled other items onto an as yet unlit pyre of refuse at the heart of the camp.

Twisted cadavers lay together in loose embraces, their naked flesh gnawed to the bone in places. Their bellies were opened to make a vulgar display of their vacant torso and flies played within the cairn of meat, performing for the audience of squirming maggots that guzzled the leftovers.

Elldrigar's jaw clenched with suppressed choler as he released the first arrow, the barbed tip tearing through the air with a soft whistle to sink into a Skaven hip.

The missile punched through the breastplate with a metallic chime before diving deep into soft bowels. The creature gave a shrill shriek that caused the other Clanrats to spin and draw weapons in alarm. Blood dribbled from the hole and the wounded creature momentarily staggered aside under the impact. It snarled, arched its back and then charged forward.

Chanting loudly, Dieter conjured up his destructive magics. The sulphur in his hand burst into a cone of growling flames that rapidly formed into a whirling orb of streaking fire.

Thrusting his hand forward in a claw-like gesture he discharged the arcane force with a shout and a stream of cackling words.

The sphere of woven enchantment split in two and streaked out in lazy arcs with flickering paths of flames trailing behind each portion. One landed between a pair of Skaven and the second fell at the feet of a third who successfully hurled itself aside, thus avoiding the worst of the impending ravages.

A refulgent pulse of white shone in all directions and the ground erupted

violently with gouts of fire that spewed out and engulfed everything within two paces. The infernos scorched hair and flesh alike, smashed metal and ignited cloth.

The Ratmen were swatted from their feet and torn into the air by the virulent slap of the blast wave. With a solid thud one of them collapsed back to the earth and rolled to an inert halt, the creature rendered a charred, blackened husk. The neighbour was less savagely affected and flopped onto its side before sheltering its head with its arms as gobs of burning debris pelted it.

The fur of the Skaven's frame smouldered and several patches bore flames that it failed to notice until it had sprung up onto clawed toes and recommenced the charge. During the swift advance the Ratman started to frantically beat out his personal fires lest the blazes spread.

While Elldrigar slipped another arrow from the soil and loaded it into his bow, Dieter fished in his pouch. The Cleric wanted a spell to snare a survivor and uncover the answers to his many questions. Such data was definitely not forthcoming from those who were supposed to be his comrades.

The rough surfaces of the dry bone brushed against his fingertips and closing his hand about it, Dieter pulled the femur free. Already dredging in his memory for the words and nuances to bring out the spell he started to focus his powers.

The Clanrats bolted toward the two unprepared targets. The nearest pair bared razor teeth and leapt high into the air with a pump from their powerful hind legs.

'Mornin' scum!' Hergar roared as he jumped up.

His hammer was already raised above his head, the haft clutched in both hands.

Unable to alter its trajectory one of the flying Skaven slammed awkwardly into the wall of painted muscle that was the Slayer. Rashly snapping its long incisors into the flesh of the Dwarf's shoulder the creature tore open a deep gash.

Hergar swung wildly to get the monstrous rodent away so he might employ his hammer. After the collision the Skaven was off balance and failed to gain a handhold. It dropped and fell into a low crouch, where it tensed and sniffed warily at the enemy.

'Here's breakfast fer ya, Urk!' snarled the Slayer and instantly Hergar's burly arms were smashing the solid hammer downward.

The creature chattered long teeth and shifted beneath the shield, mistakenly assured of protection. The mighty weapon ripped into the surface, splintering the wood, gouging through the metal rim and staving in the studded helm beneath.

The Skaven's skull shattered loudly and undeterred, the heavy weapon continued, its meteoric inertia still not fully spent.

Sinking into the opened cavity the hammer sent cranial fluid and brain fragments up amidst twin arterial fountains. Forced out by the impact, blood launched from the Skaven's maw and nostrils, flecking the Dwarf with hot red liquid.

'Or Skruuuuund!' bellowed Hergar and threw himself at the other Skaven, his eyes flashing with a berserker fit.

Pulling his weapon with him the hammer came free of the slain rodent with a sucking pop. The weighty head was dripping with glistening morsels of dark matter as he swung it into the air.

The intended target leapt at Elldrigar. With a spinning side step the Elf avoided the attack, deliberately trailing a foot to trip the attacker. The Skaven clamped jaws upon empty air and its shins snagged across the Elf's leg. The creature pivoted forward and crashed onto its front, leaving itself wide open to the Slayer's looming assault.

'Incoming Grund!' yelled the elated Dwarven warrior and the hammer dropped with ferocity, trailing abundant strings of thick, clinging blood behind it.

The vermin lurched aside with a wriggle of mortal panic. The soft dirt gave way under the strike with a muffled thump.

'Kruk!' spat Hergar at the inconvenience of having his foe evade him. 'Okay, rat! Try dodging this!'

The Skaven lifted itself upright only to find a second lunatic swing coming at shoulder height. The Slayer was operating the clumsy weapon with frightening ease and disturbing speed.

The creature desperately tried to parry the attack, but with its shield situated on the opposite arm, its only defence was its sword.

Thrusting up and out the agile blade successfully met Hergar's swipe but the vermin found that the berserk attack was not so easily stopped.

Virtually unaffected, the hammer pushed the defending blade back before connecting heavily with the Clanrat's shoulder, splintering the bones.

With a high-pitched shout the Skaven flew aside, the serrated blade falling from its grasp as it landed and then bounced a short way to a paralysed stop.

Gasping weakly to gain breath, it scratched for the nearby sword with leaden movements, fighting to the last.

'This one'll be no rikkit!' hissed Hergar.

Jumping forward, his hammer swung down and then sailed overhead in a full arc, his arms rippling with exertion as he mercilessly caved in the skull with this second blow. The furry cranium seemed to briefly implode before it burst outward, sending blood and flesh out in a spattering moist halo. The body thrashed into the air with a final spasm as the hammer again chewed deep into the ground.

The Skaven who still had one of Elldrigar's arrows embedded in its flank sought retribution, the arrival of the beast delayed by an anguished limp.

Throwing itself into the air in the wake of the others, the creature exposed the teeth arrayed on its yawning jaws. Holding a grimy axe behind it, the vermin readied to follow the initial bite with a beheading chop.

Elldrigar felt the hot rancid breath reach him a mere instant before releasing the bowstring. There was a deep twang and a soft resounding crunch. The Skaven's features jerked back with the fierce velocity of the shot, flipping the airborne form, countering its impetus and dropping it at the feet of its killer.

The arrow flight could still be seen sticking out of its mouth along with the reddened barbed tip that protruded from the back of the beast's neck.

'Hergar! Behind you!' exclaimed the Elf, fumbling quickly for a new arrow as he saw the singed Clanrat swing at Hergar's spine, its fur on end as the Slayer gloated over his latest kill.

Hergar's reactions were too occupied to have benefited from the warning and the sweep opened a deep and lengthy cut along the tattooed flesh. Lost in a killing frenzy of diabolic proportions, the Slayer failed to even flinch.

With a blind backward swing he put all his enraged strength behind a lethal blow, his body pirouetting as it followed the hammer, his boots ploughing grooves in the grass.

The Skaven's maw accepted the glancing connection. The strike mashed its jawbone and spun its head aside with such dynamic power that it almost snapped its neck. The Clanrat staggered aside in a daze, dribbling blood and particles of broken enamel.

Lowering the hammer and spacing his grip upon the haft, Hergar launched the head forward like a battering ram. Bashing against the breastplate he pushed the metal inward, cracking several ribs. The hammer carried the Skaven from its feet and sent it sprawling to the ground, crippled and prone.

With an ancient Slayer victory cry that was a mix of elation and intense sorrow for the failure to find death, Hergar cast the hammer back. Throwing it high above his head he let his grip slide along the handle until he could take firm hold of the last foot of wood.

With a grunt of exertion he swung it back down and into the Skaven's back. Cracking the armour like eggshells he destroyed the spine beneath and crushed heart and lungs with the resulting wicked displacement of flesh. The Skaven's jaws launched

apart as they vomited a wide gout of crimson gore across the grass. The beast gave a drastic thro and sagged with a series of spasming twitches, the hammer having near cleaved it in half.

Stepping forward, Elldrigar notched the fresh arrow, drew aim on the last target and fired. A tremble of rage affected his otherwise superb marksmanship and the formidable Elfbow sent the arrow scrapping across the Skaven's flank to cut a most vicious slice.

The last surviving Skaven had already received minor burns from one of Dieter's fireballs and this second injury broke its resolve. Clapping a hand to the cut with a murmuring squeak, the Skaven turned to flee.

Instantly drawing on his inner powers, Dieter formed the spell that would break the Skaven's leg bones. He was unwilling to employ a mystical attack on the creature's mind to bring about immobility because he did not know what nightmares awaited in the vermin's skull, or even if it were susceptible to such magics. But he knew it had a skeleton and thus he had a target to single out for his destructive attentions.

Lost to the rapture and intense concentration of his sorcery, the Cleric remained unaware as the Dwarven Slayer stormed after the routing creature. Frothing drool dripped off Hergar's quavering lips, his body laced with spattered patterns of blood that merged with his sweat and ran down him in winding paths.

Hergar was likewise oblivious to his surroundings. He was totally consumed by the virulent Slayer Rage.

With a snarl he swiped out to trip the Skaven before the speedy creature out paced him. There was a sodden crunch as the hammer broke the Skaven's ankle to cruelly fell the beast.

With its snout leading the fall the creature gouged a trench in the soil and skidded to a halt. Clapping a clawed hand to its injury it tossed and rolled in agony.

Closing in upon the squealing form, Hergar lifted his weapon to deliver the deathblow while savouring the crippled helplessness of his foe as he readied to dispatch it.

The injured creature span suddenly and with an almost inaudible squeak thrust awkwardly up with its sword. The serrated blade cut a ragged gorge in Hergar's thigh, scratched his chest and narrowly missed sheathing itself in his throat.

The pain only strengthened the forthcoming blow that fell upon the Skaven's neck with titanic might, snapping the bone and grinding the tissues into pulp.

A second strike severed the few remaining ligaments and strands of meat holding the two areas together and sent the head bouncing away into the clearing's perimeter.

Snapping the femur in his hand, Dieter let the sorcery devour it and fully form from the annihilated matter. The spell matured and became active, ready to afflict whatever target Dieter willed.

As awareness returned he was forced to let it dissipate, despite the black thoughts that tempted him into turning it on the one who had robbed him of the target and thereby answers.

With a twinge of effort he expelled the unguided forces that loitered about him and let them harmlessly fade back into the ether.

There was no point in scolding the Dwarf or complaining, so he gritted his teeth and remained in brooding, gruff silence. Dieter pondered briefly that perhaps Ulric was testing him with the annoying recklessness of the accursed Dwarf.

Jakob emerged from the area opposite and walked over. Looking upon the carcasses he slotted his blades back into their respective scabbards.

'What are they?' he asked, steering the question at Elldrigar for the Elf's accuracy had been compromised during this fight.

Jakob had seen the Elf in enough fights to know that his shots were usually deadly. But something was troubling him, spoiling his aim, turning an otherwise lethal

shot into a wounding one.

Noticing the sour look, he sighed and composed a calm facade before speaking.

'Skaven,' he stated, finding distinct trouble in forming the word.

Everyone looked to him in disbelief except for Hergar who continued to stare vapidly at the floor.

'But they are only a legend, a nightmarish fable,' Dieter declared.

'No. They are real enough,' Hergar certified grimly, wiping the gore that his hammer had accumulated upon the flat grass.

'You knew about...these? And you said nothing?' Jakob shouted caustically, indicating the corpses with an angry sweep of his arm. 'I suspected Elldrigar of masquerade about the truth, but *you?*'

'It is best that no one knows of them,' answered the Dwarf with grave melancholia.

'Why?'

'Because the threat they pose is more grave than you could possibly imagine and there's not a damn thing anyone can do about it. Think then on the panic such revelations would cause, and for what purpose?' he snarled.

'How is it you know of them then?' Jakob asked abruptly.

Hergar was more sombre of reply, with a distinct undercurrent of anger from the crimes the race had perpetrated against his own.

'They were responsible for the fall of many strongholds. After the Time of Woes the foul scum poured in from below, entering through splits in the earth or through tunnels of their own accursed making. The Greenskins prevented any escape to the surface and blocked the arrival of reinforcements and diverted much-needed troops into holding them back. Karak Unger, Karak Varn, Karak Eight Peaks - all fell. The Skaven caused the deaths of many a good Dwarf and caused for many more to take the vows of a Slayer.'

'How did they...I mean, the Dwarves,' Dieter stuttered, unable to see how such apparently trifling beings could have vanquished the impregnable Dwarven realms.

'They breed like flies, their numbers are vast and they have foul sorcery and twisted devices of evil to aid them. For every one you kill, you can be sure that there will be twenty others to replace the disgusting aberration. And when they fight, they fight with two of the most powerful motives imaginable in their rat claws. They have their own foul religion that they worship like fanatics, and they fight just to eat what they kill, to alleviate the starvation their impossible numbers bring.'

A pensive pause followed. It was a break that Hergar broke.

'I'll tell you this, Jakob. Your race is as threatened by them as ours ever was. They are always beneath your feet, maybe even right now, right here in this forest, just waiting to rise again. Where they go, death and disease'll follow.'

'Like Nuln,' Jakob contemplated aloud.

'Like Nuln,' said Hergar.

'Now wait one moment,' interjected Dieter. 'Beastmen struck Nuln. That's what everyone says. The Skaven were a lie that was fabricated by Chaos Cults to cause civil unrest.'

Dieter hoped they were wrong. The thought of such things thriving beneath the surface disturbed him greatly. You could see Chaos and prepare or retreat. You could foreshadow its coming. Daemons and Chaos Warriors, Champions and Beastmen were not exactly indistinct. Even the hidden cults eventually mutated to expose themselves, but this threat was like nothing he had ever considered before.

'A cover up,' claimed Hergar.

'How do you cover up something like that? Its just not possible,' said Dieter with disbelief.

The Dwarf responded with dismal impatience and he was tempted to let the

Cleric continue deluding himself if he so wished. It made no difference to him.

'Circulate rumours contradicting it, rumours that such lies are a plot against the Empire and civil peace. Order Imperial troops to keep quiet and destroy the evidence. No doubt people would like to forget the occurrence and besides, Skaven are a myth. Who'd believe someone saying that *Ratmen* attacked the city.'

'They'd be thought insane,' confirmed Jakob, knowing how the authorities would work such a feat. It was easily done and would perfectly fit the facts as they knew them. If anyone other than Hergar was telling him this, he'd be taking Dieter's sceptical side all the way.

'Typical Humans,' Hergar grumbled. 'Don't want to deal with it and so ignore it, hoping that the next generation is forced to handle the problem. And all because the foul race rarely emerge. It let's you all justify your complacency with talk of the unnecessary panic it'd cause, and every day they get stronger and stronger, make more tunnels, infect some new town or city with their nests while you disbelieve they're even down there.'

'So what are they doing here? What could they want with villagers?' posed Dieter, his body going cold with dread.

'Whatever the reason, you can bet your last brass penny that they've a dread purpose in mind. These things don't arise from their depths on any damn whim.'

'Should we tell the authorities?' Dieter voiced.

'They'd never believe us,' Jakob declared, knowing that adventurers such as he were not popular with the Empire's leaders and Dwarf and Elf even less so. Such revelations would only give an excuse for their arrest.

The only one of them who stood even the slightest chance of being believed was Dieter, but intervention from the priesthood would swear him to secrecy the moment he said the word 'Skaven'. The High Priests simply had to know, which meant that they too were part of this grand conspiracy of silence and purposeful ignorance.

The thwarting of the Skaven's unknown plot for this area rested solely upon them, and should they succeed in saving all, then the untold wealth and renown such valour produced would be a side product he could just about manage to bear.

'The bodies!' proposed Dieter hopefully.

'A rare Beastman variant, an odd mutation or something like that. With the recent attack on Carroburg its certain that they'll be dismissed as such. We need solid, irrefutable proof,' stated Jakob.

'We need to find out where they're going first,' Hergar added.

'Can you still track them, Elldrigar?' Jakob asked.

'Is rain wet?' he said.

There was a tone of animosity in Elldrigar's voice, a hateful edge that Jakob had never heard before in the flippant natured Elf. It was one that could not possibly stem from the questioning of his woodcraft ability. Hergar had his reasons for knowing about and hating the Skaven, but what were Elldrigar's? Whatever they were, they were being kept totally secret for now.

'We need to return for supplies,' declared Hergar, thinking of his appetite first and foremost.

'Not enough time,' instantly stated Elldrigar. 'Every minute puts them further away from us and nearer to their destination. We set snares at night and find water en route.'

Elldrigar's skills had kept them alive in deep forest before and seemingly would again as this private crusade engulfed them.

Chapter eleven

Maulokk spent the following days assessing the truth of the Skaven situation at

Middenheim. He examined conditions, practices and supplies, determining their martial strength and how well equipped they were.

His excavation plans were instigated and all able-bodied Clanrats were drafted into the digging work. The raiding parties that returned from the wilderness were not spared a share of the workload and were immediately put to frenzied toil.

As he had hoped, the swelling numbers of the Skaven and their increased appetites were not fully matched by the stolen supplies of the city dwellers.

The weak, crippled and elderly slowly began to disappear as the Black Hunger inspired widespread cannibalism. This left only the strong and the fast to prosper.

The internal purging of the Skaven ranks was accentuated by the increase in space. Before his coming, the Clan had been cramped into a relatively small area, which made disputes rare. With more room, tempers grew. Territorial disputes and squabbles over females forced the populace to continually steel themselves against challenge. Such aggression further served to weed out the weak and strengthen those who remained.

The only real obstacles left against Maulokk's designs were the ones his enemies would erect. The avoidance of the pitfalls would require the discerning of his specific foes and how they might be defeated. To deduce who were the disguised subversives he individually called upon each of the Grey Seers.

He already knew Tikric's stance in the matter so discussion was pointless and dangerous. Instead, he opted to send a messenger to command the feudal Grey Seer. Tikric was told to take charge and responsibility for the eastern excavations.

Next he summoned Bilquik, the Skaven who was so openly contemptuous of him. Such obvious hate made him an unlikely traitor, unless such reasoning were planned so as to put him above suspicion.

'You called for me, Commander?' the Grey Seer uttered sourly upon his arrival.

Bilquik regarded the two guards standing close beside him, their eyes trained upon the Grey Seer's every twitch and breath.

'Yes. I want you to take over the supervision and responsibility for work in the western tunnels,' said Maulokk.

'Any particular reason?' he asked bitterly.

'To ensure accuracy and speed,' came Maulokk's grave response, implying that it might be a vital task.

That should have him speculating as to my reasons, thought Maulokk. *He must suspect that I have plans for that area, plans I cannot reveal by having myself be their initiator. If he intends treachery, I can expect 'accidents' to occur in the west.*

'When must I begin?' Bilquik asked lazily, covering the sudden flurry of thought as he considered his course of action.

'Immediately.'

The Grey Seer nodded and departed, the guards following him out to await the arrival of the next visitor. Maulokk gave Skarbitik a different task but it was one for much the same detective reasons.

'I want you to pick a select group of Clanrats as escort and head into the neighbouring area. I will require discreet raiding. Food is your priority. Leave no trace or witness.'

The food would be used to supplement the stolen store produce so as to appear that the thefts were slacking off. It would also allay any Manling or Longbeard suspicions that something was brewing beneath their feet. The migration of the attacks into the forest would successfully divert Manling attention, but the Longbeards were not so frivolous of purpose and would stay entrenched in the stores. Keeping the Dwarven tunnel fighters deep below ground would remove another threat to Maulokk's plans.

Also, if the Skaven reavers were repeatedly seen or their results were poor, then

Skarbitik would be exposed and his failure used to justify execution. If they were detected, then it would also aid his situation because the Manling military would send patrols to investigate or eradicate the reavers and further weaken the city in the process.

The Seer affirmed with a nod and was dismissed. After his departure Maulokk instructed his guards that he was not to be disturbed for any reason.

Pulling aside the large chest that concealed the entrance to the adjacent warren, Maulokk crawled in and began to unpack. Opening his note filled grimoires he started to scan through the ideas and theories, the construction details and plans he had made for possible spells and devices.

If he could prepare a new weapon in time and successfully deploy it in battle conditions then such a display would further boost his stature. He would have his lieutenants fully research and prepare the Warprockets while he worked upon one of his other inventions, keeping the acclaim restricted solely to himself.

Looking through the pages there were many choices. A Warfire tank was the first to catch his eye. Based around the Imperial version, it used two harnessed Rat Ogres inside the dense metal shell to act as propulsion. Much more reliable than the crude steam locomotion their enemies used, there was the added bonus of extra fighting power to be released should the tank be immobilised or damaged. A charge into an enemy column spewing Warfire as it went could be devastating, and after ramming the survivors the Rat Ogres could be loosed in the very heart of an opposing army. Even if the Warfire tanks erupted, the damage would be almost assuredly confined to the foe.

Another concept tickled his imagination, one that had come about after seeing Night Goblin Fanatics at work. A massive close knit cage or spiked metal ball was covered in small holes for breath and sight with a rabid Rat Ogre welded within. The beast was placed to run and roll the sphere over everything in the resulting erratic path. Like a fanatic it had a little control but could well wander back into its own ranks. A Warp Lightning generator could be fitted within the orb to inflict further trauma, the outer surfaces blazing with deadly discharge while leaving the Rat Ogre insulated within. The advantage to the Ratsphere was that should the shell be breached, its frenzied occupant would again be unleashed in the heart of the enemy.

However, both tank and sphere would have their effectiveness considerably reduced in the narrow streets of a city, especially one as closely packed as Middenheim, so he resolved to save them for a larger field of warfare.

There were plans for Warpstone bombs that could be hurled by hand. Mines to be placed covertly during the night by the sly operatives of Clan Eshin, ready for the enemy to march onto them come daylight. Both could be laden with plague-tainted shrapnel. Either a virulent Clan Pestilens contagion or merely diseased bone fragments could add to the horror they inflicted on flesh and morale.

He had huge versions of the Warplock Jezzail, strapped along a lobotomised Rat Ogre's back. A cannon carried by six Clanrats with a spike base to stab into the soil and minimise recoil. Troops and the crew could carry a mortar that was built upon a converted litter. When needed it would be set down and fired while being protected by the warriors.

A Warpstone cannon ball would be devastating, but so would the cost. Using shells packed with plague shrapnel around a Warpstone explosive could reduce the amount of the precious holy rock and ease expense. A little sorcery could achieve deadly air bursts where troops could not be shielded by those nearer the eruption. Thus a much larger area could instantly be affected and infected.

But all of these would take too long or be too costly to have ready in time. This left Maulokk with one invention, one that would prove highly effective against the well-armed forces of Middenheim.

Increasing the eternal radiance of his Warplamp, he set to work with meticulous

enthusiasm.

Chapter twelve

The days ate into the autumn, crawling by as Elldrigar led them ever onward. The Skaven's encumbering loot was matched by the need for those following them to move warily in case of ambush. These factors kept the two groups equally spaced.

The usual inter-group friction built inexorably up, but the need for silence at all times gave no spark to ignite the well of irritability. It soon became clear that the enemy was moving directly for the Middle Mountains. Even from such distance the city of Middenheim was clearly marked, although largely by the dark smoky stain of smog spreading above it.

Nearing the great and holy city of the White Wolf the forest became increasingly foreboding. There arose a strange sense of being watched. Of something hideous lurking unseen in the thick, dark foliage. Clean-picked bones and skulls littered the ground, broken open by inhuman appendages to seek out marrow and brain.

The Fauschlag, or fist strike rock, was responsible for bearing the city in the clouds. Legend spoke of Ulric himself smiting it, cleaving off the pinnacle and leaving a flat surface for his sacred settlement to be built. If this were true then there could be little doubting the power of the God of wolves and winter.

The trail summarily led them towards the rocky cliff face, but was soon lost upon the stone about the towering mount where the soil was sparse and the plant life thin. During a brief search, a crooked crack was spotted amongst the weathered crevices, boulders and outcrops of the Fauschlag base.

The split appeared broad enough to permit entry so Elldrigar and Jakob clambered over the rough terrain to access it, while Dieter and Hergar watched their backs.

'They entered here for sure. Look,' the Elf declared and tugged a few canvas strands from a jagged stone tooth.

There were other such pieces all around the vicinity, the material torn from the bulging baggage of the Skaven as they squeezed themselves in.

'Do we enter?' Jakob wondered.

'Not if you want to live,' Hergar shouted to him with a gruff snap.

'I thought you wanted to meet your death?' questioned Dieter, speaking half in serious questioning, half in derision.

'In the thick of battle, atop piles of my enemies with their blood soaking my skin and their screams ringing in my ears, not ambushed and captured by some fell beast in that damn labyrinth.'

'So what shall we do?' Dieter asked, obviously concerned for the city of his deity.

'The only thing we can do. Enter the city and try and find some evidence to back up our tales,' Jakob said.

'You think the Skaven are up to something?' posed the Cleric with trepidation, for Middenheim was impregnable from without but from within was a different matter.

'I don't know, but-' Jakob began before Elldrigar interrupted him.

'Yes they most definitely are. There are numerous tracks leading to this area. At least seventy heavily laden Skaven have entered. None have left.'

'You are sure,' Jakob asked.

The Elf frowned at the slurring of his skills.

'Sorry,' added Jakob.

'We are short of money,' Hergar said, his hand patting the small reserve he held. The few coins he had gained from the Landwirt farm had almost doubled the pittance he previously bore.

'The Carnival should begin within the next few weeks. We could find plenty of work there,' came Dieter's solution.

'Work?' Hergar spat discordantly. 'Like some measly serf? Not I! Not in this lifetime or any other!'

'As an alternative you could always enter the Minotaur fights, Hergar,' Dieter suggested.

The Slayer's features lit up and a broad smile crept across them as he thought about facing such a powerful monster in single combat.

'What Carnival's this?' Jakob wondered. He could see significance here. When else would a city be at its weakest and richest except during an important festival?

'The day before the Carnival begins – Mittherbstis, is when the Middenlanders siege was broken in eighteen twelve. It precedes a week of feasting and revelry.'

Jakob recalled talk of the event over the years, but little more than its autumn date. Back when he was still in the Imperial Army he remembered a squad of Nordlanders inviting him along as they attended the festival during a period of leave. He had almost gone with them but at the last moment his own leave was cut short.

Jakob's regiment was called out to an area near the Moot without explanation. The officers had hidden the truth of the mission from the rank and file and with good reason. The dead had been called from their graves and were abroad in force. The battle that ensued still gave Jakob nightmares and had ended with the death of many of his friends and many more being driven insane.

Despite their victory and the gratitude of the Halflings for saving them, it was another instance of subterfuge that had prompted him into leaving Imperial service and seeking private employ. If he was going to fight he wanted to pick his own battles and not have some bureaucrat in Altdorf march him to certain death against the Undead or Chaos or some other supernatural evil force.

If the authorities had decided to hide the existence of the Undead like that had the Skaven, he could now see how easily it could be done. Jakob couldn't even bring himself to talk of the things he had seen that day, and if he had been ordered to secrecy he would have readily carried that order to his grave.

'You okay, Jakob?' asked Elldrigar, nudging him from his thoughts.

'Aye.'

'You look a little pale. Need a rest before we continue?' continued the Elf.

'I'm fine,' Jakob replied with weight, brushing the ghastly visions of shambling rotting meat from his mind.

'The chairlifts will prove a better mode of entry. This way,' said Dieter, indicating the direction as he spoke.

'Lift?' Hergar repeated anxiously under his breath as he looked up the sheer, five hundred foot slope with distinct apprehension.

The group walked towards the immense viaduct streaking up above the forest canopy to meet the Fauschlag's plateau. The winding sturdy structure towered above them, sixty foot in width, its great supporting columns vibrating slightly from the grinding of wheel, hoof and foot upon the surfaces hundreds of feet up.

Weaving between the arches they continued to follow the Fauschlag's base.

They emerged from the dense forest onto a wide track that led from the base of the viaduct to an area where pedestrian travellers were stopping. Several armoured Watchmen monitored the situation, occasionally delivering a punch or butt to those who became impatient or rowdy.

Two operators strapped the passengers onto one of two chain-borne wooden slats, which then carried them aloft.

Without word the group joined the line and awaited their turn, declining the offers the hawkers badgered them with as the salesmen worked the queue, trying to sell talismans of good fortune, trinkets and other assorted tricks and nonsense to the foolish or gullible.

It was obvious that the Watch were getting a percentage of the profits because they never once bothered the haranguing tradesmen.

The pair of chairlifts slowly ate through the queue and then attended the adventurers. Hoisted gently up they were buffeted by the strong, high altitude winds that raged so powerfully about the Fauschlag.

Hergar and Jakob were the first to be taken aloft. Hergar sat like a statue during the ascent and was several shades paler when he reached the top. His knuckles were white from clenching to the ropes and beads of phobic sweat littered his brow.

In contrast, Jakob found the experience quite exhilarating as he gained a taste of flight without the untrustworthy effects of sorcery to do it.

Upon arriving at the tall chairlift terminus they found a reedy civil servant waiting that regarded them coldly and charged for the ride - a shilling each.

City guards closed in and grumpily assessed the appearance of the pair. A mean looking sergeant stepped forward and stroked his bushy moustache.

'Well, well, well, what 'ave we got 'ere? Drifter scum lookin' fer trouble?'

Elldrigar was winched onto the scene. Slipping out of the chair he stood behind them and wondered what he had missed.

'And an Elfy. This 'ere be civvyalization boys and that means no tin skin, an nuthin' bigger'n a shortsword. So...'

He looked over the trio, running his stare across the copious arms and armour.

'Just about everyfing you've got goes. So give it up, right now!'

A nearby guard made a grab for Hergar's hammer. The Dwarf tugged it violently from the grasping fingers and clapped his palm across the man's face. With a thrusting shove he sent him careering back to slam against the wall.

The man looked around to his superior with appalled fury, seeking assistance as his hand went for his sword.

Hergar stepped back snarling, his muscles tensed as he levelled his weapon. The chairlift had made him feel fear and with his pride now bruised he was anxious to prove himself with some psychotic courage.

The slow squeal of twenty swords sliding from scabbards filled the area. The other citizens backed away, anticipating extreme trouble.

'Give it up stunty one, or you'll be takin' the quick route back down,' the sergeant hissed.

A few others chuckled, feeling safe to taunt a Slayer because of their considerably larger numbers. Clearly they were unaware that their advantage only made them more appealing to Hergar, and would make him infinitely stronger and more violent.

Jakob tried to reason with them before an all out war developed between the two forces.

'Look, we don't want any trouble. If we can't wear our arms, we'll leave them at our Inn.'

'The word of a stunt, a pointy eared gypsy, and some merc drifter. Veery solid trust,' he added sarcastically.

'Come on then! You wanna fight, Skruff? I've plenty for all,' whispered Hergar, his voice a deep growl as adrenaline surges made him quiver in expectation of a one-sided confrontation.

'I can vouch for the integrity and trustworthiness of these men,' Dieter loudly declared, stepping from the newly arrived chairlift.

The sergeant turned angrily and then saw the cleric. The Cult of Ulric was powerful in the city and its clergy were well respected and implicitly trusted. The sergeant knew this and was forced to reluctantly comply.

'Very well,' he conceded with disappointment. 'But they're in your charge. Any funny business an' it's on your 'ead.'

'Of course. Now, may we proceed with our business, sergeant?'

'Yeah. I suppose so,' he huffed. 'Let 'em froo lads.'

Dieter gave a slight bow of gratitude and led the way. Hergar moved tardily

through the guards who were still postured aggressively. The whispered taunts were not given their full response and Hergar merely shoved one or two out of his way.

They looked to the sergeant for permission to attack but he shook his head, unwilling to upset the politically powerful clergy.

It was easy for Hergar to let the incident pass. He deemed the Skaven a far more important foe than a sanctioned band of petty Imperial thugs. But he made a private vow that if the chance arose he'd beat the sergeant to a bloody pulp.

The group emerged from the chairlift terminus onto the crowded city streets of Middenheim. Their fellow chairlift travellers immediately headed away to put some distance between themselves and the troublesome new arrivals.

The tightly packed buildings of the city were all hardwood from the Drak Wald forest and grey masonry hewn from the Middle Mountains. The cityscape did not sprawl like other cities they had viewed, instead it was as if an agoraphobic had been let loose as its architect and his designs had been a prime concern for the city's creators. Its restrictions on the width of the streets concentrated the pedestrian and vehicle traffic, greatly choking the roads and filling the pavements. After the long seclusion of their forest journey the whole group gained a momentary sense of claustrophobia.

Before them lay a spiked iron fence that surrounded a cemetery. Even the dead were not excused the cramped conditions that the city had imposed in life and the paths between tomb and plot were negligible. Few indeed were the denizens who had not been interred in family vaults or stacked many deep in their graves.

The squat building of plain black stone that arose at the centre could only be the temple of Moor, where the priests who conducted the funeral rites lived and prayed to their dark deity of death and dreams.

'Good Dwarven stonework,' proclaimed Hergar with racial pride as he looked over the surrounding buildings and recognising the exemplary work of his ancestors.

'So where do we stay?' asked Jakob, finding little interest in matters of heritage.

The Cleric was drinking in the sights and smells. He seemed ecstatic to be present here, standing on the very stone he believed his God had touched. Jakob wondered if he had been here before, or if he was so enamoured with this place of pilgrimage that he had studied it extensively with the hope of someday coming here. Had he been enjoying its magnificence from afar while dreaming of being amidst it?

'That's the Nordgarten,' he observed, pointing confidently at the wealthier buildings to the left. 'I doubt your finances would support you there for long.'

'Don't you mean our?' Jakob inquired.

'I can stay at the temple of my Lord. There is an Inn situated in the Wynd District. I think it's called the Anvil and it's run by a Dwarf who has undertaken some Troll Slaying. You might prefer to stay there, Hergar.'

The Dwarf looked at him, dubious at the unusual consideration.

'Any Elven establishments?' asked Elldrigar.

'An Elven run restaurant called the Harvest Goose and a cabaret and bar called the Singing Moon. But there are no Inns that I know of. There's an excellent Halfling place in the Kleinmoot, just past the Great Park.'

'Sounds suitable,' said Jakob.

'But Halfling cuisine?' Elldrigar complained. 'It's...gross.'

'Too much for your feeble Elgi guts, eh stick boy?' Hergar grinned.

'No. It's just that unlike some, I prefer delicacy. Refinement.'

'Weakness,' spat Hergar.

'Delicacy,' the Elf corrected.

'The-establishment-will-suit-us-well,' Jakob declared stridently in order to override the budding argument. 'With what we'll be intending it would be wise to be located in a friendly place, where questions and suspicions will be rare.'

'I suppose,' Elldrigar insipidly agreed.

'It's settled then. Dieter, could you take us there?'

'Follow me,' the Cleric stated with a nod.

As they complied it became clear that the city was preparing with accelerating verve for the forthcoming Carnival. Stores were now bulging with products and an immense surplus of goods was evident. There were many entertainers, jugglers, musicians, magicians, tricksters, dancers and all manner of street performers abroad. Some plied their trade but drew little money from the crowds. Most of the clientele were saving coins for the approaching festival and were not yet so dispositioned to give freely.

The gargantuan Temple of Ulric towered over the streets, even visible from beyond the graveyard. Drawing closer they could make out the baroque construction that elegantly merged the traits of both a castle and a cathedral.

Multitudes of bright banners fluttered in the turbulent winds about the rows of towers and turrets, bearing the religious symbols of Ulric.

The nearer they came, the bigger it continually seemed to grow. The building was mammoth in its proportions and was as intimidating as it was impressive.

Traversing back streets to evade the worst of the crowds, they were carried by the flow onto a massive park that was a surreal place of tranquil greenery above the clouds.

A dark watered lake stretched along the centre of the park. About its banks lay an expensive looking restaurant, a large number of boating sheds, numerous stalls and small buildings that served the needs of the people.

Further into the park there arose a large stadium, where much activity to repair and decorate in time for the festivities was occurring.

'If you want to face that Minotaur or some Beastmen, Hergar, it'll be in there with thousands of spectators cheering you on,' said Dieter, indicating the arena.

'More like booing the oaf when it uses him as a toothpick,' remarked Elldrigar with a smirk.

'You sliver of grizal, I'll runk you as a warm-up,' mumbled Hergar.

The Slayer stopped and stared wistfully at the stadium, admiring the stonework and dreaming of what lay within.

'As good a place to die as any,' he muttered quietly, hoping to find the death he ached to earn in the stadium. The way he excitedly regarded the place as a possible location to be brutally slain by monsters unnerved the others a little and even Elldrigar suddenly found his taunts shrivelling on his tongue.

Dieter led them across the park and into the streets opposite. There they found a Bohemian business district that was predominantly Halfling run and after a brisk stroll they came to a twin storey Inn called the 'Hungry Halfling'. At the entrance, Dieter turned to his companions.

'Well this is it,' he announced. 'We shall meet this evening. Sundown. The Plague Memorial we passed?'

Everyone nodded, remembering the grim landmark well.

'I'll take Hergar to the Anvil and then head to the temple,' he added and the group divided to go their own ways.

Jakob and Elldrigar found that their Halfling lodgings were not expensive, the food was plentiful and the Halfling owner a very cheery soul. Elldrigar found his food unpalatably heavy in places but such was the volume provided that he could find a full meal to his taste amongst a fragment of the whole.

After unloading their weapons and armour they sought directions and then entry to a bathhouse. They gladly washed the trail dirt and sweat from their bodies and had their bloodied clothes cleaned and repaired.

After a short nap, they proceeded to the memorial at the agreed time and found the others already in attendance. Everyone had cleaned up and ate well and their spirits were considerably more amiable because of it.

'How is the Halfling place?' Hergar asked, the smell of ale strong upon his breath.

'Fine. Yours?' reciprocated Jakob, still feeling somewhat bloated after the feast and wondering if his armour would still fit after a few days of lodging there.

Jakob was also a little nervous. He didn't like to be without the comforting weight of his steel hide. When he shuffled his shoulders there was no burden of metal links resting on it. It made him feel as though he had forgotten to dress when he left the bathhouse.

'Excellent. I've been swapping stories and getting to know some of the other Middenheim Dwarves. So what do we do now that we're here?'

'I say we get into the sewers and look about,' Jakob voiced.

'Why not something even *more* noisome,' Elldrigar said with clear and complete disgust.

'You don't *have* to come, Elgi,' said Hergar with embittered hopefulness.

'Well if you insist,' sneered Elldrigar.

'What's up, sticky? Afraid of the dark are we? No trees to hide behind?'

'Can't think of anything more intelligent to retort with, you tubby ale drenched wimp?'

'Enough!' Jakob barked sternly. 'Hergar, can you get a map of the sewer network?'

The Dwarves had been instrumental in the creation of the city and would no doubt have accurate blueprints of what lay beneath it. As a Slayer his loyalty and reasons for such sensitive material were clear, making him more able even than other Dwarves as the most likely source to gain it. With an accurate map they might be able to find access to the tunnels within the Fauschlag. In that labyrinth dwelt the Skaven.

'I can try.'

'Then we meet again tomorrow. Same place, same time. Elldrigar and I will gather the equipment for our exploration, so we'll need everyone's spare gold.'

The Cleric opened a purse and relinquished a handful of coins. Hergar was reluctant but gave what he could spare to the cumulative funds.

'Tomorrow then,' Dieter said, heading off in the direction of his Temple.

'Tomorrow,' Hergar affirmed with a grunt and stomped off, the thinning evening crowds parting at his undeviating approach as lurid imprecations dribbled over his lips.

Chapter thirteen

Skrack stopped suddenly, his stomach knotting with involuntary apprehensive fear. Instantly, like all that saw the dark figure, he began to scrutinise his conduct and project reasons if 'they' were here for him.

The dark-furred Skaven had the dagger brand of Clan Eshin burned into the fur of his shoulder. His body was powerful and athletic with a dark, ragged cowl concealing much of his features.

Twin blades that looked like large machetes lay crossed upon his back in scabbards of a strange thick hide. The cross straps over his chest bore triangular throwing stars of opaque metal, their edges sharp as razors and stained with poison.

Upon his belt lay several small flasks, some coiled black rope, a knife and a stout hollow pipe beside a pouch.

The assassin was gently carrying a wide cage that was about two feet square. The container was low and squat, and was covered with thick black linen. Movement was evident within it and Skrack knew it could well be a Rat King. If so, Maulokk would be exceptionally informed once it was in place, and any furtiveness would become virtually impossible.

The Warlock resolved to operate his conspiratorial strands with added caution from this sight, lest beady eyes in the shadows bring on his own downfall.

The presence of the Clan Eshin assassin suggested that Skaven souls would

soon be prematurely departing to join the Horned Rat.

Skrack decided to follow at a discreet distance, even though he already knew where the assassin was heading.

When the veritable murder specialist walked into Maulokk's warren and was permitted entry by the Commander's new Stormvermin elite, Skrack wheeled and made swiftly for the warren of the Warlord.

Skrack had already cursorily probed into the strength of the Stormvermin's loyalties and already it was beyond reproach. His informants, allies and contacts had been unable to find out from where they had even sprung. They were superior to others of their caste and this, coupled with their fealty and exceptional equipping and treatment suggested highly trained elite forces. Despite extensive enquiry into all the major Stormvermin breeding grounds he could find no clue as to their origin.

Maulokk was quickly conjuring up an impenetrable shell about himself and if Skrack did not deal with him soon, he would not be able to deal with him at all.

Lounging upon his nest of straw and rags, Warlord Kritish absently began grooming himself as he thought deeply upon his problems. His favourite female lay at his feet, adding a sense of comfort in this time of stress. Ikitikika was busily gnawing at a linen blanket, ripping it into strips to pad the bowl-shaped nest.

The Skaven Warlord was a fighter. He settled his scores and problems with the battle prowess that had gained him this position. Now he was impotent in the face of what was his greatest threat and that was what riled him the most.

The Warlocks of Clan Skryre were masters of terrible sorcery, but were physically no match in combat for an adept warrior. Kritish knew this from experience, having fought them before when dissent in the leadership of his horde had resulted in combat.

He knew that by closing in quickly to prevent them utilising their magic, a bold Skaven could normally overcome one in restricted close-quarter combat. Yet Maulokk had moved with a speed and aptitude far greater than his own.

When he had first fought the Warlock, the outcome could have been attributed to a single, well-practised trick. But when Maulokk had attacked the Grey Seer, it was clear that he was highly proficient in the subtleties and techniques of mortal combat.

The greatest annoyance was that he could not fathom where any attempt on his life or position might come from. Kritish felt threatened from all sides and had placed a group of his most trusted Stormvermin at his warren entrance, but despite this protection, he still felt insecure.

A glimpse of movement from the shadows caught Kritish's eye and he heard no clatter of armour or confident tread that betrayed a Stormvermin's identity.

His hand flashed to his nearby sword, tugging it from the scabbard as his female ducked back and cowered behind the nest, peeking over the lip.

'Who is it?' he hissed, sniffing heavily for trace of a scent. 'Speak now or die!'

'It is only I, Warlord,' purred a soft voice.

The robed piebald form of the Clan Skryre Warlock, Skrack, emerged into view, his Warpstone eye radiating darkness deeper than the shadows from which he stepped.

Kritish did not move. He was unarmoured, seated and the Warlock had the advantage of space. His only option was to buy himself time.

'I thought you a...How did you get past my guards?' he exclaimed, suddenly concerned at how his defences had been breached. Were they dead? Was he without the option of even calling for assistance?

'Intimidation works wonders upon troops whose leader's command is somewhat...tenuous,' replied Skrack.

'What do you mean? My p-'

'I am here to warn you,' the Warlock interrupted.

'Of what?'

By looking to the cowering female and then to the Warlord, Skrack expressed his hint and had Kritish tell her to go. She immediately scampered away, giving the Warlock a wide berth with her tail kept low from fright. When she was gone, the Warlock Master continued.

'Maulokk,' he said, leaving a pause to intrigue the Warlord and evaporate his tiny well of patience.

'Yes?'

'He intends an invasion. Afterwards he will have you killed and take all the credit.'

'What? Where will this invasion stem from?'

'The east or the west. I have discovered true objectives amidst his camouflage of tunnel expansion. One is the true, one is the decoy and it will take me time to discern one from the other,' Skrack revealed idly, running a claw down the wall as he spoke, treating the matter as one of little import.

'How do I know you speak the truth about my slaying?' quizzed the Warlord with a distrustful squint.

'A Clan Eshin assassin has just entered Maulokk's warren. By invitation. I doubt he's here simply to have a chat.'

'By the Horned Rat, that-' growled the Warlord. Fear gripped him as he realised that his life could now be accurately measured in mere hours.

'You are as good as dead, Warlord Kritish,' added Skrack, incensing the Warlord still further.

'I shall kill him first!' hissed the Skaven leader, shaking with fury and terror.

There was nothing he could do to stop his assassination. Clan Eshin were flawless in their contracts. All he could do would be to take Maulokk to the Horned Rat with him.

'You will not succeed,' Skrack stated explicitly.

Recalling the Warlock's martial skill, Kritish knew that this was true. Even if he did manage to pierce Maulokk's body of guards, he would not be able to overcome the Warlock's sorcery or even his fighting strength.

The situation was hideously frustrating. He was going to die, and his killer was sitting in his warren, completely safe from Kritish's last possible act of vengeance.

'So what do I do? Sit and wait to die like some Skavenslave under the shadow of a Grey Seer's sacrificial dagger?'

Skrack walked over, patronisingly tut-tutting.

'You shall pay Clan Eshin yourself.'

'To do what exactly? He will still have me-'

'You pay them to have an assassination contract initiated on Maulokk should you die...*suddenly*. He has ears in the Clan, cultivated to protect himself. He will know of your protection and will abrogate his plot.'

'So why are you helping me?' asked Kritish with suspicion replacing his impotent dread. Warlocks and warriors didn't generously assist each other without good reason.

'I have my reasons. You are important to my cause and Maulokk is not. He will be dealt with, one way or another,' dismissed Skrack.

The Warlord weighed up his alternatives and found that little option was actually left to him.

'Very well, I agree.'

'Do you have the tokens to pay for the contract?' asked Skrack.

'Easily. I've been secretly selling slaves, grain, and-' he began and then stopped, realising that he was revealing too much to this flimsy facade of friendship.

'I can afford it,' he simplified.

Skrack grinned slightly to himself and withdrew from the chamber, slithering

back into the darkness until Kritish was alone once more.

The Warlord waited, thinking on his dilemma as much as his intellect would permit. Sheathing his blade he began to dress with haste. If he were to have Maulokk learn of this before the assassin struck, he would have to move exceptionally quickly.

Chapter fourteen

'By Kharnos, what a stink!' Elldrigar cursed, clapping a hand over his nose as rank vapours curled out of the uncorked shaft.

Jakob and Hergar hefted the weighty manhole cover and moved it aside while Dieter kept an eye out for Watch patrols.

The shaft dropped into the blackness and bore a rust-specked ladder. The rungs were sunk into the stone and they appeared safe. A few hard tugs on them by Hergar confirmed their sturdiness as no deception.

One at a time they began to descend, Hergar entering last and pulling the manhole cover noisily back into place behind him. The metallic clang of the disc falling into place resounded at deafening volume in the slender shaft, and the echo took a full minute to fade.

'Someone light a torch,' whispered Jakob, facing the breaking of the silence with utmost trepidation.

The group stood blindly in the foetid darkness, listening to the gurgling sound of running effluent. The feel of the lumpy current was detectable even through their tall water-sealed boots and even succeeded in making Hergar cringe.

A flickering, candle-like flame appeared on Dieter's palm, the magical illumination allowing the others to draw tinderboxes before it died. After several attempts light was forged in some oil lamps and the stinking midnight folds retreated a short way.

'Why didn't we just light the lamps with Dieter's flame?' asked Elldrigar, slotting his tinderbox back into a pouch.

Jakob and Hergar looked to each other in the amber glow of the lights and then back to the Elf.

'Shut up, stick,' hissed Hergar and irritably began marching off.

Elldrigar grinned privately to himself as the others followed and he brought up the rear. His more honed senses were ideal to detect any that might try and jump them from behind, while Hergar could more than handle anything he blundered into.

The circular tunnel was ten feet in diameter and its lowest point ran with a knee deep effluent stream. The Dwarven stonework, though clearly affected by the passage of years still seemed solid even with the thick crust of dried and damp grime caking it.

'Well,' Hergar said, trying to adapt to the potent stench that was making his eyes water. 'We'd better damn well find something! I'd hate to come up empty handed after wallowing up to my knees in Umgi sh-'

'We will Hergar, but keep it down okay?' scolded Jakob, sword in one hand and lamp in the other. Jakob held it high so it could clear the bristling hair spikes of the Dwarf and allow the Slayer to see.

Trudging through the thick sludge they continued the conversation that had been interrupted by reaching the manhole, the entrance point situated in the discreet interior of an alleyway.

'So, about the temple of Grugni?' Jakob inquired softly, keeping the noise down lest it alert those above that there were trespassers beneath their feet. Or it might give too much warning to those who might lie ahead of them.

'As I was saying, there's a lot of newly arrived Iron Breakers going in and spending an awfully long time in its clerical rooms.'

'But why? And who cares?' questioned Dieter.

'There has to be tunnels throughout the Fauschlag, you pudding head. Secret

ones. You really think a city on a mountain, which we Dwarves, a people who thrive and live on underground excavation were instrumental in building doesn't have a colossal tunnel network beneath it?' snorted Hergar.

'They must have an entrance in the lowest areas of the temple. It's a perfect spot. Populated only by Dwarves. Religious ground that's been there since the city was founded,' Elldrigar guessed intuitively.

'So?' said Dieter.

'So if the Dwarves are sending specialist fighting forces down into the mountain interior, especially Iron Breakers, it isn't to lose their suntans. They are there to fight. Has this happened before?' Jakob asked Hergar.

'Very rarely, and not for decades now.'

'They must have detected the Skaven presence in their tunnels,' noted Dieter.

'Perhaps. Perhaps they-'

'Look! Over there!' said Elldrigar, suddenly interrupted Jakob. Even though he was situated at the rear, his senses pierced the gloom and located something ahead.

The group instantly gazed to where the Elf was indicating, holding up their lamps to give the scene more illumination as they readied their weapons.

Further along the tunnel in a large discharge pipe sat an enormous rat. The size of a dog, it sat upright upon its large haunches, its eyes glistening in the lamp light.

The rodent did not move or respond, merely watched them while twitching its whiskers and vigorously sniffing the rank air.

'What's it doing?' Dieter wondered aloud.

'It's watching us,' noted Elldrigar with concern, the creature breaking just about every rule of animal instinct.

'I've got a real bad feeling about this,' said Jakob nervously.

'Probably that Halving food,' Dieter weakly mused.

'Ah dammit, it's just a rat!' Hergar spat and charged forward a few paces, roaring and waving his hammer.

The black rat remained unmoved. The Dwarf paused, confused, his initial shout still echoing, repeating again and again down the tunnels. He looked round to the others and then back to the rat after seeking to confirm on the faces of his comrades that what he had seen, or rather failed to see from the rat had actually occurred.

'Skruuund!' he bellowed, and stormed onward towards the impassive rodent, waving his arms wildly, swinging his hammer to and fro.

'Hergar! Wait!' warned Jakob. Sudden concern arose as the Dwarf fled their vicinity, the sense of extreme jeopardy running freely down his spine.

The rat turned and fled into the darkness, its tail vanishing down the pipe. The sounds of scampering feet grew quiet and then disappeared.

The Dwarf wheeled and waded back with a victorious and satisfied grin. Slings his hammer over his shoulders he rested his arms over the haft.

'No problem,' he said proudly.

The others were not so sure.

Chapter fifteen

Maulokk strolled with purpose down the dark tunnels. Karikk was at his side, leading the Stormvermin that marched about him.

The Clanrats tunnelled like maniacs and those under the command of a Grey Seer worked even more acutely.

The excavation plans were proceeding rapidly to their conclusion and it would not be long before he could initiate his plan.

Impassively observing the toil, he watched as the Clanrats scuttled and boosted their efforts in his presence. Grey Seer Skarbitik's looted food was supplementing their diet, which was just as well for he wanted them decently fed now that the weak had

been exterminated.

Just before the appointed time he would lessen the sustenance and let the Black Hunger burn, giving his forces an added, ferocious edge.

A formless shape emerged from the shadows, a shimmer of movement that was almost undetectable. Maulokk knew it had to be one of the assassins.

The enchanted Cloak of Shadows that was worn by the Clan Eshin operative rendered him silent and all but invisible. It was one of the few magical artefacts Clan Skryre could not mimic the manufacture of. Its secrets were closely guarded and all attempts to dissect a looted cloak and find out how it worked had been fruitless.

The Stormvermin protectively closed in when the shadow whispered with words that were even and toneless.

'There is a group in the sewers. They are searching. A Manling, a Cleric, an Elf and a Longbeard Slayer. They followed a raiding party here.'

Maulokk pondered the situation for a moment, conceiving fresh intrigue.

'Attack them. Send Gutter Runners, but I want survivors and I want the group but no others to know who was responsible.'

'As you wish,' the shadow hissed, merging back into the darkness.

Maulokk put the topic from his mind, storing it away for later scrutiny as he departed the areas where work was occurring to seek out Warlock Master Skrack. Passing through the Clanrat warrens that filled his route to the workshop he found out just how much effect his plans were having.

The air was an acoustic maelstrom of ultrasonic squeaks that issued from newborn litters. Skaven mothers were no longer devouring their young due to overcrowding and this was precipitating an acutely ascending birth rate.

Even though the shrill mewling was irritating to Maulokk's ears it was vital to the infants, allowing the parent to find their offspring by sound alone. It was too dark to see, too noisy to distinguish any calls or cries of lower frequency and the smell of the grime disguised all olfactory recognition.

Leaving the warrens, Maulokk walked into the workshop, where the one-eyed Skaven was with Kerick'k and Skrabic, toiling with gusto on the Warprockets. So intently in fact that at first they did not notice his entrance.

'How goes the research?' he enquired, announcing his presence.

The Warlocks looked round with a start and quickly relaxed once they saw who it was addressing them. The tensions and rumours caused by hostile friction in the upper echelons of Middenheim's Skaven power elite were the cause of much paranoia and fear. It seemed that even his aids were not exempt from the uneasy nervousness so prevalent everywhere.

'Well,' Skrack began. 'The rocket does indeed release a powerful raw magic pulse that could prove highly disruptive, if not fatal to a sorcerer. I think the more proficient a wielder of magic, the more resilient they will be to its effects and the less likely it is that they will come to serious harm.'

'And on our own?'

'Our resistance to raw magic in its most potent form of Warpstone should greatly protect us.'

'Excellent,' Maulokk confessed. 'Now. There is another matter that I wish you to handle,' he added, pointing a claw to Skrack.

'Go to the Manling cult that gives us its fealty. You know the tunnel to reach the contact?'

'I do,' he replied. All the Warlocks had been extensively briefed on the Manling cult and its contact points, as well as the vast intricacies of the Fauschlag tunnels, both those of the Dwarves and those carved open by the Skaven.

'Leave immediately and tell them that the children of the Horned Rat will rise in the east of the city on the last night of the Carnival. They are to ensure that all their fellows are ready to receive my forthcoming orders. Afterwards you are to return and

continue the work here.'

'I shall attend the matter instantly, Lord,' Skrack attested faithfully. After a brief bow he set down his tools and scrambled off.

Maulokk waited until the Warlock was gone before heading back to his warren, for he still had much work to do upon his invention, and annoyingly little time.

Chapter sixteen

'What is it now?' questioned Dieter with exasperated strain as he scaled the last few rungs of the ladder. He was the last of the group to depart the sewers.

'I shall never get this odious stink off,' moaned Elldrigar, for despite their oiled and impermeable tall boots, the smell clung potently to each of them. Elldrigar had been bemoaning it all night and it was starting to wear thin.

'He says that again, I'm fireballing him!' said Dieter under his breath, merging the words with strain of exertion as he left the shaft and stood up.

Once Dieter had exited, Hergar lifted the end of the manhole cover with a growl of effort and pushed it back until the thick metal disc fell firmly into place. He looked up at the sky to see that the dim glow of the sun's rays were already touching the horizon.

'Daybreak'll be here soon. We had best head back.'

'I could sleep for a week,' Elldrigar expressed with a yawn. 'An entire night spent wandering the sewers and nothing to show for it save stink,' he added petulantly.

'Oh, that's it!' growled Dieter, fumbling in his bag, his agitated fingers seeking sulphur.

There was a barely audible cacophony of whistles and a volley of spinning shapes filled the air the razor edges.

Elldrigar gave a shout when one tore a deep cut in his shoulder and another slashed open his thigh.

Dieter hollered as one sank into his left forearm, the missile wedging deep in the flesh.

Hergar grunted irritably and recoiled as the flesh of his left cheek parted. The shuriken ricocheted from the bone, chipping it as another missile spat sparks from bouncing off the head of his warhammer.

Jakob staggered back, one of the missiles having cut through his boot to slice the meat of his calf.

In unison the group ran for cover. Before they reached it a second volley of the slender projectiles was raining down on them.

Weaving and darting for shelter, most of the whistling shards failed to connect.

Jakob's neck received a shallow cut, one that was less than an inch from slicing his jugular. Another bored into Elldrigar's thigh and lodged there, toppling the Elf in mid sprint and causing him to fall clumsily onto his side. Fortunately he had enough impetus left to have him skid across the cobblestones and into the protection of a doorway.

From the safety of cover the adventurers pulled the triangular devices from their flesh and drew weapons.

'What in damnation is going on?' yelled Dieter, his words sharpened by pain he was in.

'Dieter! Get ready! Here they come,' Jakob warned with a shout, holding tightly to his throat as lines of red slipped through his fingers, seeking to at least try and staunch the flow a little, scared that it was worse than he assumed.

'This is Grobkaz fer sure!' scowled Hergar, and yelled out to the enemy, slamming a fist against the stone with such severity that his knuckles began to bleed. 'You hear that you filthy ambushers! You're gonna get such a runkin! I'm gonna kill you soooo much!' he bellowed, fighting the effects of his wounds, stirring his battle rage to

new levels to overcome them, goading himself onwards.

Seven dark figures descended from their vantage-points upon the roof of the building opposite. Clad in hooded cloaks, the Skaven clambered down several stories with outstanding agility before leaping to the street and drawing nets and long blades. They advanced menacingly, their eyes glinting in the dull light.

Painfully, the four of them charged out to meet their attackers, for if they allowed themselves to be assailed, the cover that had preserved them from more of the deadly missiles would trap them, giving them no place to dodge or run to.

The reflexes of the Skaven were quicker than those of the wounded adventurers and they reared up and leapt at the targets with chisel incisors bared.

Jakob lashed for an airborne Skaven's throat, his sword humming against the air. The creature swatted the blow away with his net, the dense tangles dragging the mortal swipe aside. The creature's partner exploited the opening and landed near Jakob's flank, snarling softly as it lashed outward with its blade, gouging a deep gash in his side. Jerking upright as he felt the hot line of pain spill through his flesh, Jakob bellowed through clenched teeth and with blood drooling from his wounds, he pulled his blade from the net and thrust. The Skaven was ready for the vehement response and skipped nimbly aside, avoiding the stab, chattering its teeth in mocking.

Hergar charged like a juggernaut and cast his hammer about in a wide arc, forcing both of the Skaven before him to spring back. His momentum carried him on and he rammed the weapon forward, driving the head into the Skaven's stomach. The fierce blow doubled over the opponent with a yowling gasp, its legs starting to buckle, its claws barely keeping hold of the weapons.

Hergar threw the weapon up, striking the Skaven's jaw line, smashing it and destroying several rootless teeth in the process. The strike briefly lifted the creature from its feet, its snout leading a brief ascent as it spit blood and fragments of enamel into the air. Dropping back down, the Skaven's legs folded beneath it and the creature collapsed into a reckless sprawl, dribbling a line of red in its passage.

Elldrigar lunged hatefully. The Skaven tried to dodge, but the speed of the Elf, even slowed by wounds, was still greater than that of the Ratman. The Gutter Runner squeaked in shock when the cold blade slid through its abdomen, transfixing his gut.

The Elf did not dally and quickly withdrew the blade to parry a downward slash from his second opponent. Hauling the steel from the sheath of clinging flesh, he span and cast up his gore coated weapon. Catching the machete with his sword and stopping it, the two blades screeched as they slid against each other until their hilts locked.

'You'll have to do better than that!' he said, glowering at the beast, the two of them lending weight to their blades, pitting their strength against the other in a bid to beat down the guard of their foe.

After a quick flurry of ambulating steps, the other Skaven finally toppled aside, clutching its bleeding stomach and collapsing to the road, its life seeping through grimy claws, a trembling hiss trickling from its widely-stretched maws.

Dieter hacked horizontally outward at the charging enemy. The sprinting Skaven fell into a smooth forward roll that carried it beneath the swipe and to the Cleric's feet. The Gutter Runner leapt up, hurling the net over the Manling, who threw up an arm and fortunately caught and cast the entangling device aside before it could ensnare him. With the veil that was the net gone, Dieter jabbed as the creature clapped both hands to its blade and readied to launch it at Dieter's abdomen.

The Skaven saw the blade, but not early enough to allow it time to weave aside. A hasty attempt to parry it failed, its taloned hands swinging the knife too vigorously, making it swish prematurely past the descending sword point. The blade punched through a rib and sank into chest, migrating through the innards and coming to rest against the shoulder blade beyond. Dieter rotated the blade sharply, feeling the pulsing organs within mince, making the creature spasm and squeak its excruciating travail before he yanked the sword free.

The Gutter Runner swayed, clutched the bleeding hole, and dropped slack against the road, its knife rattling loudly as it fell next to it.

Launching his own net at the snout of an adversary, Jakob distracted it. The Skaven threw up its arms protectively and in that split second Jakob acted. His blade bored through the Skaven's chest to pierce the heart and send the steel tip bursting from its back. The beast gave a drastic throe, dropping its weapons and sliding back, its organs clinging to the piercing implement.

Withdrawing his sword with a hearty tug, darkness unexpectedly covered Jakob's face.

The second Skaven had seized the opportunity to assault Jakob's back and had engulfed him with his net, leaping up and delivering the heavy weave across him.

While the entrapped target fought to free himself, the Gutter Runner kicked Jakob's legs out from under him, and with a sharp shove sent Jakob thudding to the ground, all balance lost as he wriggled against the clinging sheet. Through the foul smelling mesh he saw the Skaven before him reverse its knife, holding it like a dagger in two hands.

'Hergar!' he bawled in calamity as the Skaven dove onto him with a merry squeak and started pushing the pointed blade into Jakob's side, seeking to saw across and eviscerate the target.

Jakob's call for aid turned into a bellow as the point cut through his chainmail and entered his helpless flesh, the rancid scent of the creature mingling with the soft aroma of his own blood.

Throwing up his hammer horizontally to parry a downward slash from his side, Hergar saw the other Skaven throw itself recklessly towards him, its broken features leading the way as it swayed and lurched, its sight unsteady.

Cursing the event that was robbing him of a chance to finish the other foe, Hergar held off the knife on his haft and kicked the wounded Skaven squarely in the temple just before it reached him, sending the creature reeling and into unconsciousness.

Swivelling to again face his second assailant, their weapons parted company and the Slayer swung his hammer at the Skaven's flank. The Gutter Runner hurled the net to deviate the blow, but the effect was minimal due to the sheer ferocity of the Slayer's assault. With a resonant wet fracturing, the Ratman's hip was smashed.

Dropping sharply to its knees, the beast threw back its blade to hack at Hergar's legs, but the hammer returned before it could act, ripping into its temple and staving in the side of its hooded head.

Elldrigar thrust at the groin of his last opponent. The Skaven swung his net underhand and knocked the stab aside. The Elf pulled his sword free and hacked brutally back, opening a shallow cut across the Skaven's chest. The Gutter Runner speedily gave ground under an oscillating rain of violent slashes, and with a final savage swipe the sword tip opened its throat. Arterial spray immediately launched from the wide slice as the creature pawed at the mortal wound, gurgling as blood flooded its throat and lungs. With torpid movements it sank to the floor, burbling in dismay.

Elldrigar turned to see a Skaven atop the struggling, entrapped form of Jakob, and the creature was a mere instant away from slaying him. Without hesitation he charged, throwing himself wildly forward, slamming into the Skaven and knocking him from his perch.

The Gutter Runner managed to retain his grip and dragged his blade out of his target's flesh, keeping him a weapon to fight with. Elldrigar landed awkwardly following his desperate rescue attempt, and roared loudly as the impact upon his wounds caused his senses to be briefly overwhelmed with waves of intense pain.

The dislodged Skaven tumbled and arose swiftly, skipping to its clawed feet and taking a more efficient hold on its blade. Without the burden of the creature pinning him down under the net, Jakob had some room to manoeuvre and effect his escape.

Slipping his hand to his belt, he pulled out his parrying dagger and with a sawing slash opened the net to finally get free.

With a growl, Hergar stormed forward, leapt over Jakob and wove about Elldrigar. While Hergar was swinging his hammer back, the Skaven suddenly chopped forward, narrowly missing Hergar's throat and cutting a long slash along his collarbone. The Slayer brought his poised weapon round in a wide arc and smashed into the Skaven's side, demolishing ribs and kidneys. The Skaven flew aside and fell to the cobblestones, turning into a momentary rolling ball of ragged fur and tattered cloak. With one side paralysed, it raised the blade with a snarl, teeth chattering, only to have its skull smashed by a second blow as Hergar ran over and executed it with glee.

Putting a hand to his bleeding, throbbing cheek, the Slayer turned to the last Gutter Runner. The stunned Skaven was coming to from the cruel kick to its head, and Hergar wanted some answers out of the creature.

Dieter swiftly drew small wads of lint and ran to the others. Chanting some lines of magic, his fingers began to glow with an inner incandescence until with a word comprised solely of many syllables, he opened his fisted hands. The lint seemed to disintegrate into his palm, fuelling the strange glow that dispelled the gloom about him with its intensity. Putting his palms to the worst of his companions' wounds, the light appeared to flow into the trauma and stir the meat into activity. The eerie sound of creeping flesh crackled softly and the tissue regenerated at a sorcerously hyper-accelerated rate. Within mere moments the most grievous of the incapacitating injuries were gone, the life threatening trauma erased or lifted to the realms of a mere nick.

'Any still alive?' Jakob asked, steadying his breath and keeping a glaring eye to the area in case others reinforced the slain unit.

'This one's going to be-' Hergar began, and there was a low whistle as a triangular star bit into the surviving Skaven's throat. Turning to the source of issue, a shimmer upon the night sky was seen, but no clear assailant. Blinking, Hergar rubbed his eyes when the faint ripple seemed to retreat back beyond the rooftop and when he looked again the strange disturbance upon the air was gone.

'Let's get out of here,' Elldrigar implored, picking up a blood-flecked throwing star and examining it.

'We had best go to your Inn, Jakob. I need to cleanse these wounds else they get infected. Hopefully the Halfling won't inform the authorities of our skirmish,' Dieter decided.

'Very well. Dieter, help Elldrigar,' requested Jakob.

Despite an application of the healing magic, the Elf's leg wound was still open, causing him to limp badly.

Elldrigar finished scrutinising the shuriken and handed it to Jakob before putting an arm across the Cleric's wolf pelt-sheathed shoulders. The Human mercenary glanced at the device and absently put it in his pocket, not recognising the symbol.

Shortly after leaving the scene, a Watch patrol marched onto the street before them, blocking their route. They had heard them a moment earlier, the steady chime of their copious chainmail and heavy boots announcing them prior to being seen, but injured and exhausted, the group had no chance to try and flee or hide.

There were seven men in hauberks, with a tunic bearing the heraldry of Middenheim Watchmen. They wore round pot helmets over the mail hood of their hauberks, and each bore a scabbarded sword, dagger, and carried a shield depicting the same device as laid upon their tunics. Two wore shouldered bows with fully loaded quivers across their backs, and three held glowing lanterns to hold back the night.

At their head marched a Watch sergeant, the officer clad in a full suit of chainmail with cuirass and helmet, the visor raised to grant unobstructed vision. With bastard sword and shield in hand, a rapier and dagger were sheathed upon his belt.

The motley group immediately wondered where this force had been while they were fighting for their lives against the Skaven.

'Been a busy night lads?' the officer crooned, the intrigued patrol walking over. 'We were attacked by...muggers,' Jakob answered.

The involuntary, unintended delay arose instant suspicion. The patrol reached them, whereupon the sergeant sniffed the air and grimaced.

'By Ulric, you stink like a Bretonnian woman's armpit,' he said with a choked splutter to clear his senses of the reek.

'We-' Jakob began.

'In the sewers? Conducting some nefarious scheme no doubt. Run into another patrol did you? A fight? Injure some Watch? Kill some maybe?' accused the sergeant.

'Most certainly not!' protested Jakob with vehemence and then hastily calmed his tones before continuing.

'We were attacked by Beastmen.'

'Beastmen?' the officer said disbelievingly.

'If you don't believe us, we'll show you the bodies!' hissed Hergar.

Jakob shot the Dwarf an angry glare.

'What?' whispered the Dwarf in response to this unexpected rigorous look, but before Jakob could explain the sergeant spoke.

'Good idea, let's see us these 'Beastmen'. Let's go lads.'

With aggressive movements the patrol indicated for the group to lead the way, nudging them with shield and weapon.

'But we have injured amongst our number,' Dieter protested as Elldrigar continued to lean on him for support.

'So?' replied the officer, purposefully blind to the Cleric's standing in Middenheim society. This was his patrol, his territory, and in the hours of darkness he was absolute ruler of the streets.

Resigned to returning to the scene they headed back, the Watch walking closely behind, chatting and discussing amongst themselves.

When they arrived, it was as Jakob had feared. The bodies and shurikens were gone, only pools of blood remained. The sergeant went to a puddle and dipped a finger into it, the blood still slightly fluid as he rubbed the dark viscous life between his fingers.

'Red blood. Human blood. Everyone knows that Beastmen have green blood.'

'That's bull,' Hergar disputed, for all four of them had seen and shed plenty of both varieties before.

'Are you arguing, stunted quim?' announced the officer, lifting his head but not looking to the source of dispute. It was clear that he was challenging Hergar, making it known that unless the Dwarf backed down, he was going to act.

'What if I am...Umgi,' Hergar retorted, using the Dwarven word for Humans with acute contempt and derogatory abhorrence.

'Watch what you say stunty, or I'll give you the death you seek.'

'Try it,' he suggested insipidly.

The sergeant walked over to the Dwarf with arrogant confidence, a slight smirk tickling the corners of his lips. Jakob desperately wanted to stop Hergar, but knew it would be impossible.

If the Dwarf led them into confrontation they would certainly be defeated in their weakened condition. Also, if they aided him, all four of them would become wanted fugitives in a city where there was no way out without having to run a gauntlet of guards.

The officer stood before Hergar and looked gleefully upon the diminutive figure.

'What did you do take up Slayer vows eh? Marry a Goblin wench maybe? Trollslayer! Ha! More like a Snotling Sla-'

The officer was catapulted back as Hergar slugged him. The blow had caught the man unawares while he baited the Dwarf and the impact forced him off balance. The skin of Hergar's knuckles went numb from punching and denting the unyielding

helmet. The Watchmen all drew their swords simultaneously and readied to attack.

'No!' the officer roared. 'The little dastard is mine!'

Straightening up, he removed his weapon belt and helm and slipped a pair of knuckle-dusters onto his hands. The Watch kept supervisory eyes on the others, who were now powerless to act.

'Very well, stunted freak, now you're gonna get it,' he crooned, punching a set of the brass knuckles into the other palm as though warming them up for their approaching workout.

Tossing his hammer to Jakob, the Slayer ignored his partner's look of solicitation, and clenched his fists in readiness for the brawl.

'I could take you with Chuf. So, say goodbye to your teeth, night soil, it's time for a runking,' he growled, and threw a mighty punch for the Human's face.

The confidence of the Dwarf was ill-placed, for the Watch sergeant had been raised on the back streets of Middenheim, where street fighting had been elevated to an art form. Hergar on the other hand may have been a pernicious warrior, but he had neglected his unarmed skills to make his weapon arm all the more deadly. The assumption that his strength and speed would carry him through the fight had been a grave error, and the officer was all too ready to enlighten him.

The sergeant blocked the blow with a sweep of his forearm and sent a heavy jab darting across the Dwarf's jaw.

'Assaulting an officer,' he stated as Hergar fell back several steps from the force of the blow, shaking his head to throw off the sudden giddiness. Looking back, he saw the officer with his arms curled against his chest in a fighting stance, his embellished fists hiding most of his face.

Hergar was just recovering when the Human was upon him again, skipping forward and straightening the brass knuckles. His right fist shot out, the strike jerking Hergar's head aside as the assault slipped through the Dwarf's paltry defences.

'Resisting arrest,' he added, swivelling at his hips to bring the other fist around, the left hook whirling Hergar's head back the other way, sending out a spray of blood-flecked spit.

The punch left him open for more, and acting with timed and practised celerity, the officer jabbed with his right once more, spinning Hergar's features back around, throwing them against the limit of his neck, shattering his equilibrium from the violent motions.

'Brawling in a public place,' he snorted, and ducked down, swinging viciously up to land a deep thumping blow into Hergar's gut.

With a stunned croak the Dwarf folded at his middle, dropping his face down and into a ferocious upper cut that caught the base of Hergar's jaw line, jerking his head up and rendering him momentarily prone.

'Trespass in the sewers,' announced the Watchman, continuing his litany of mounting offences. The stamina of the Slayer was keeping him upright, even though his senses were reeling, keeping him vulnerable, unable to raise his guard and gain a moments respite from the pugilistic whirlwind assailing him.

Slamming a knee harshly into the Dwarf's groin, Hergar's head jolted forward again with a shout, whereupon the Human butted him squarely. There was a deep crack of bone upon bone, muffled slightly by a thin layer of flesh and the Slayer collapsed inertly onto the street.

'Suspicion of murder.'

A kick slammed into his stomach. Hergar gave a gasping exhale and a winded series of coughs as he curled his legs up and gripped his twice wounded abdomen.

Jakob moved forward, unable to stand by and do nothing any longer. Three sword points waved close before his chest as the other monitoring Watchmen moved in to block his path.

'Wouldn't do that, mate. You'll be next if you don't sit back and keep bloody

quiet,' threatened one of them as Deiter grabbed Jakob by the upper arm and tried to pull him back.

'Yeah, listen to ya priest. Just watch the stunt take his medicine. Maybe he'll learn himself something,' suggested another with a soft laugh.

'Like you don't be trifling with no Watch,' snapped the other with a wide grin, his disordered rows of teeth winking in the dull light.

'A valuable lesson for any visitor to our fair city to learn,' announced the officer with volume after hearing part of the discourse.

The officer then kicked out with a sweeping attack that lashed across Hergar's dazed features. The Slayer's head span aside and he sagged into unconsciousness, lines of crimson winding out from nostrils and lips to stain his bright beard.

'Suspicion of mass murder.'

Another kick followed, this time directed into his side. The blow yielded little response so the sergeant stopped, wiped the sweat from his brow and looked down at the stolid figure, which was dribbling red and issuing a moribund wheeze.

'And being a short, puny little blob of Dwarven filth that thinks he can push a Middenheimer around just because his idiot race slapped a bit of mortar on some bricks,' he snorted, giving one last kick to the downed Slayer to ease his prejudice dislike of Hergar's race.

Satisfied, the officer removed the brass knuckles and beckoned to a pair of his men.

The others could only watch helplessly as the officer had them take up Hergar's heels and drag him away.

'You others,' the officer broadcast, indicating Elldrigar, Jakob and Dieter.

'Get lost. If I see you about again, you'll get some of the same.'

It was clear that the Watchman had no wish to be troubled with anymore paperwork than was minimally required, and now that he had one of them on an easily proven crime, one that required no detective work, he was content to leave the matter as it was.

Watching sullenly while the Middenheim police took Hergar away, Jakob stood rigid and filled with anger, while Elldrigar could only lean on Dieter, both equally powerless and despite their dislike of the Dwarf they were still chagrin at the whole episode.

Chapter seventeen

Locating the small low tunnel, Skrack followed the rough passage as it wove upwards, moving on all fours in its confines, scrambling along the narrow pipe.

It was a long trek through the Fauschlag, the Skaven contingent having made their home deep in the bowels of the mountain. The upper levels bore many dangers such as Beastmen, mutants, Chaos followers, Night Goblins, Fimir, and ever hungry beasts of monstrosity that prowled and preyed upon all without distinction.

The Skaven forces had etched several such direct tunnels from their domain straight to various locations, including the uppermost tunnels so as to bypass the intermediate dangers. The path he currently followed led to the rear of a heavy door, propped and sealed to prevent passage unless the locks on his side were removed.

Skrack rightly assumed this to be the secret entrance, and sliding back the bolts he swung the braces aside and pulled the hinged panel open. It was heavier than it looked and took effort to shift, prompting him into digging his feet into the ragged floor for leverage. As he achieved success, he could see why he had been forced to labour so, for the outer surface was a solid area of bricked wall, the edges adorned with a grey spongy substance that had the appearance of mortar and which hid the existence of this covert portal perfectly.

Looking out into the cellar beyond, Skrack could spy that the walls were largely

covered with partially-stocked wine racks, while kegs and cheap chests filled most of the floor. The tunnel exited near the ceiling thereby prompting him into leaping down after locating a suitably clear spot for his landing.

The only exit out presented him with a set of stairs, his clawed toes finding difficulty in negotiating the obstacle. The affluent home at the top was deserted, so he settled into the lounge, flipping his tail over an armchair and curling onto the cushions to think and wait.

Pondering Maulokk's message, he tried to rationalise why the east had been named. The most probable reason was to have the Manlings used as a diversion, to distract from an attack in the opposite end of the city. Unless the instructions were designed to divert the Commander's enemies. Was he willing to sacrifice the Manling cult to fool his adversaries into thinking he really was going to strike in the east? If Maulokk suspected Skrack, then it could well be a double bluff, to trick him into following such lines of thought and think to the west. If only he could find some pattern in Maulokk's thoughts he could predict his actions, but the Skaven Warlock-Engineer Lord was still stubbornly beyond such predictability. His only chance was to find which set of excavated tunnels were the ones intended to carry the Skaven hordes into Middenheim.

Metallic clicks issued from the front door of the house, the dull clunk of the tumblers reaching his sensitive ears and stirring him from his contemplation. The door opened with a squeal and slammed shut. A bolt was shot, and another, the restoring of the home's defences preceding the sound of long Manling strides against polished floorboards. The room was dark and the Manling walked casually in without detecting the Warlock, the frail sight of his species unable to penetrate the gloom that was almost bright to Skrack's night-piercing gaze.

The Human stretched, threw the interior door shut and strolled to a wall lamp, lighting the wick and letting radiance fill the chamber like a physical presence. The middle aged noble bore a head of dark hair and a bushy moustache, the frugal fur growing from his face trimmed and preened in typically self-indulgent Manling manner.

When he turned about and saw Skrack, he gave a startled shout and jumped back, bumping a table and sending a tray of crystal tumblers and a decanter to the floor to smash loudly into myriad pieces.

The Human recovered his calm visage and bowed deeply until on his knees.

'Lord of the great and all-powerful Horned Rat, I bid thee welcome to my home. I, Maximillian Rudolf Verrater am ready to do thy bidding.'

Skrack tried to hide his disdain for this base organism. No matter how they attempted to conceal it, the pitiful wretches only served the Skaven to try and save their own miserable lives for when the Great Armageddon came. They actually believed that they would be spared the fate of all the others if they betrayed their race. Such Humans only reinforced the belief that Skaven were truly superior to the greedy apes, and that Skavendom deserved to take the world by right of conquest from these most unworthy of holders.

'I come, tell you, tell-tell all others loyal to Horned Rat, 'we arise in east, last moon Carnival, ready-ready receive plan,' Skrack professed in fragmented Old Worlder, having difficulty with the strange tongue that contrasted so violently from Queekish.

'It shall be done, master,' piously replied the Manling.

'Good-good. One thing more. In city - Manling, Elf, Ulric cleric, Longbeard Slayer, all friends, stay at Halfling rest place. Go to. Pretend enemy of Skaven. Tell-tell 'Skaven leader come up, look-look, cellar, house, 19 Markt Weg, Altquartier. Midnight, this night he come'. You tell-tell good, make believe very much?'

'Yes master, I shall not fail thee,' the Human declared with enthusiastic fervour, as though a deity had given him charge of a most splendid and awesome task.

Arising to his full height over the supplicant Manling, Skrack spoke in as grave a tone as he could muster.

'See-see do not. If fail - die. If succeed - reward gre-' he began and leapt aside as the door opened, twirling behind the seat amidst a flutter of his robes to keep out of sight. Peering around it, Skrack saw a Manling female dressed in black and white looking in, holding a lamp.

'Sir? I heard a crash, is everything all-' she began as the Manling jumped up off his knees and tried to usher her out.

'It's all right Kristine, I'll clear it up later, now off you go, I'm busy!' he stated sternly, but with an uneasy tremor in his voice that feared his allegiance might be unearthed.

'Busy? All alone sir? Don't fret, I'll be out in a moment if...Ulric preserve me!' she cried, her smiling face becoming a mask of horror as she spotted Skrack lurking behind the chair.

Skrack kicked into the floor, vaulting the high backrest and streaking towards her as a nightmarish shadow. She grabbed hold of the Manling, squealing in calamity, seeking his protection.

Grabbing hold of the noble, Skrack threw his arm aside to clear the obstruction. The rip of fabrics echoed as the female's hands tore great pieces of his attire from him, her terror-filled fists refusing to let go. The Manling struck another chair and toppled over it, dropping to the floor with a harsh thud.

The cries of the female turned into a mortified gasp as Skrack pounced, clamping jaws around her throat and biting deep. His teeth pierced her flesh, the strength of his maw crushing her windpipe to bring the shrill shrieks to an end. The weight of him as his body collided with her felled the female, sending her crashing to the floor. Skrack landed atop her, still locked to her by his jaws. Her cloth-filled fists pounded against him as he kept the strangling bite in place, the taste of her blood welling in his mouth. Skrack fought the urge to rip open her neck and feast on warm tissues, because if he created such carnage, the Manling might be discovered via such wanton clues to murder.

The female started to weaken, her strength vanishing until her arms dropped slack to the floor and the ripped material fell free. Maintaining the lethal hold for a little longer, he listened as her pulse finally stopped and her eyes glazed over.

'Oh Gods! Oh Gods! This isn't happening! Oh Gods preserve us!' muttered the noble, rocking to and fro, beset by shock at what he had witnessed.

Rising up, Skrack dropped the female and turned to the Manling cowering beneath him.

'Me take care-care of body. You do as told or join!' he hissed, indicating the limp contorted form of the noble's housekeeper.

'Y...yes, L...Lo...Lord,' he stammered, quivering from fright and dismay at what he had just seen, holding himself tight as though to comfort his lacerated psyche from the witnessing of murder. The Manling was serving the Horned Rat to try and save his own skin, and for that same reason he would now do as Skrack had commanded.

Turning, he strode back down towards the cellar, grabbing the corpse on the way and bringing it with him. Feeding his victim into the tunnel, he climbed up after her, pushing her down the slender tube, her body taking up most of it. Ensuring that he resealed the door, he forced the blocking body downwards, the steep incline assisting the process.

Once satisfied that he was deep enough so that the smell of her remains would not leak through the door from extreme proximity, Skrack started to devour the obstacle. The long voyage up, and the effort of moving the corpse had made the Black Hunger rage within him, and his devouring of the remains was swift and all-consuming. After quelling the ferocity of his famine with her offal, Skrack gnawed free her arms and slipped them into his robes to renew his energy after the descent. With a snack set aside, he turned his appetite back to the rest of the banquet.

Some skin, hair and the shredded articles of her uniform were all that remained

when Skrack continued onwards, returning into the depths of the Fauschlag.

Chapter eighteen

Marching sternly down the tunnel, Karikk sent the Clanrats scampering aside as his armoured frame stormed relentlessly forward, flanked by two pairs of his fellow dark armoured Stormvermin.

Heading to Maulokk's warren, he pondered on how his existence had been transformed. One moment he was a slave, living in despair and agony from heartbeat to heartbeat, the next instant, he was plunged into the luxurious life he now led. He and his comrades ate well, were feared even by other Stormvermin, received the best equipment, training, and breeding females, and were blessed with the protection of Maulokk's patronage.

They had just finished further enhancing their reputation in the tunnels above by storming a nest of Chaos cultists. The warped worshippers of Tzeentch were mostly exiled city dwellers, but the throng also bore several Chaos warriors, some Tzeengor (Beastmen allied to the Lord of Change) and a many tentacled, snake headed Champion of the mutating Chaos power.

The Skaven had swept onto them, using Clanrats as a buffer to soak up the magical retaliation and to protect their initial advance and subsequent engagement. The Stormvermin hacked down all who resisted them and drove the others upwards, calling up more Clanrats to help steer the routing Chaos followers. Generating abundant noise, they caused the Cult to flee directly into the Dwarven occupied, uppermost tunnels. The Longbeards were waiting and were eager to avenge the food thefts. The assumed culprits were slaughtered by rash Longbeard axes and hammers, leaving the Stormvermin to withdraw back into the depths, unseen.

Karikk had been astounded at the ferocity he could muster, and the skill with which he operated in combat. He and his force had fought many times better than at any time before. Their bondage had made them far deadlier than any other Stormvermin, rivalling pack chiefs in battle savagery, while he himself was probably more than a match for any Clan chieftain. But such delusions of promotion and authority were no longer a factor in their minds, their slavery had taught them the price of such folly.

He reached and entered Maulokk's warrens alone, leaving his escort with the sentries. The Warlock-Engineer Lord was sat looking over tunnel plans, surrounded by roll upon roll of parchment. Karikk went to one knee and bowed his snout in genuine reverence.

'My Lord.'

Maulokk rolled up the plan he was examining and got to his feet.

'Arise, most trusted Captain.'

Karikk complied, using his halberd to help pull himself upright, whereupon Maulokk continued.

'I want you to take some trusted Stormvermin from Clan Skreek and with twelve of your best troops go to these villages.'

He produced a piece of parchment that mapped the southern area of the Middle Mountains. The target villages were all situated along the road to Talabheim.

'It is important that they are attacked in this order - Holzbeck, Selmigerholz, then Garssen.'

Karikk spied a village and a town between the last two targets and pointed them out.

'Forget them, you will be expected there after the first two assaults. When you attack, I want the villages stripped, and I also want lots of mutilation. Use Clanrats to carry the pillage back, ensure you travel quickly, and above all leave the odd survivor to confess as to who orchestrated and executed these raids.'

Karikk did not comprehend Maulokk's reasoning, but then he did not need to. All that was required of him was success, which he would gain regardless of any obstacles.

Chapter nineteen

Hurrying to the Warlord's location, Skrack found Kritish standing within a protective circle of guards, overseeing the storing of the latest supplies acquired by Grey Seer Skarbitik's reaving.

There was much food, for the raided villages were channelling their harvests into winter stockpiles. From the sheer quantity arriving, the villages would have been left to a bleak winter of starvation without them, so it was fortunate that all the survivors of the attacks (which were few indeed) were arriving in chains as new slaves. Their fortune at living through their capture was short-lived though, for Maulokk's orders soon allocated the Manling chattel to that of food reward to exceptionally productive tunnel workers.

The order disposed of cumbersome captives and served to give the Clanrats a taste for Human flesh in the capacity of a treat, a rarity, a delicacy to be savoured.

Skrack approached the Warlord and addressed him quietly.

'Commander Maulokk wants you to take the tunnel to the Altquartier. There is a group of Manlings who are suspicious, and who are conducting a search for us. They have been lured into attending a dwelling on Markt Weg at midnight, tonight. Maulokk wants you to personally deal with them. You may take four of your best troops with you. Did you pay Clan Eshin as we discussed?'

'Of course,' huffed the Warlord, irritated at being used in such a demeaning capacity. Executing troublesome Manlings was Clanrat work, not a task for a Warlord.

'It is as I suspected then,' Skrack confessed with adopted solemnness.

'What?'

'Maulokk expects you to die facing them, for such a death will not initiate the assassination contract.'

'A group of pathetic Manlings kill *me*?' he scoffed, amazed that Maulokk could even expect it as a remote possibility.

'Not just Manlings. An Elf, a Longbeard Slayer and a priest skilled in the ways of battle sorcery. But I have a plan. I shall attend the conflict secretly to counter the cleric's magic and to aid you. I can also give you this.'

From within his robes he drew a brazen amulet upon a thin chain with runes engraved about its circumference.

'This magical device will greatly protect you from all harm. Wear it during the fight.'

The Warlord took it and threaded his snout and head through the chain loop. Once on, he tucked it beneath his armour.

'You had best hurry if you are to make it on time, no doubt Maulokk would just as readily have you executed for poor punctuality.'

'Agreed,' concurred Kritish and turned to his guards.

'You, you, you, and you, follow me,' he ordered, and stormed off, mumbling under his breath with Skrack following behind, concealing his secret grin.

His plan was running perfectly. The amulet had been bungled during the final stage of its creation and was now an accursed artefact that although it deceptively seemed to bestow great prowess, in reality it slowed the wearer's reflexes, rendering them easier to hit, and making it harder for the victim of its malignant influence to defend or retaliate. If this did not cause the Warlord's death, then Skrack would 'accidentally' burn the flesh from his bones with a misplaced burst of Warp Lightning.

Hopefully some of the Manlings would also die in the conflict. Maulokk was

using them for something, so weakening their strength and numbers would be an added bonus.

Chapter twenty

'Lord?' a voice enquired.

'Wait. I shall be out in a moment,' Maulokk replied.

He placed the Warpstone chunk in its lead casket, closed the thick lid and threw a sheet of canvas over the experimental device to hide it. The Warlock left the chamber and emerged to see one of his Stormvermin - Ikirik. The warrior bowed deeply as Maulokk emerged from his private workshop.

'What is it, Ikirik,' he asked, calling him by name to maintain the illusion that he did not regard his troops as mere faceless cannon fodder to be used on a whim for his own goals.

'A number of Clan Moulder representatives have arrived. They have a consignment of Rat Ogres in their charge.'

'Take me to them,' he responded ebulliently.

The Stormvermin led the way, the others falling in behind as escort once they were outside the warren entrance, leaving another pair to continue guarding it.

They proceeded to one of the exclusive Skaven tunnels that accessed the Under-Empire. Along one side of the immense tunnel were many large and sturdy, wheeled cages. Each had a flaccid-skinned bovine tethered to its solid yoke, the hairless beasts powerfully built, but seemed virtually mindless. Maulokk had never seen their kind before, but ensured that his gaze did not linger on the curious breed of organic engines.

Clan Moulder Packmasters dotted the scene, armed with whips. Many bore spiny growths, and others had one or more additional arms emerging from their sides or adjacent to their true limbs, a product of specific Warpstone treatments to encourage such exacting and useful mutation.

A heavily armoured, robustly built Packmaster with four brawny arms approached, holding an evil dressage whip in one hand with two crossed sabres on his back, and a hand axe tucked in his belt.

'You are Commander Maulokk?' he uttered casually.

'I am.'

The Skaven gave a token, curt bow. 'Packchief Wericik. I am here to deliver the merchandise you ordered.'

Ignoring him, Maulokk began heading along the convoy's line, looking into the cages as he went. The Rat Ogres within were thin, weak looking, ill-formed or stunted, and were either exceptionally and abnormally languid, or in a rabid, lunatic rage, throwing themselves against their cages, their sheer feebleness barely making the prisons rock.

The specimens were obviously rejects, sent to him following a bribe from some enemy. Maulokk resolved to find out who.

'These Rat Ogres are pathetic. Worse than that, they are an insult to me and to your Clan!' he bellowed, acting incensed, adopting the pretence that he was losing control, overwhelmed by the burdens and setbacks of his command here.

'I regret to inform you that the merchandise cannot be exchanged under *any* circumstances,' the Packchief responded insipidly, expecting such a response.

Opting to test whether it was Clan Moulder that was his adversary, or some other force, Maulokk began focusing his powers while continuing the facade of seething outrage. He chattered his teeth and emitted abrupt ultrasonic squeaks, both characteristic of extreme aggression. Black arcs of power began crackling over his body, and his eyes glowed with dark radiance.

'You expect me to accept this...this animate...OFFAL!'

The Packchief lowered, whipping his tail in indication of intended passivity, his image of serenity slipping as he realised the precariousness of his position. He had assumed that Maulokk would be held at bay by the repercussions of killing a Pack Chief, but if he were as harried as he appeared, then such a felony was at present the least of the Commander's concerns.

'I cannot refund your payment, it is beyond my means. I am only the courier Commander, I am not the one at fault.'

'Your Clan betrayed me! YOU have betrayed me! You! I'll...' yelled Maulokk, his fur on end, his robes flapping against him as the serpentine forks of opaque power curled about his form, making the accusing finger he jabbed at the Packchief flare with a bleak sun of welling supernatural force.

The Packchief gave a series of long ultrasonic drones, hoping to avoid conflict by maintaining submissiveness.

'The Clan was forced to send them! We had no other option!'

'Who!' roared Maulokk, the cage of power flickering around his body growing more ferocious as it started to lance out and lick the floor or jab angrily at the air.

'I don't know! The deal was made in secret!'

'WHO!'

'I don't know! I swear it on the teeth of the Horned Rat!'

Maulokk released the accumulated energy, using his will and words of power to form it into a burst of destructive Warp Lightning. The midnight electrical energy streaked forth and bored into the tunnel wall, wiggling its jagged fangs into the structure. The surface seemed to swell for a brief instant, the cracks that formed like an intricate jigsaw upon it spilling jet light from beneath.

Amidst an enormous eruption, the sorcery gouged a great hole from the stone. The Packmasters dove for cover and the Packchief dropped to his knees, expecting to be the next recipient of the deadly force, making his hasty peace with the spirit of the Horned Rat.

Fine dust billowed out, bearing larger fragments in its folds that pelted everyone in the vicinity and filled the air with the sharp flinty smell of sundered granite.

Maulokk fought the urge to go wild, spurred on by the seductive rapture of the dark energy that had coursed through his being. Turning and striding angrily away, he began excogitating deeply on this unexpected setback.

During his return, a single black furred little brethren rolled onto its back, offering the message that was tied to its hind leg. Unravelling the strip of paper, Maulokk quickly read it.

'Chaos cult migration away from east. Arsenals being stockpiled.'

Letting a burst of generated black fire devour the sheet, it was as he had suspected - the chaos cults had spies in the Manling following of the Horned Rat.

Such moles would be detected in the upper hierarchy, so they must be posing as lowlier members of the sect, who either listened in or stole to gain their information. Such eyes would have to be plucked out before he instigated his plan, and he knew just the persons to do it.

Chapter twenty one

Strolling solemnly, Jakob and Elldrigar moved down the stairs and entered the warmly welcoming bar room of the Inn, its cosy and friendly atmosphere failing to pierce the gloom that afflicted them.

'Evening me dears,' Halrida piped cheerfully from behind the bar. But the two were in grim mood and did not reciprocate the Lilliputian woman's merriness. After their injuries had been cleansed and bandaged, Dieter had left them and returned to the temple. They had gained a poor day's sleep, and now felt drained and listless, their body clocks scrambled.

'Two dinners please, Halrida,' Jakob requested.

'Coming up me dears,' the Halfling Innkeep chirped, and called to the kitchen staff while the two weary customers slouched into one of the few spare booths.

The tables were almost all occupied by evening diners, for with the Carnival looming, the Inn was fairly full of new guests and tourists.

Halrida herself delivered the two steaming food mountains with an ale and a wine. Before departing she gave Jakob a plain wax sealed letter.

'This was delivered an hour ago by messenger.'

'What firm?' asked Jakob, taking his bread knife and cutting along the edge of the high quality envelope.

'Just an urchin,' she smiled, and trotted away to busily ensure that all bellies in the place were full, as though such gluttony were a personal crusade she followed.

Jakob pulled the letter free and opened the fine, neatly folded parchment. The script was elegant and meticulous. Whoever had wrote it was educated, and were either a fluent writer or had taken time in composing its text. The instruction Dieter had given him in reading and writing was basic at best, the group's active lifestyle permitting little opportunity for prolonged study, and so sections of the letter were still beyond him.

'What does it say?' Elldrigar asked.

Jakob simply handed the letter to his companion rather than admit his failing, even though by being illiterate he was amongst the vast majority of his people. Elldrigar was undeceived, and quietly read the letter aloud for Jakob's benefit.

'The leader of thine verminous enemies will ascend at the stroke of midnight in the cellar of 19 Markt Weg, in the Altquartier. He will be expecting a spy to establish contact with him and deliver information of great value. The Skaven leader will await for one full hour before departing whence he came. Signed...M.'

Was it Jakob's imagination or did Elldrigar's jaw clench at the mouthing of the Ratmen's name?

'You think it truth?' Elldrigar inquired, turning the letter over and checking the back for any more data.

'It warrants investigation if nothing else.'

'Who is M? Why does he aid us so? How is it that he is aware of this? And us for that matter?' the Elf questioned.

'The Ska...' Jakob began before pausing suddenly, looking furtively about and then continuing in hushed tones. 'The enemy must know of us, from last night. I suspect a turncoat in their ranks.'

'Well, we can easily get Dieter, but what of Hergar? He may be a loutish irritating thug, but if this escalates into a confrontation, we'll require all the fighting strength possible to defeat a Skaven leader, and as much as I am loathe to admit it, we really do need his presence.'

'We will have to bail him out,' stated Jakob.

'Surely the Watch would not permit it?'

'With enough cash encouragement, maybe they'd reconsider,' said Jakob, taking back the letter and placing it back in its envelope.

'Unfortunately, that is something we do not have,' reminded Elldrigar, taking the envelope and looking across it, checking for any other clues.

'I have some rings I can pawn,' Jakob murmured.

'I suppose I could sell those small rubies I have been keeping aside for emergencies.'

'You still have them? I thought you lost them in that fight near Dresschler?'

'Then it is fortunate I 'overlooked' them, is it not?'

'I suppose. What matters is that you have them, so let us bustle, we have little time.'

They quickly ate their fill, took a few sips of their beverage, and after collecting their weaponry headed to the pawnbrokers where (after some intense and heated

bartering) they gained a fat purse of gold for their valuables. At a brisk pace they went to the city gate nearest the place of the incident, where the enchanting powers of gold swayed the resolve of Hergar's jailers and had him release the Dwarf with only a cautionary warning. The jailer obviously knew of the arresting officer's racist leanings and was in no hurry to add further trouble by holding the Dwarf until the man came back on duty that night.

The beating had obviously continued at the jail, probably due to Hergar's stubbornness and abusive attitude. His eyes were nearly swollen shut, and dark bruises covered his face and body. Several teeth were missing from his swollen split lips, and dry blood caked his face and chest. Shoving them away when they tried to help him, they escorted Hergar to the Hungry Halfling in silence, his walk stiff from trauma to his stomach and ribs.

Jakob began donning his armour, Elldrigar his weapons, and Dieter applied several doses of his Lord's magical regeneration to Hergar. The swellings wet down, the bruises faded, and the cuts melted back into unbroken tattooed skin. Almost fully healed, and able to speak properly once more, he immediately solicited details of what had happened in his absence.

'We gained a significant lead,' replied Jakob.

'I shall meditate to recuperate my magical energies in case of conflict,' Dieter interrupted, sitting down and closing his eyes while drifting into the trance-like state. Jakob nodded and continued to brief Hergar.

'Someone signing himself 'M' says the Skaven leader will be coming up in the Altquartier for a covert meeting, tonight.'

'When do we go in?' he gruffly answered, anxious to avenge his defeat.

'As soon as you're able,' shrugged Jakob.

'I'm always ready for a fight, now more than ever. Where's my hammer?' he barked, jumping up and looking around with sudden concern.

Jakob handed him the weapon from beneath the bed. The Dwarf gripped it tightly, stroked its solid head with the gentleness of petting a kitten and then slapped it reassuringly.

'Fists! Pah! Next time I'll bust his head like the...like the putrid Umgi melon it is!' Hergar ranted.

Elldrigar covertly sighed and shook his head.

'Come, we'd best hurry, it's nearly eleven already,' Jakob declared, drawing on his net and sheathing both bastard sword and parrying dagger.

The group departed speedily and moved amongst the shadows and alleys until they were in the Altquartier. The district adjacent to the Halfling Kleinmoot was home to the worst of Middenheim's underworld. Gangs of thugs, cut throats, drug addicts and drunks prowled or staggered past, while illicit dope dealers and prostitutes propositioned them constantly en route. Hergar had to be prevented from going wild on several occasions when females offered to attend him for half price upon regarding his height.

The group's clearly combat-ready appearance dissuaded attack, and due to the Watch's avoidance of the area, there were thankfully no authorities to reprimand them for their armament violations.

They reached the dwelling without incident and found that it was small and in poor condition, neglected for many years. The drawn grimy curtains prevented a view within from being extracted, and after one pass - where Dieter knocked upon the door alone and received no answer - they took refuge in a nearby alleyway to discuss their next course of action.

'What now?' Jakob petitioned, seeking input.

'Can anyone pick the lock?' Elldrigar asked.

'I can utilise a little sorcery to slip the mechanism,' Dieter expressed, fishing in his pouch and covertly drawing what appeared to be a small silver coloured key.

'We'll come over once you're in,' Jakob decided.

The cleric nodded and after discreetly checking the street for Watch he began heading across. At the door he paused and briefly touched the lock before simply opening the door and walking in.

'That cleric would make one mean burglar,' Hergar mused.

'Why didn't he tell us about that spell before now?' Jakob questioned morosely, recalling all the times that he could have exploited the spell for their own convenience and wealth.

'You cannot expect a man of faith to resort to such thievery just because we are short of a few crowns. Magic, especially from a God, is supposed to be used when necessary, or with good reason,' indicated Elldrigar.

'How would you know?' replied Hergar.

'If you *can* recall, my race are renowned for their sorcerous proficiency,' the Elf responded haughtily.

'If these Clerics are so goodly and helpful, then why don't you ever see them on battlefields, why is it you only see the College Wizards?' pondered Jakob.

'Did I say I knew everything about Human faiths? I merely pointed out that magic is not to be employed lightly. I doubt anyone could pierce the perplexities and paradoxes of Humans,' stated Elldrigar.

'For once I agree with you,' Hergar added with a grim smile, the two of them turning to smile and look at Jakob.

'Let's go,' Jakob added, having had enough abuse from members of the two most ancient of races.

After marching rapidly across the street they entered and shut the door behind them.

The interior smelled musty from disuse. Every surface was smothered with dust and laced with silky curtains of cobweb. Whoever ensured that this place was never resold, did not care for what condition it remained in.

Elldrigar, Jakob and Dieter drew their swords, the soft tone of the blades leaving their sheaths banishing the ominous silence.

'Where's the cellar?' whispered Dieter, nudging Jakob in the ribs.

'How should I know!' Jakob retorted dissonantly, pushing the Cleric away as he looked across the scene and once more let himself be forced into a role of command. 'Elldrigar, check upstairs. Dieter, go with him. Hergar and I'll look about down here. Any trouble - call for help, and be careful, we don't know how many of them there'll be.'

The softer footed Elf and Cleric crept up the carpeted stairs in search of occupants, while Jakob and Hergar split up and visually scanned the ground floor.

When Jakob located the cellar stairs he listened for sounds from within, and then awaited the return of his companions.

Elldrigar and Dieter crept down to join him, Hergar appearing soon after. Indicating the door, Jakob allowed them to prepare while putting his hand to the handle and standing to the left. Elldrigar unshouldered his bow, notched an arrow and took up a firing position opposite the door. Hergar stood to the right, hammer raised. Dieter, with a small vial of clear liquid in one hand, a lit lamp in the other, stood adjacent to Elldrigar.

Jakob nodded and threw open the door before ducking back, exposing a flight of plain stairs which lanced down and to the left.

Elldrigar leapt forward onto the top of them, jumping into a crouch and aiming down the unseen passage. His eyes penetrated the gloom in a way that the Human's vision could not, and seeing that the stair was deserted, he nodded to the others that it was clear.

Jakob crept past, his sword tip leading the way. Dieter carried the lantern in and standing behind the Elf, he held it high to allow the warm glow to fill the sloping

passage.

Jakob reached the bottom and glanced through the doorway on the left, feeding the cellar that lay beneath the home.

After beckoning to the others, Dieter quickly followed behind Elldrigar to the subterranean foot of the stairs, taking the lamp to the corner so as to light the chamber before him. Hergar stomped noisily down, pushed past and remissly entered, his hammer ready.

The cellar was musty and bare. Several mildewed trunks lay against the walls but there was nothing else, and certainly no entrances, exits or rabid Skaven warriors.

'Where by Grugni's hammer are they then?' Hergar grumbled, kicking a box out of his way.

As if in response to the Dwarf's question, a section of wall flew open, the blackness beyond spewing forth dark furred armoured forms who wielded serrated swords and carried iron bossed shields.

At their head came the tarnish and stud-encrusted plate and chainmail-armoured Warlord, his skull necklace bouncing as he ran, his large double handed blade raised high.

The serrated greatsword swept down in an overhead arc. Hergar threw up his hammer to ward off the blow, and sparks flew as the two weapons slashed against each other.

'Ah yes! This is more like it!' sang Hergar with jubilation, his muscles rippling as he struggled against the Skaven's strength.

The Skaven dragged his weapon back and thrust for Hergar's gut, the speed of the beast frightening in its grace and nimbleness. In response, the Slayer reversed his grip and in a pendulum motion struck the flat edge of the Warlord's blade, swatting it aside with a deep clang.

Hergar let the hammer swing up upon its momentum until it was vertical once more, and with a sharp shove he sent the head down at the Skaven's armoured skull.

Confident in his skill, Kritish sought to parry, and consequently looked all the more shocked when his arm moved languidly and failed to have his sword meet the attack. The unrepulsed solid weapon smashed into the Skaven's temple, the clang of metal upon metal ringing out as the Warlord staggered slightly, momentarily dazed.

The Slayer quickly followed up, letting gravity draw the weighty head down while he pulled it back and then up overhead in a ferocious full circle that tore down onto the Warlord.

Kritish responded with attempted evasion, but his previous speed and agility had strangely dissipated causing Hergar to wonder whether he had delivered greater trauma to the Warlord's brain than he had thought. The bludgeoning weapon hummed with intent against the air during its speeding plummet and the studded pauldron of the Warlord buckled and split. There was a sharp crack, and the joint was popped from its socket and laced with splintered cracks.

Elldrigar unleashed an arrow while Dieter chanted fluid sorcerous words of complex text. The missile streaked out and sank into Stormvermin's flank, piercing the dull segmented breastplate and nestling in his intestines.

Jakob charged forward, hurling his sword at the wounded Stormvermin's chest, seeking to kill him quickly and reduce the enemy's numbers.

The massive Skaven warrior quickly covered the area with his circular shield, his body lowering as the pain of the arrow started to make itself more distinctly felt. The wooden shield sustained a splintered gash, but denied the blade access to the flesh beyond, the Skaven tottering back a few steps under the strike.

Another Stormvermin warrior came onto Jakob's flank and thrust at his heart. Seeing the attack in his peripheral vision Jakob countered with his dagger, catching the sword in the embrace of the accommodating width of the hooked hilt and shoving it aside.

The other two Skaven stormed towards the door. The first met Dieter's spell, which pierced his mind and robbed him of his mental faculties. The black furred form crumpled and fell heavily at Elldrigar's feet, twitching and drooling profusely.

The second leapt over his fallen comrade and sought Elldrigar, bringing his sword down with venom. The edge sparked brightly upon the stone that the Elf had previously occupied before gracefully side-stepping.

The Skaven Warlord snarled, sagged, and span, bringing the sword round at Hergar's side. The Dwarf blocked the weak and stolid attack, using the haft to swat it away before rotating the weapon at its centre and slamming the head onto the Warlord's wrist. The sharp influx of pain caused the curved greatsword to tumble from Kritish's grasp and clatter loudly to the floor.

Hergar raised the hammer in both hands to deliver the death blow, the enemy wilting before him, overwhelmed by his injuries.

'Here's one for Dammaz Kron!' roared Hergar, taking another tiny portion of revenge for one of the largest entries in the Great Book of Grudges.

Suddenly the Skaven straightened, having plucked the cleaver from his belt with his wounded arm and deftly swapped the weapon to his good hand before hacking viciously at the exposed tattooed torso of the Dwarf.

With a panicked jerk, Hergar tried to dodge back, but had not expected the attack and was ill prepared for it. The ragged edge cut a long deep gash along his body, severing several beard braids in the process. Hergar counted himself fortunate that the blow was as weak as all the Warlord's attacks, for had it been better placed, it would have surely eviscerated him.

Infuriated by the loss of hair, Hergar struck down. The hammer smashed onto the Skaven's brow, caving in his helm and shattering the bone plates of his skull. The Warlord collapsed and clawed weakly at the floor, mewling in a barely audible whine, whipping his tail violently, blood pouring in lumpy torrents from his ruined head.

The Dwarf released his Slayer's cry of victory and unfulfilled death vows, the blend of elation and sadness resounding through the room before he jumped up and delivered the hammer fully onto the prone head with all his weight and descending velocity behind it. The weapon mashed the furred cranium down until with a liquid fracturing crack it burst, splashing blood, bone and brain outward to wreath the mangled stump left behind.

Jakob lunged deceptively low at one of his opponents, and then swept up at the last split second. The blade sailed over the lowered shield to sink into the Skaven's shoulder, scraping the collarbone and causing the creature to squeak loudly in pain. Jakob sprang suddenly to his opponent's left side, evading the other Stormvermin on the right who sliced murderously at his vitals. Pulling the embedded sword around with him, he opened the inflicted wound all the more, tearing the flesh and pivoting upon the collarbone to audibly crack it.

Rendered disorientated through intense waves of pain, the Skaven failed to prevent Jakob's dagger from sinking into his neck. The point pierced his bebor and punctured the carotid artery. Instantly, red spray erupted under high pressure, covering Jakob's armour as warm droplets splattered his face forcing him into closing his eyes and turning his head away from the rhythmic pumping stream.

'Dammit!' he cursed, shaking his face to try and get the blood off. Through a protective squint he saw the other Stormvermin charge towards him, seeking to take advantage of his moment of near blindness.

'Catch!' Jakob snapped, taking the gurgling Skaven in both hands and without losing his hold on his weapons, he span and cast the dying form onto his victim's comrade, granting himself opportunity to wipe away the obscuring tepid fluid that was trickling into his eyes.

He was undisturbed by such grotesque visions of carnage, having lived with and seen far worse in friend and foe alike, his years of war having hardened his heart as

though under a Medusa's stare. Besides, it was considerably easier on the conscience to kill such beasts than it was fellow Humans.

Dieter stepped forward and smashed the oil lamp onto the Stormvermin's head before it could attack either himself or Elldrigar. The glass shattered and the fuel chamber split, sending oil in a pungent cascade over the Skaven's torso. The burning wick ignited the flammable liquid and the Stormvermin's features immediately became a fountain of bright flames.

Dieter and Elldrigar were forced back by the effulgent pulse of heat and light, throwing up an arm to protect themselves from it. The blaze spread rapidly and in an instant the Skaven's neck and shoulders were alight, the flames following the trickles of fuel that ran his body and arms. The acrid stench of burning fur assailed Elldrigar's nose as he loaded another arrow and kicked out into the burning Skaven's gut, sending him tumbling away and allowing Dieter to run safely past and into the room to help Jakob. The Skaven collapsed and rolled, his fur shrivelling, his flesh charring, his shrieks quickly becoming more hoarse from the blackening and burning of throat and lungs under the touch of inhaled flame and roasting air.

Feeling the heat of the inferno upon him as he ran past the frantically writhing Stormvermin, Dieter heard chanting from within the secret tunnel. He glanced to it and suddenly, from the shadows, there came an opaque flash.

Instantly the ground beneath him cracked and split. From the lattice work of tiny fissures, a thick, sickly green mist billowed up. A moaning sorcerous wind snatched the faintly luminous miasma, reared it up about him and before he could react, the foetid vapours rode a gasp of shock and were within his body.

Dieter's lungs ignited with a choking burn and he dropped to his knees, clutching his chest, unable to breathe as the foul sorcery ate voraciously at the tissues of his viscera. The sizzling crackle of dissolving meat echoed from within his chest as his limbs cavorted in nervous spasms. A smoking, green ooze dribbled from his mouth in thick globules, melting his teeth and tongue like an acid, his lips blistering under the touch of the fizzing gobs of viridescent issue. Dieter tried to call to Ulric in a pleading prayer, but his lungs were already shredded and no sound emerged. Slumping forward, his eyes rolled back and his life ebbed.

Hergar span to see a Stormvermin disentangle itself from a bleeding cadaver, then push it truculently aside and prepare to charge a blood-blinded Jakob. The Slayer catapulted himself into the air and towards the Skaven, bringing the hammer down onto his head, catching him unawares as his attention was focused on butchering Jakob.

The Stormvermin's brow split, and the force of his skull being driven down broke the bones of his neck. The creature dropped to its knees, squeaking in puny chirps. Hergar landed and swivelled with ardour, striking with the hammer and caving in the side of his adversary's head amidst a loud crunch that lashed the nearby wall with sundered blood and quivering meaty particles.

The Skaven warrior at Elldrigar's side began to stir as the effects of Dieter's spell wore off. The Elf stepped forward and fired an arrow point blank into the back of his head. The Skaven gave a wild throe, the point biting deep into his brain and after several sedate twitches he went slack.

Wiping the last droplets of crimson fluid from his eyes, Jakob thought he detected a figure in the tunnel entrance. Its shadowy outline seemed to be that of a robed Skaven, but little else could be discerned. A flicker of light from the burning Stormvermin body touched its snout and Jakob saw it smile gleefully before retreating.

Cursing, he gave pursuit, but was forced to stop at the entrance due to the pitch blackness that ruled within.

'LIGHT!' he yelled.

The illumination provided by the Skaven's combusting flesh was dying, and the room was getting darker with each passing moment.

'We don't have any more!' Elldrigar yelled, flashing his gaze around to try and spot a new source they could make use of. 'Oh Gods! Jakob! It's Dieter!'

Running to the Cleric they checked hesitantly for life signs, of which there were none. The rank stink issuing from the body made their guts turn queasily and forced them to put a hand over their features to mask the horrendous smell.

'Accursed rat scum!' hissed Jakob with bitter rage, rising up and moving away from the body, coughing slightly from the stench.

The sound of collapsing stone reverberated from deep in the tunnel, a steady thunderous cacophony of rocks pounding upon rocks.

'Damn, damn, damn!' Jakob roared, kicking the wall in fury as it became evident from the audio clues that Dieter's murderer had just escaped and prevented any pursuit.

An uneasy, restless shudder ran through the cellar's structure.

'What the -' Hergar questioned, pulling his hammer free from the Skaven's head with a wet sucking kiss.

The quiver became more pronounced, the walls and ceiling began to crack, and fine dust started to filter through between the splits.

'Out! Get out, now!' Jakob roared, running for the stairs, Elldrigar closely following.

'But the bodies!' protested Hergar, the floor already beginning to buck and writhe beneath his hob nailed boots.

'Forget them! Run for your life!' bellowed Jakob as he vanished up the stairs taking them four at a time.

The Dwarf spat irritably upon the Warlord's headless remains and sprinted for the exit, grimacing as a chunk of brick dislodged from the ceiling and bounced from his shoulder.

The house above quaked under the seismic disturbance and the lower levels began to rupture. The three remaining occupants charged desperately for the front door, Elldrigar being the first to reach it after speeding past the armour-encumbered Jakob.

Skidding to a halt before the portal, he grabbed the handle and pulled, but the exit remained steadfast, wedged in its tremor-distorted frame.

'What's wrong?' Jakob yelled, closing in, weaving from one side of the corridor to the other as the floor shifted and tilted, affecting his run.

'It's jammed!' Elldrigar responded fearfully, gritting his teeth and tugging in vain at the solidly wedged portal, which began to groan as the sagging masonry put even more weight upon the trapped wood.

'Out of the way!' Hergar demanded, running forward with a steadily ascending, throaty growl.

Elldrigar ducked aside and Hergar's bestial tune reached its crescendo as his head struck the door. Ramming it with his skull, planks of the door split and burst outward, wrenched from frame and hinge to shower the street. The Dwarf rolled clumsily onto the grimy pavement, splinters of wood piercing his scalp, the blood stemming from the cuts trickling down his face.

Elldrigar and Jakob summarily ran through the ragged hole, the unstable portal collapsing about them. The slightly dazed Dwarf was staggering to his feet, thick chunks of the wooden door falling from him as he tried to counter his unsteady swagger and rise.

'Come on, let's get out of here before the Watch turn up,' Elldrigar declared, and ran for the backstreets.

Jakob helped Hergar to his feet and followed the Elf into the winding slum labyrinth at a sprint, anxious to put distance between himself and the rubble.

'See you back at the room!' he shouted to Hergar, splitting up, the three of them each choosing their own paths.

The dull, staggered crunching sound of an avalanche of stone rose from beneath the streets. The cellar collapsed, dragging the ground floor of the house down with it and leaving the dwelling a hollowed out, unsound shell. Jakob realised that whatever bodies were left, would now be unrecognisable. Once more the Skaven had eluded detection.

Chapter twenty two

Karikk looked out over the dark structures of Holzbeck. It was an insignificant maggot of a village, situated a few miles south of the Middle Mountains. A major coaching stop, it was thought to be well-defended, so he had called for observation and preparation.

Around ten homes lay about the village centre, which was comprised solely of a walled, extensive sized Coaching Inn that dominated the scene of cabins and farmsteads, and which was probably the only reason that this village had come into existence in the first place. A few windows still emanated light from within, the late night denizens trying to catch up with work or obligations.

A crude spiked fence surrounded the whole settlement, providing scant protection from the Skaven force amassed in the wells of darkness beyond the treeline. His troops were each leading a trio of Clan Skreek Stormvermin, and were due to reach their positions at any moment. Holding his halberd flat, and keeping low, Karikk began to scuttle forward with three black furred warriors behind him.

At the fence, he drew his dagger and began cutting the tethers holding the spikes in place. Once they were all severed, he pried the nailed poles apart, creating an opening.

The same would currently be occurring all about the perimeter, undetected by the dull-eyed Manling sentries.

Once a safe gap was effected he gave the order to move in, using the high pitch of ultrasonic that was beyond the Manling ears but which was audible to every Skaven in his force.

A volley of soft faint whistles echoed and the five Manling sentries upon the Coaching Inn wall fell from their perches, their flesh pierced by a score of arrows. Seeing the other units scampering in as they breached the perimeter, Karikk arose and headed swiftly to the nearest house.

Like their black rat little brethren, the Stormvermin caste were adept climbers, and within seconds, three units were over the sheer wall of the Inn and opening the sturdy gates from the inside, erasing the only problematic barricade.

Karikk went to the front door of the house and shoulder barged it. The lock split and the door swept open to reveal a small, poorly furnished living chamber, the lingering warmth reaching through his fur.

Marching boldly in, Karikk kicked the flimsy interior door situated opposite him from its hinges. A Manling leapt up from his strange bed, while his mate went into a screaming paroxysm upon seeing the Skaven warrior bathed in the dull bedside candlelight.

The Manling grabbed an axe from against the bedpost and sprang at Karikk, roaring in his native tongue of deep guttural grunts.

Karikk caught the down cutting blow, haft on haft to the loud crack of wood on wood. Swinging his weapon round against the axe, he slammed the counterweight into the Manling's knee. The joint popped audibly, and as he shouted in pain, Karikk viciously headbutted him.

The spiny helm ripped open the skin of his face, shredded the flesh and caused the Manling to drop, concussed severely and bleeding through the torn ribbons of his features.

'Take him outside,' he commanded of those behind him, the forces complying instantly, each of them only too aware of their Captain's psychopathic reputation.

'Search the rest of the house, then move on,' he added harshly, striding forward and punching the screeching female, knocking her from the bed with the violence of his assault.

The female fell inertly to the bare floor, blood dribbling from her countenance. Karikk took hold of her hair and dragged her from the room, following the red path her mate had bled as he was similarly extradited from the house.

Sounds of alarm, terror and fighting were ringing out on the chill night air. A short Human ran from behind the house, seeking escape, his features flushed, his body quaking.

Karikk spotted several villagers fleeing through the perimeter, fulfilling Maulokk's orders and rendering the Human before him an eligible target.

The Manling tried to weave away when he saw the Stormvermin warrior release his prisoner's hair and lift his halberd threateningly, but he was in no way a match for the speed of the former Skavenslave.

Karikk swept out with the blade, slashing into neck, opening a deep wound and causing gouts of blood to pump rhythmically from the yawning slice. Seduced by the alluring sight, he stepped forth, grabbed the victim and clamped jaws over the proffered wound. Quaffing great mouthfuls of the warm blood, the gurgling Manling pawed at him with waning strength, overcome with pain and mortified horror as his life was feasted on.

The flow gradually ebbed depriving him of ready sustenance, so Karikk pulled the languid Manling to the house, lifted him high into the air and pinned him to the wall. With his chisel incisors he slit along the belly and forced his snout in, gnawing into the intestines, the parting soft skin and muscle running along his armoured snout. After readily gulping down the pulsating viscera, he found that the Black Hunger was still unsated and so continued to dine. Burrowing up, chewing into organs, tugging them free and swallowing the rent, wet offal whole, he was finally gluttoned only once the Human's torso was fully hollowed out.

Karikk took a long lap from the inside of the dripping ribcage, gave a satisfied gasp and let the body fall into a tangled pile.

After retrieving the captive, he licked his gore-dripping snout and marched through the village, surveying the progress of the assault.

The only real resistance had come from the militia and the coach guards, but taken by surprise and with little time to ready themselves, they were no match for the invading Stormvermin force.

The survivors were being quickly rounded up and brought before Karikk, who allocated their fate at a glance while Skaven-gers began stripping the village of food and useful items.

'Flay those two, impale him in the village centre, nail those three to the Inn walls, bind these three in chains, soak them in oil and burn them alive, eat what you want of the rest, leave what you don't,' he capriciously prescribed.

The Skaven did not need telling twice and fell upon the eligible sustenance with ravenous zest. The Humans shrieked briefly as the Skaven snouts began to bore into their flesh, swiftly tearing them apart in the manic feeding frenzy that resulted in the comprehensive devouring of the hapless Manlings. The bodies were stripped to the bone in seconds, then the skeletons were fractured by powerful jaws and were gorged upon as well.

When the writhing bristle furred mound marking each Manling retreated, only shredded blood soaked skin, some hair, and strands of gore dyed cloth remained.

Once the settlement was fully pillaged and the survivors dispatched, Karikk led them back into the tunnels, had the secret exits sealed and headed onward to the next village with a full and content belly.

Plaguemaster Festrík grimly sat down upon his mouldering nest, the materials moving with the passage of little brethren and maggots as flies buzzed freely around him. That triple damned Grey Seer had done this to him.

He had been attending a religious meeting, one to honour the secret Clan holy night of Creeping Buboës. At the same time a massive cave-in occurred in the tunnels undergoing expansion. His absence and the absence of his Plague Monks from the disaster area looked highly suspicious. Furthermore, he could not divulge why he had been away, for he was bound by the Code of Filth not to reveal anything of the Plague Monk creed.

His plans would be delayed, perhaps even thwarted by any probings into his affairs by Maulokk. Vexed, he went to his cabinet of plagues, resolving to deal with the culprit in the most drawn out and sadistic manner possible.

Maulokk tightly fastened the reactor core shielding and checked the power seals to make sure all was secure. Finding it to his satisfaction he began repeating the procedure on the other examples as he thought upon his latest secret reports, gained through the machinations and influence of the Clan Eshin Rat King.

Grey Seer Skarbitík had lost nearly three quarters of his troops after walking into two Manling ambushes in succession, indicating that he had not only let the Manlings discover his actions, but had used a poorly disguised pattern, allowing the enemy to predict and prepare for his next attack. It was a sly failure, and one whose subtlety would allow him to easily allocate blame elsewhere, preserving himself and allowing him to further continue his relentless campaign of sabotage.

Finishing the last reactor, Maulokk decided to go and pay a visit on Grey Seer Tikric, and after throwing a canvas over the workbench, he moved to exit.

While still leaving the tunnel he saw a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye. He instinctively sprang, flying through the air and into a cushioning roll, pulling his dagger free. Arising, he detected the rustle of cloth closing in swiftly upon him. Forsaking any questioning as to who it was, he concentrated all his thoughts on the combat, span, and acted with trained skill.

The Clan Eshin assassin held a Weeping Blade in each hand, the dark killing knives generating and drooling a dark venom that hissed and ate into the stone where its droplets fell. One such blade plunged toward Maulokk, the other remaining back for defence.

The thrust was a testing blow, and one Maulokk fervently capitalised upon. He caught the assassin's blade at the hilt and twisted it in the enemy's grasp. With a kick to the gut he knocked the assassin back and forced the weapon from his claws. It fell point first into the stone floor where its caustic issue swiftly opened a sheath for it to slide into.

Both Skaven adopted fighting crouches, blades held out before them. The assassin studied the Warlock whom he had already underestimated, and as a result he had lost one blade, evening the odds between them.

Maulokk in turn gauged the assassin, whose poise and movements made it clear that he was superior to the usual Clan Eshin membership. Perhaps he was a Master of Assassins, or even a Lord of Shadows, one who appeared highly experienced in combat.

Maulokk's main advantage was his armour, for he had worn it to protect himself in case of explosion during his work. The value of his sorcerous defence would however be drastically diminished by the Clan Eshin blade, which would ferociously eat through almost any solid material.

Primarily he would need to keep the assassin from retrieving his second weapon, so Maulokk took the offensive, lunging with his dagger and trying to drive his foe further away. The assassin dodged back with a spry and lofty leap, acting with an almost flagrant denial of gravity.

Maulokk charged as the assassin's toes touched the ground, covertly slipping his dagger from his right to his left hand and then deceptively thrusting with the vacated extremity. Seeking to cover the low stab, the trick was discerned and the assassin ducked aside into a cartwheel that carried him to safety, whereupon he flipped to his feet and regained his posture.

The sturdy construction of the blowpipe on his back permitted it dual usage, so the assassin tugged the pole free, span it in his grasp and deployed it as an effective cudgel, temporarily replacing his lost dagger.

The two moved and swayed, sniffing instinctively, their eyes fixed upon each other, seeking a weakness, an opening. After long moments the assassin acted, the need to complete his mission and the danger of arriving reinforcements or aid quickly forcing him into a rash offensive.

Driving a thrust at Maulokk's stomach, the Warlock parried before riposting at the assassin's face.

Meeting the attack with the pipe, he successfully diverted it a mere inch from his flesh, and then forced Maulokk's blade away with an acute shove, opening his guard, creating a valuable opportunity.

The assassin immediately stabbed at his target's exposed chest. Maulokk twisted, causing the drooling point to tear a smouldering gash in his robes but fail to touch armour or flesh.

As he pirouetted, Maulokk drove an elbow at the adversary's torso, using his spin to add impetus and pulling his dagger back from where it had been sent.

The assassin was forced to skip back, but slashed into the outstretched joint before his leap carried him out of range. The blade rattled upon the Warpstone armour, which hissed under the touch of the residue and then manifested its anger as a bolt of black lightning. The diabolic shock scourged the assassin, but due to his tough flesh it failed to do worse than singe his fur and help distract him to the most minute degree, far less than it should have. The assassin knew of Maulokk's defences and artefacts and was mentally prepared for them.

Maulokk jerked forward and unleashed a wide backhand stab at the foe, etching a deep scratch along the bicep.

The Skaven killer fell back, trailing a few streaks of smoke from the scorched portions of fur, raising his blade warningly before him.

Instead of recovering from his over extended assault, Maulokk pressed his advantage. He countered his ailing balance by leaping upward. Throwing a savage jab at his opponent's face he simultaneously swivelled his whole body. The thrust was deflected with the pipe, which cracked and buckled slightly under the hack, and Maulokk slammed a reversed circle kick, heel first into the Skaven's flank. The assassin was knocked awkwardly aside by the blow, giving Maulokk another valuable opportunity.

Landing nimbly, Maulokk flipped his dagger to his right hand and thrust for the off balance chest of his implacable foe. With a springing leap the assassin hurled himself away, tossing the split pipe at Maulokk's face, back flipping to give himself yet more space to recover, and to conceal a sudden sly assault.

In mid-air the assassin tugged a throwing star from his belt and threw the device. Maulokk was not deceived by the preceding pipe, and ensured he retained the intense degree of focused concentration that was essential in such deadly and highly trained combats such as these.

The pipe bounced harmlessly and ignored from his helm, leaving him able to swat the deadly projectile from the air with his dagger. The shuriken unleashed a scintillating cough against his blade and rattled harmlessly onto the floor.

Maulokk closed in quickly. A second shuriken appeared in the Skaven's hand and Maulokk sprang without hesitation upon seeing it. The weapon whistled sibilantly and bit into the armour of his thigh, piercing it, sinking partially into his flesh and

discharging its venom into his system. The initial effect of the toxin and trauma was the instant numbing of the Warlock's leg, which conspired to make his landing clumsy, though not nearly as awkward as he pretended.

The assassin darted in to capitalise on his victim's weakness, assuming that the poison was working to full effect. Maulokk swept fiercely outward, the enemy arching back at the last moment, the knife opening a gash on the assassin's cheek rather than ripping through his face. Surprised, but in no way defenceless, the enemy stabbed ferociously in reprisal. Maulokk tried to evade, but even though he was faking most of his sluggishness, the work of the venom still hampered his agility. He felt the blade tip strike his side, dissolve and pierce the metal, then graze his skin. The caustic venom burned eagerly into his tissue and with pain accelerated speed he plunged into the wrist that bore the deadly knife. The dagger smashed the bones of the forearm and sank hilt deep to the fur, its protruding length running with blood.

The assassin hissed and ruthlessly suppressed the debilitating waves of pain that raged through his anatomy like a flash flood.

Maulokk butted his adversary, fracturing the rootless incisors and cutting open the assassin's lips and nose with the sharp spines of his helm.

Continuing in a whirl of coldly calculated anger, simultaneously fighting a second battle against the poison within him, Maulokk rammed a plate mailed knee into groin, lifting the Skaven from his feet. Not allowing even the slightest heartbeat to permit recovery, the Warlock pushed his throbbing frame onward, following his knee with a spiked elbow driven into tough gut, doubling up the assassin and puncturing his flesh. Ripping up and out, Maulokk callously freed the pointed elbow guard, span, and smashed his fist into the side of the lowered jaw. The jarring impact fractured the bones and broke several molars from the violent shutting of the foe's scowling mouth.

The assassin tossed his Weeping blade from the transfixed arm into his free and uninjured hand and hacked out. He was slow from injury, and Maulokk had little trouble in sweeping his forearm up to meet the wrist that was wielding the blade to fend off the assault. The Warlock pulled his knife out of his enemy's limb, twisting it in jerks to cause a paralysing torment, delaying another attack of the venomous dagger.

The assassin shook from the horrendous duress and with a dark hiss he dragged the dagger back to stab for Maulokk. The blade had barely moved before Maulokk's own dagger was crammed into the Clan Eshin killer's chest on a punched thrust.

Only the assassin's extraordinary agility and powers of endurance permitted him to weave aside enough to prevent the blow from becoming a mortal one. Instead of bisecting his heart, the point punched through a rib and sank into his left lung.

The Skaven staggered back away from the blade, clutching the wound with his pierced arm and trying to muster enough strength for a final attack, his breath coming in rattling gasps, blood flecking every exhale. Maulokk stepped back as well, giving the enemy the space he required, using it to call magical energies unto him.

Drawing on Dark power, he wove it about himself and channelled the accumulating reservoir to his outstretched hand. The flesh pulsed with a green luminescence and crackled with welling sickly energy. The assassin fought the anguish rushing through his nerves, his blood dribbling onto the floor as he thought only of his duty to kill Maulokk, his own survival irrelevant to that cause.

Maulokk strode boldly forward, slapped a feeble thrust from the adversary aside and clapped his hand across the assassin's features. The foul light seemed to pour into the Skaven's face and flow along veins and arteries into the rest of his body, the radiance lighting him up from within, spreading malignantly. The assassin squealed and shrieked, his muscles and skin beginning to wither about him, hollowing onto his bones, which also started to displace amidst brittle resonant cracks. His equipment belts fell from him, his tunic and cloak falling away as he shrunk to a size where they simply slipped from him.

The assassin collapsed onto his clothes and possessions, glowing eerily, his body slowly shrivelling, growing smaller and smaller, his cry rising up through octaves until it was lost and his anatomy was rendered no bigger than Maulokk's foot.

The Warlock prodded the steaming husk with his toe, and then picked it up to examine its tiny detail before putting it in a pouch with the other souvenirs he had created through such slayings.

Pulling the throwing star from his flesh, he slowly let transmuting energy flow into his body, annihilating the remaining dregs of the deadly poison that his body had not managed to cope with.

It was a lengthy process, so he opened a pot of Skalm whilst purging his system. The poultice was of his own making, though not his recipe. Produced from a mixture of powdered Warpstone, various herbs, and mutant fungi, the tar-like substance was an expedient healer of trauma, but one whose effects were gruelling indeed. Maulokk smeared a thin line of it onto his wounds with a metal spatula and braced for the blazing pain that immediately lanced along the flesh where the paste lay.

Gritting his teeth, he drew breath in strained rasps, his skin bubbling and warping, seemingly filled with multitudes of insects that pushed against the interior surface, struggling to break free. The rampant mutation slowly subsided as the flesh was regenerated, leaving a dark twisted scar beneath his white fur.

He exhaled deeply, the torment withdrawing. He could have left the wounds to heal naturally, but he wanted to be at full strength come the next phase of his plan. He could not rule out the possibility that more fighting would result from such subterfuge.

He replaced the Skalm lid and put the pot away. Drawing the Weeping blade from the floor, he took up the second one, sheathed them both in their corrosive resistant scabbards and secreted the precious weapons in his nest.

A little word with Grey Seer Tikric was needed before he called Skrack to him, and then there was the Manling - Maximillian.

Chapter twenty four

Hergar transferred to a room at the Hungry Halfling. Now that they had slain a leader of the enemy they would be under constant threat of possible revenge attacks.

The three of them sat within a booth, talking over ales and wine after having slept for much of the day. None had said anything of Dieter's death, for they were all mercenaries, sell swords, hired killers, and as such death was an occupational hazard. They had all travelled and worked with others, had seen friends and foes alike die before their eyes, and they were now hardened emotionally against such tragedy. They all remembered Dieter, what he was, what he did. The Cleric now lived in their memories, and grieving like some grizzling wench would not alter the situation. Perhaps in the years ahead they would toast his memory and talk of him, but for now, other matters concerned them, such as their own survival.

'What now?' Hergar said dourly, dark scabs criss-crossing his scalp, makeshift bandages lying over his self-stitched wounds.

'We enjoy the festival, the enemy is leaderless, we've done it,' Jakob replied confidently, easing back into his seat with a satisfied air about him.

'Wasn't it just a bit easy?' indicated Elldrigar.

'So? They're only rodents, none too smart,' Hergar rebuked sharply.

'I'm still suspicious.'

'And what would you have us do? Crawl around in the sewers again? Oh you'd love that!' asked Hergar sarcastically.

'What of this 'M' person then?'

'He's betrayed his Ratmen and gone back to whatever he does, or if he's a doer of good deeds, he's off doing more of the same, and good luck to him,' replied Hergar, lifting his tankard to toast their anonymous benefactor.

'What if he has taken over from the leader we slew? What if we were set up to help him scale the hierarchy? If he's just got control, he'll want to do something impressive to keep it,' said Elldrigar.

'Well...erm,' Hergar frowned, confused and unable to find any convincing response. 'Ah as if!' he expressed dismissively, waving a hand and looking out over the bar as he pushed such thoughts out of his mind.

'He does have a point, Hergar,' added Jakob.

'No he doesn't,' came an instant gruff rebuttal, the Dwarf keeping his face and his attention diverted, stubbornly refusing to pay attention to the new events unfolding before him.

'Yes, he bloody well does,' insisted Jakob.

'Great, here we go again. So what should we do? Get ourselves into more grief? Why not just throw ourselves from the city walls right now,' he hissed scathingly.

'We wait, enjoy the festival, keep our eyes and ears open,' suggested Jakob.

'I can manage that,' the Slayer readily attested.

'I mean open and unintoxicated, Hergar.'

'Hmmpmph.'

Chapter twenty five

Karikk looked out over the village of Selmigerholz. The defences lay breached, its defenders and citizens were marked by packs of Clanrats who were devouring the still warm flesh. Other Manlings were being impaled, crucified, hung from trees by their own offal, flayed or pressed to death beneath the doors of their own homes, the portal being piled high with stones by grinning Skaven who then lapped at the trickles of gore that drooled from beneath the edges. The air resounded with the wails of the Humans, the noises of soul-torn anguish a comforting melody to the forces of the eternal underworld.

At the same time, sated Stormvermin were viciously goading the Clanrat Skaven-gers with hilt and fist into looting the village. Fewer than half a dozen Manlings had escaped the swarm of Skaven, and they had since fled deep into the forest, well away from the bristle furred hordes.

Glowing fires curled up from the coaches and Inns, horses still tethered and lodgers still within shrieked as flames licked their flesh. The acrid stink of burning meat filled the air.

He had gained a few bruises from leading the assault, but nothing serious. The dents his armour had acquired would be beaten out before the assault on Garssen, which he was looking forward to, his new blood lust raging within him and requiring fulfilling.

Dwelling on how good life was, he swallowed a mouthful of raw organs, feeling the warm wet meat glide lazily down his throat. Wiping a dangling strand of ligament from his chin, he began rallying his troops, and ordered everyone back into the Under-Empire.

Chapter twenty six

Maulokk's two guards lay dead, slain by the assassin's poisoned darts where they stood. Only Maulokk's sorcerous skills had saved him from a similar toxin-induced fate.

The attack had been a surprise, and although there were magical devices that could alert the wearer to an enemy, Maulokk had been taught by his tutors not to rely upon such artefacts. Those who did so, were left defenceless when an assailant remained undetected by the items enchantment, for there also existed sorceries and items to cloak and conceal an enemy from such tools. They were not hard to come by, as such things were in great demand for the easy killing of someone whose reliance upon their mystical warning device left them basically helpless.

The bodies were taken back to his Stormvermin's warrens to be consumed by their fellows and to pass on the strength of the slain unto the living. Two new guards quickly arrived to replace the old, and to re-establish his security.

Maulokk was satisfied with their performance so far, and if they fully acquitted themselves by the end of this campaign, then he would recruit more, and he would breed from this stock until he had secretly created a Warlord Clan of his own, loyal to him unto death and beyond.

Skrack entered and bowed.

'You sent for me Lord?'

'I did. An assassin just made an attempt on my life.'

'Surely not! But who would-'

'You,' Maulokk stated flatly.

Skrack paused, unsure of what to say. Was this a bluff? A guess? Or had Maulokk somehow unearthed the truth? Maulokk continued regardless.

'You knew I had ears in Clan Eshin. Did you think I did not possess the means to buy out contracts on my life?'

'But the assassin-'

'Lord-Warlock Morskittar. He pays well to keep me ignorant when he sends an operative against me.'

'Why?' said Skrack, faking an aghast tone. He knew full well that such actions were often conducted by the powerful, but he was playing for time. In a sorcerous battle he knew he was no match for Maulokk, so he discreetly drew two pieces of refined Warpstone. Consuming the nuggets was a terrible risk, but he was just as dead without them so he had little to lose.

'To keep me alert, and to ensure I do not drop my guard...ever.'

'But Grey Seer Tikric, he -.'

'You mean my trusted ally Grey Seer Tikric? We staged our little confrontation, for it was my intent to have you steered into acting against me,' Maulokk stated blandly.

'But why?' he replied, feigning added astonishment as his claws closed tightly and squeezed the ragged chunks for comfort, the stone seeming to shift against his skin, radiating its holy might into his palm.

'To remove the Warlord without my involvement, and to have good cause to take your flesh for my latest creation.'

'Never!' he shouted, tossing the Warpstone into his mouth and swallowing the nuggets. The shudder of raw unadulterated power coursed through him almost instantaneously, the substance dissolving into pure energy and radiating out through his being, filling every tissue, every cell with throbbing Dark magic. The sheer volume of it was overwhelming and his flesh started to ripple, straining to hold the immense force and remain unaffected. It took a maximum effort to force the curling serpents of power to obey him before they took over his body and warped him into a mindless gibbering abomination. Fighting away the degeneration into Spawn he mastered the well of potency and stepped back, calling forth a spell as he saw Maulokk doing the same.

Black electrical energy crackled about Skrack's arms, filling the chamber with angry pulses of opaque light. With a final cry of effort, a blazing streak of Warp Lightning lanced out, the hundreds of wiggling jagged tongues spitting forth in bleak columns to engulf his enemy.

With a hearty sweep of his arm the blazing lightning was halted by Maulokk and then dissipated, flaring against an unseen shield. The ferocious blast hacked at the defence, the stink of black ozone almost choking them as copious sprays of sizzling midnight sparks spat with each repulsed churning finger of power.

Skrack strove to keep his spell in existence, to outlast Maulokk's dispelling sorcery, but Maulokk also applied extra force to destroy the unleashed energy, and the final arcs of destructive voltage faded without having touched him.

Undaunted, Skrack called forth more power, weaving pestilent magics and channelling the sorcerous plague spell against Maulokk with all the might he could muster, sucking in and draining every morsel of power to make it as virulent as possible.

Maulokk replied by brewing churning malevolent mists of power that curled fondly about him, and even as he shaped the Dark magics, the contagion assailed him, seeking purchase in his flesh.

Throwing up buffeting waves of mental energy, Maulokk countered Skrack's influence and denied the pestilent spell a victim. Without a carrier the sorcerous contagion perished, leaving Skrack open to Maulokk's imminent reprisal.

Maulokk's sorcery whipped out against the Warlock Master. Invisible razor-edged tendrils curled about him, groping to procure a hold, fighting the Skaven's will to resist.

Skrack utilised his final scraps of effort and still found himself lacking. So additionally he took the desperate last course open to him, and called upon the energy in his Warpstone eye, drawing out the power and seeking to protect himself with it. The dark chunk crumbled into myriad hued particles of light, the stone breaking into jagged arcs of energy that jerked out and then dove back into Skrack's features, burrowing into him, bolstering his might until only the empty torn socket remained.

Maulokk's will pounded against and enchanted the deadly magics, crushing Skrack's enfeebled resistance. The Warlock Master squealed pitifully, the encroaching Dark charm coursing through his frame as he felt the alien magics smothering him, stamping in his mind, the alien energies so unlike the power of the Horned Rat. The revelation of what was within him horrified.

'Dark Sorcery! It is not possible,' he cried, as if the impossible would be revoked now that its falsehood had been broadcast.

Shallow cuts slit across his skin, crossing each other in an intricate pattern of rapid slashes that filled him with intense agony. His blood ran in torrents down his fur, bursts of spray issued as veins were cut. Skrack collapsed in shudders, tendons being severed and causing his body to involuntarily go limp, twitching as he endured the ghastly process of living dissection.

'It is your flesh I seek, not your traitorous blood, Skrack,' his tormentor gloated with wicked glee.

Skrack slumped onto his side, splashing into the wide pool of his warm lifeblood. Stretching his mouth wide to cry out, his lips fell away in raw tatters, his gums opening under the manic blizzard of incisions as his teeth fell loosely from the shredded flesh. The ribboned tongue in his crimson filled mouth lolled loosely, and his sliced eyelid gave way to cuts upon the soft orb beneath, fully blinding the one eyed Warlock. With a quivering rasping exhale, the last of his blood dribbled out, and Skrack's life left him.

Maulokk took the loose-limbed incarnadine corpse and dragged it into his workshop, where he pulled out the last unused particles of the Warpstone 'eye' and locked it in the lead casket holding his supply of the holy substance. After placing the concealing canvas back upon the work and wrapping the body in cloth, he returned to the main chamber.

With more pressing matters than his creation, Maulokk continued with the Manling papers, creating bogus files and details to forge a new plot. While he worked, a Stormvermin entered and bowed.

'Lord. Grey Seer Tikric is here to see you.'

'Show him in,' he declared absently, concentrating on a particularly annoying signature.

The Grey Seer strode proudly in and immediately noticed the pool of red spread across the floor, in addition to the lingering scents of the sorcerous conflict.

'I assume the plan worked,' he surmised.

'Perfectly,' Maulokk replied, and changed the subject to one of more relevance. 'What did you discover?'

'The next shipment will be passing from Hell Pit in two moons. They will definitely be using the Great Tunnel of Verminscratch.'

'Any other news?'

'Only that there was a major tunnel collapse in the West. Casualties were high.'

The area was home to a great portion of the Clan Pestilens force, so Maulokk chose to test a theory.

'Were any Plague Monks slain?'

'No. They were all absent, a meeting of some kind my sources say.'

This Grey Seer Bilquik is good, Maulokk decided. He had chosen a time when Clan Pestilens were away from their usual residence to allay suspicion from himself. The Plague Monks would say that their meeting was a religious ceremony, and other than give a fictitious name to it, they would give no other details. Few outside of the foetid Clan knew the intricacies or even premise of their foul worship, so there was no means to verify if the ceremony were a true one, or a fabrication the sole purpose of which was to remove their Monks from the disaster area.

My enemies materialise, thought Maulokk with excitement, relishing the danger and the intense challenge it presented.

'Tell Bilquik that I am currently taking progress reports, and have him come here. That should cover your reason for being in my presence,' suggested Maulokk.

'Agreed,' the Grey Seer concurred and gave a curt bow. Maulokk responded in kind as his ally withdrew and then returned to his work without delay.

Quickly finishing the last of the parchments, Maulokk rolled up the sheets and placed them in a sealed cylinder. He arose and made haste to the area where the Warprockets were being engineered. Kerick'k and Skrabic were both engaged in reassembling a stripped down and reworked rocket. They turned and bowed upon noticing his entry, the deepness betraying their knowledge of Skrack's death, but not Maulokk's motives for it.

'I have just had some news of a tunnel collapse. Were you aware that no Clan Pestilens Monks were caught in it?' he said, feigning anger.

'No Lord,' both replied in defensive unison.

'You suspect them of sabotage?' Kerick'k asked, obviously seeking information to carry to his Plague Monk paymasters.

'That remains to be seen. Kerick'k, go to the Plaguemaster, I wish to see him in my warren as soon as possible.'

'Yes Lord,' the Warlock replied, putting his slender blade upon his back and picking up a vial of badly needed tcheeka on the way out, the twitch in his snout testifying that his wounds were acting up again.

Kerick'k's employ by Clan Pestilens would have the Plaguemaster suspecting that Maulokk blamed him for the 'accident', which was his intention.

Once he was gone, Maulokk looked out into the passage to ensure that Kerick'k had indeed departed before turning to Skrabic.

'I have another vital mission for you Skrabic. It involves the Rat Ogre problem.'

'Lord, it was not my fault, I-' the Warlock began in sudden panicked defence.

'Do not concern yourself with such matters, for forces are at work beyond the control of either of us. But I will have the situation rectified, and several other loose ends severed in the process, with your aid,' grinned Maulokk.

'What do you wish me to do?' he wondered.

'You are to accompany Grey Seer Bilquik on a journey. He will believe you are to meet extra Clanrats, but you will meet a consignment of Rat Ogres from Hell Pit, bound for the Grey Seers of Zhufbar. I want you to ensure that the Grey Seer is slain, using *this* dagger.'

He produced Skrack's blade and handed it to the Warlock Champion along with a wide topped vial and a parchment scroll. Maulokk knew that the weapon was enchanted to visit grievous trauma upon Skaven and could cut a Clanrat in half with a single slash.

'Place the blade venom upon the weapon within one hour of its intended usage. When the Clan Moulder shipment appears, stab him from the front and do not withdraw the blade. Let no Packmasters escape alive. Ensure you utilise the spell after putting the hand of a Packmaster to the dagger, and then release the spell upon his body. Leave no trace of the scroll's residue, for it will crumble once used. Swap my twenty Rat Ogres for theirs and return with haste.'

'What of the Packmasters here?'

'I shall have them kept busy, they will not notice anything until they see that their Rat Ogres have become somewhat better specimens during their absence.'

The reject Rat Ogres would be dead from starvation, or would be stolen by a wandering Clan soon after being abandoned. The former would ensure that decomposition concealed that they were Maulokk's rejects, the later would result in their discreet disposal once it became apparent that the acquisitions were the property of the Grey Seers. So rather than risk getting the blame for the attack, the thieves would opt to destroy the evidence.

The Grey Seer had to have cast the spell that slew his Packmaster murderer. The only persons absent from Middenheim at the time would be Grey Seers and those who did not know the spell - namely Skrabic. All the evidence would point to a rogue Grey Seer, and that in itself would warrant a cover up, for such things were virtually unheard of, and could only harm the priesthood's reputation as fanatical devotees to the will of the Horned Rat.

The Grey Seers who were responsible for bribing Clan Moulder (the Seerlord would certainly be operating through blameable agents) could not use their knowledge of Maulokk's motive for such a theft lest they reveal their own involvement. Such sabotage would lessen the impact of any other orchestrated failures, where as this was what the culprit precisely wished to avoid.

'You leave tonight, prepare yourself,' he ordered, and departed to receive his next two 'guests' back in his warren.

The Plaguemaster was the first to arrive, his wheezing breath and the chiming of the bells on his staff preceding his announcement by Maulokk's guards. Leaning heavily upon his crooked pole, the Clan Pestilens leader limped in.

'You wished to see me, Commander Maulokk,' he croaked.

'Yes I did,' the Warlock confirmed, and did not speak further, prompting further the rattling breathed Plaguemaster into speaking out and defending his Clan's innocence, which he did with strained severity after an uncomfortable pause.

'We had nothing to do with the western tunnel collapse. It was coincidence, or an act of sabotage intended to implicate us.'

'I know that. The true felon is known to me and will be dealt with,' he answered casually.

'Then why am I here?' he questioned weakly, unmoved by his sudden acquittal.

'What contagions do you have here?'

'A comprehensive encyclopaedia of disease and plague, Commander Maulokk, for what little use it is. You seem to avoid using our wares, you want all the credit, you-'

'If you have quite finished. I asked because I wish you to use your precious viruses and begin widespread introduction of your most virulent infections. Nothing too exotic, nothing that would arouse too much suspicion or concern. If you need carriers, supply Clan Eshin with infected little brethren. They will deploy them for you,' interrupted Maulokk.

'They have a Rat King to control them?' hissed the mouldering Skaven, leaning more heavily upon his support.

'Of course,' came Maulokk's cheery reply.

Festrik paused, his plans were in danger with a Rat King present and under Maulokk's influence. Had the Warlock deliberately revealed this to dissuade attack? How much of his own plots had this grand spy already noticed?

Festrik had actually seen a Rat King once, when he was part of a force that had employed Clan Eshin to use such a creature to introduce a new plague strain into a Tilean town. The strange Clan Eshin gestalt entity appeared to be thirteen albino little brethren, their tails joined into a single intricate knot. The serene creature was like no Rat King found in nature, this was a sorcerous creation that could master and manipulate every member of its species within a huge radius and could communicate with its Clan Eshin masters. Anything a little brethren saw, the Rat King saw, and thus Clan Eshin saw, passing on their intelligence to whoever had commissioned them. Festrik would have to be exceedingly cautious from now on.

'Why this sudden change of heart, Commander?' he enquired warily.

'This has been my plan from the beginning. The Manling's festival begins this night, the feasting and revelry will provide excellent cover for you. The diseases you introduce must be non-contagious or must have fully dissipated before the week is up, I want no epidemic, lest you scare away the populous and risk infecting our own forces. Target temples, Inns and bars,' he decreed.

'We invade? In a week?' he croaked, glossing over and concealing his elation with a racking cough that caused a line of phlegm-tainted drool to fall from his lower jaw.

'I will reveal the details nearer the time. May the Horned Rat guide your creations, Plaguemaster,' Maulokk said with gravity.

'And may He watch over your actions, Commander Maulokk,' gurgled the Plaguemaster and hobbled unsteadily out, leaving Maulokk to his thoughts.

He had chosen to allow Clan Pestilens a hand in his work to placate them. He wanted no future resentment added to that caused by their failure to have him bungle his appointment. All his machinations were running steadily; there was no stopping him now.

Chapter twenty seven

Plaguemaster Festrik exited the warren and looked briefly to Maulokk's alert and deadly Stormvermin. They glanced to him suspiciously, their bodies tensed and ready after the slaying of their comrades. Two of their number had lapsed in their duty, the others were now rabid with paranoia. Angered at the lack of fear they showed him, he ambled back for his own warren, taking a little comfort in the terrified faces of the Clanrats that ducked out of his path.

His swollen red-rimmed and blood-shot eyes spied Grey Seer Bilquik marching in his direction, using the barbed spear he carried as a walking staff, swinging it with every stride.

Festrik turned one of his rings. There was a faint click and a tiny black spine flipped from its green stone. A moment before they passed each other he tottered slightly and bumped into the Grey Seer. The tiny barb of the ring pierced Bilquik's hide undetected.

'Apologies Grey Seer, are you alright?' he offered dully.

'I will live,' he replied with curbed indignation, straightening his robes and absently rubbing the tiny pin prick puncture.

No you won't, Festrik mused mentally as limped away, his mind full of jubilant bile.

The tiny tip had borne a potent and virulent plague strain, which was now within the pierced Skaven. The Grey Seer had one week to take the vaccine, during

which time the virus would incubate unseen and unfelt. Once the vital week had elapsed, he would begin to die a languid, painful death, his body slowly devoured by the virus. It would take at least a month of terrible agony before he finally perished, and Festrik was eager to savour every moment of the ordeal. Such was the penalty for crossing Clan Pestilens.

Grey Seer Bilquik arrived. No doubt only attending after concocting reams of excuses to refute any accusation. He stood calmly before Maulokk with the audacious poise of a Skaven who could not be punished for his crimes. Maulokk ignored all pleasantries and cut to the heart of the matter.

'I have a new mission for you Grey Seer Bilquik,' he began sharply. 'I am sending one of my lieutenants with a small armed escort to meet and show back a contingent of reinforcements, or perhaps they should be termed replacements what with the recent 'accident'. I want you to go with them.'

He gave no reasons, for he wanted Bilquik to assume he was being sent away either to cause no more mischief, or to sabotage a mission where he had no one else to blame and thus give Maulokk reason to dispose of him.

'They leave this night, be with them,' he snapped.

The Grey Seer scowled at the abruptness, but turned without word and stormed out, leaving Maulokk to continue with work on his project while awaiting the Manling.

Chapter twenty eight

Middenheim's streets were crowded and bustling with excitement. Street entertainers were abroad in force and the Great Park was a rolling sea of citizens and visitors. At the heart, atop a large stage stood a well dressed man, whom they guessed was probably a local dignitary of some sort. The midnight hour struck, all went suddenly silent, and Hergar, Elldrigar and Jakob watched him issue the traditional speech.

'This night, in centuries past, Artur, chief of the Teutogens, scaled the Fauschlag before Sigmar's coming and saw this place, this gem upon the forest. He did turn to his people, who were tired and drained by their long trek and said; 'Long has been our wandering and long our suffering. This place will be our home...so leeeet's PARTY!'

A great booming cheer went up, shrill wooden whistles screamed, bands struck up raucous choruses, people applauded and stamped their feet, cast streamers into the air, the beginning of the Carnival resonating the whole city with its initial barrage of celebratory sound.

Inexorably the festivities drew the battle-fatigued trio into the fervour of the manic city-wide revelry. Ale, wine and spirits flowed without end and merry songs were sung. The usual dour temperaments faded from the vastly bloated population of the city and all were friendly and every care was temporarily forgotten.

Hergar and Jakob drank arduously, funding their quaffing with drunken arm wrestles, and on the generosity prompted by their tales of courage and warfare. Finally, they staggered back to their Inn and passed out, leaving the prostitute Jakob had picked up to cut his purse and depart with it as compensation for the squandering of her time.

Elldrigar had sought more refined company during the night, proceeding to the Elven establishment 'The Signing Moon' where he talked with his own kind and reminisced about life in the deep wilderness realms of the Wood Elves. Snatching a few hours civilised company away from the midst of the brutish Humans, he strode back to the Inn with considerably better spirits.

Chapter twenty nine

Jakob was shaken awake in his bed. As he sluggishly dragged himself out of sleep, he found that his head throbbed terribly and his stomach felt tender and constricted. The world swam and span about him, and he fought the urge to instantly vomit as he fought to open his leaden eyes. The image of Elldrigar moved from a blur into more distinct levels of focus. Jakob spoke softly to protect his aching brain.

'What?' he mumbled, his mouth feeling as dry as an Arabian sand dune.

Elldrigar held up a piece of paper before him, but despite his best efforts and much squinting the squiggly writing refused to become more legible.

'Another note from 'M'. It arrived last night,' Elldrigar declared.

Jakob rolled over and buried his face in his pillow with a drawn groan. He felt terrible. Damn Middenheim, he would try and help out the city some other time. Let it save itself, that's what its populous' taxes paid Witch hunters and bounties for.

'Go away,' he murmured with exasperation.

'Listen to this,' Elldrigar began, undaunted by the Human's wretched condition.

'Skaven temple. 3 Westgarten Weg, Ulricsmund District - M.'

'So what!' he moaned.

'So what? So let's get moving. The Skaven's base is known to us. We'll get all sorts of answers about them there.'

'It'll be there tomorrow,' muttered Jakob and pulled the sheets higher up to hide Elldrigar from his wavering sight.

'Typical Human lout, cannot comprehend restraint, only excess,' Elldrigar stated in disgust and got up. 'I'll leave the note here in case you feel up to it later. I shall go now and stake out the place on my own, alone, with no assistance,' he complained.

Jakob absently mumbled his assent. Elldrigar leaned close to the covers hiding Jakob's ear and yelled.

'SEE YOU LATER THEN!'

Jakob winced and cringed, his brain reverberating with the noise. Despite some cringing whines of discomfort and nausea, nothing else emerged from the bed.

'Typical,' Elldrigar spat, and looked for Jakob's purse for funds to assist him in his lone task. It was not to be found.

'Where's your purse, Jakob?'

He clawed absently where the coin filled bag should have been, only to find that severed drawstrings were all that remained.

'Ah no. The slut ripped me off. BITCH!' he cursed, and collapsed back down, softly burbling profanities into his pillow.

Elldrigar sighed and walked out, leaving him to his hangover.

The streets were already full, the smell of cooking pies and sweetmeats mingled with the aroma of incense, perfumes and potent alcoholic beverages that overwhelmed the pungent stink of the city and its refuse.

He had wanted to see some of the Carnival's attractions - the Elven Gymnasts, the Archery tourney or the Matinee of bards and poets. The city actually had some culture available, but instead he had to observe a suspect house because of his companion's lack of subtlety.

At times he regretted having thrown his lot in with them, but bounty hunting had lost its appeal when he discovered the hard way that those he tracked were not always guilty.

He had been enlightened whilst employing his skills to pursue the reward on Jakob's head. After confronting his prey, he was sufficiently convinced that the bounty was false. Despite all else Elldrigar still believed in justice, and with Jakob's help he had ensured that the corrupt official was himself the subject of an Imperial warrant. The official had been bribed by a vindictive Baron to indict Jakob following a duel Jakob had won for his employer against the Baron's own champion.

Elldrigar personally pursued him and took the reward, but was unable to touch

the influential noble. In the Human lands, justice and money were inseparable, a persons amount of one determining the quantity and quality they received of the other.

Would he have joined Jakob if he had known that a Dwarf Slayer was part of the mercenary band? Probably not, but by the time Hergar had rejoined his Human companion after an excursion into Norsca, the pair had been working well for nearly a year, and had become firm friends.

It did not matter about the intervention or aid of his comrades, he would get the vermin scum, even if he had to face them alone.

He purchased a flute from a travelling vendor and set up opposite the house as an entertainer. It was a fairly large middle class building, and was completely inconspicuous amidst its surroundings. The windows were grimy and restricted all vision within, so Elldrigar was left with the door as his only place to witness activity. The building backed directly onto another dwelling so the front door was the only portal in or out, making his lone surveillance considerably easier.

His playing was average by Elven standards, but was still superior to the performances of the Human buskers. The songs he had learned as a child in Athel Loren soon had a steady stream of coins tumbling into his hat. He did not play his favourites, the ones he had played to his wife and child, for they brought back too many bitter memories.

Chapter thirty

On the second day of the Carnival, Grey Seer Skarbitik returned from the wilderness. Maulokk took leave of his creation to attend the arrival.

The forces that had survived the Grey Seer's 'blunders' were weak and overburdened with largely useless and irrelevant pillage. Fortunately, the results of Karikk's eastern conquests were yielding much more loot, and he was amply compensating for the Grey Seer's treacherous ineptness.

Skarbitik approached him with false solemn gladness, a facade that Maulokk had to avoid sneering at in contempt as an insult to his intellect.

'I am glad to be back Commander Maulokk. The Manlings have been relentlessly hunting us in force, they are more alert than we thought.'

If Maulokk had not sent Karikk marauding, the Manling troops who were out hunting Skarbitik would now have returned to the city above just before the invasion occurred. Instead they would now be sent to deal with Karikk's reaving, so he had at least dealt with one problem the Grey Seer had spawned.

'As I see,' Maulokk said, coldly looking over the exhausted and depleted Skaven Clanrats.

'Twice we were ambushed, it seemed that the Manlings had set traps everywhere. It was only by the will of the Horned Rat that I managed to detect the number I did, else none of us would have returned alive, it was this that forced us to undertake our return in daylight,' he offered as cause for his terrible tactics and feeble results.

Maulokk remained unmoved, he had taken the necessary steps to clean up after Skarbitik. The Grey Seer was unaware that the deliberate tracks he had left leading to Middenheim so as to indicate an attack brewing beneath the city, had been obliterated by Clan Eshin and the controlled little brethren. The tracks now pointed east, to Karikk, suggesting a swelling of the forces there, and perhaps an attack on some large target, like the town Karikk was at this very moment avoiding.

'It is fortunate that you survived and made it back. I would have you take over the tunnel work from Grey Seer Bilquik. He has gone off on some personal errand, and I need someone to take charge of the excavations in the west,' stated Maulokk.

'I shall begin immediately,' the Grey Seer vowed, and gave an abrupt bow before he departed.

I have no doubt that you will, brooded Maulokk privately.

Chapter thirty one

Plaguemaster Festrik had to go to Cikcrit. The drugs had to be administered personally to ensure that they worked as planned. But to contact the Stormvermin would give rise to the possibility of him being seen by one of the multitudes of little brethren, and the Rat King might pass on such suspicious information to its Clan Eshin owners and thus onto Maulokk, revealing Festrik's hand in the plot. He pondered giving infectious carriers to the Clan Eshin operatives, hopefully to infect and kill the group and the Rat King, but such a blatant assault would spark a Clan Eshin war of vendetta against his own Clan. Such a feud would cost vast fortunes in recompense, else result in a multitude of vindictive assassinations.

Clan Pestilens had been humbled once already by the shadow hand of Clan Eshin, they would not lightly risk such grand humiliation again.

Placing the vials and bleeding thorns in a bag, he left the warren, scanning intently for signs of little brethren watching him instead of behaving naturally. Satisfying himself that he was unobserved, he cautiously made for the rendezvous with Cikcrit, keeping his diseased senses piqued and paranoid.

Chapter thirty two

Discreetly locating the tunnel that ran to the surface, Maulokk turned and dismissed his guards, giving the orders to behave as if he were resident in his warren and seeing no one under any circumstances.

Maulokk immediately began the long march upwards, while all the time keeping alert in case of ambush, recalling the old proverb - 'a complacent Skaven is a dead Skaven.'

The thin low passage ran up through the vast mountain, allowing him to avoid the many layers of deadly tunnels. It eventually brought him to the surface, emerging through a loose floor stone into the interior of an ancient Manling crypt, situated deep in the city's graveyard.

Maulokk pushed the weighty slab aside and hauled himself up into the musty smelling interior. After replacing the stone he sought the door.

The fat bolts had been installed by the Skaven, ensuring that the crypt still appeared to be sealed. They were a secondary consideration because the Skaven had ensured that the crypt they used held a noble family who had perished of plague. Their wealth and their affliction would further dissuade the opening of the family vault.

Taking hold of the bolts, Maulokk found that they had rusted a little and required several sharp slaps before they would slide back, allowing him to slightly open the heavy door and peer out into the moonlit Necropolis.

The early night was heavy with the sounds of gaiety, providing excellent cover for his activities. Wrapping his cloak about himself, he scampered forward into the maze of tightly meshed graves and pointless monuments of vanity. Keeping low and between the tiny paths that separated the small stone buildings, he kept his ears open and his hand near his sword at all times.

As he travelled Maulokk was bemused at the sheer volume of eligible food the foolish Manlings had simply buried and left to rot, had they no sense at all?

Nearing the fence it became clear that the streets were far too choked with people to allow unseen passage. He retreated back into the interior and scaled a tall Morr's Angel statue, using the vantage point to locate his destination.

Clinging to the marble depiction, nestled between its broad feathered wings, the city breeze ruffled his ragged robes as he scanned across the scene. He could just about

see the house on Morr's Weg, and summarily began calling a spell into existence.

The power coursed through his flesh and took form, and with a triumphant squeak he leapt into the air, dematerialising amidst a rolling ball of acrid sulphurous smoke and coalescing upon the peak of the house's tiled roof.

Aware of the abundance of light, he crouched low and moved quickly onto the darker slope that faced away from the main street. The backstreet below was poorly lit and thankfully bore very few people. It appeared that the attractions of the Carnival were all placed on the main roads, drawing people out of the winding alleys and paths that curled behind the homes.

While waiting for a suitably sizeable gap to permit an unobserved descent, Maulokk found that the vast open space spread above and about him was slightly disconcerting, a sense of mild agoraphobia brought about from his largely subterranean upbringing. Vexed by this niggling personal weakness, he ruthlessly quashed it.

The street cleared briefly and he dropped down from the roof lip onto the cobblestones below, landing in a tight squat, his eyes flicking to and fro to search for sign that he had been spotted.

Ducking back into the deeper shadows of the back doorway there was a grumble as he disturbed a mound which he had at first assumed was refuse.

'Whassama wid ya, caanguy gerra liddle sleep rowneer?' mumbled a slurred and weak voice.

A wild and hairy face emerged from the rags and tattered blankets, pushing through the filthy curtain of cloth that hid it from view and elements alike. With a swift spin Maulokk clamped his clawed hands to the Manling's throat and throttled the enfeebled drunk. Gasping fruitlessly for air, he writhed desperately in a bid to escape the choking grip, but his movement gradually became more lax. Foam dribbled from his lolling tongue, his bulging eyes glazed over, his pulse stalled and shuddered to a halt, and his body went limp. Maulokk tossed a blanket over the face and continued to wait, absently preening his fur as he slotted tightly in beside the dead vagrant.

Drunken Human scum continually tottered past, blissfully ignorant of the fate that would be visited upon them come the Carnival's end. It would indeed be an end, an end for many.

Where is the accursed Manling? he wondered.

The night wore steadily on and there was still no sign of the target. As he sat and studied the life of the city, he found it tempting to rush forth and tear open the soft pink skin, gorge on the beating meat within, crack the skull like an egg to chew on the spongy organ inside. But he was Clan Skryre and the Black Hunger was his servant, and most definitely not his master. Let the Warlord Clans be ruled by it, the frenzy of blood lust served well on the field of battle. It was a potent aid to savagery and a starving unit would fight to the death to try and feed.

Also, bearing witness to their fellows and fallen being dragged into the Skaven ranks, torn apart and guzzled by shrieking Clanrats served to psychologically terrify their opponents, giving the Children of the Horned Rat a further edge. Though it was one reduced by the immense cover up that tried to keep their very existence secret from the Manling population.

Watching the crowds strut and amble, Maulokk studied them with a scientific curiosity. He had never before seen Humans in the centres of their natural habitats. He had seen them as slaves, he had attacked their smaller settlements, but never had he witnessed the full hustle and bustle of a Manling city. The densely packed streets, the smell of tightly pressed bodies, the squalor and over crowding of Middenheim, it had almost Skaven qualities to it.

Maulokk spied a powerfully built Human, strolling down the street with an air of authority that bordered on ownership. It had to be him. The Manling wore elaborate clothing with strange decorations and bright clean colours. A two handed sword lay

scabbarded upon his back, and from the lumpy movement beneath his jerkin it was clear he wore an undershirt of chainmail.

So this is Bruno Keisler, threat and benefit. This is the Watch Captain who has kept us at bay in Middenheim, mused Maulokk as he perused the mannerisms of the Manling.

The Manling had been a part of the forces that had finally driven the Skaven host from the city of Nuln. The knowledge he had gained about them had allowed him to prevent numerous other Skaven plots, and he was now a constant thorn in the side of the Horned Rat.

Despite the occasional drawback, overall it suited the Skaven scheme of things to have the Manlings disbelieve in them. Those who had seen the Skaven generally chose to 'forget' what they had observed. The threat beneath their lands remained deliberately ignored, and they were often passed off as a small sub-species of Beastmen, and not the immense race they were.

While the Chaos Cults strove to increase the profile of Chaos, the Skaven's Manling following and their agents continually fought to ensure that the veil of secrecy, ignorance and superstition concerning their masters was kept firmly in place and continually enforced.

When the Manling was passing him, Maulokk shifted out behind, grabbed his neck at the collar with one hand and yanked him into the doorway. Maulokk held tightly and placed his dagger to the Manling's carotid, causing him to instantly remain motionless lest he open his own throat with any struggling. Maulokk could smell liquor on the Manling's breath, inebriation having left his senses dangerously affected.

'What the...I'm a Watch Captain, I'll have your head for this!' he hissed.

Maulokk tightened his grip and pressed the point closer to silence him. The Warlock began calling up a minor spell that Ikit Claw had stolen from the hedge Wizards of the Empire and passed onto him. Drawing power from within himself, he felt his throat tingle with the effects and when he spoke, it was in pure Imperial with a soft Middenheim accent.

'My name is Klaus. I am a Witch hunter in the service of almighty Sigmar. That my friend is all you need to know. I have uncovered a Skaven plot, and you are the only one who would act on such a threat, for you and I both know that these 'faery tales' exist. They have a powerful Grey Seer at their head. He and a small escort will be moving along the main sewer running the western length of Great Park in about six hours times. They plan for an attack, of which I know little except that it will come on the last night of the Carnival. However, the Grey Seer knows the full invasion plan,' he quickly revealed and pulled the knife away before slamming a gauntleted fist into the back of the Manlings neck, pulling the blow slightly so as not to break the vertebra.

The Watch Captain collapsed into a stunned heap. Maulokk hastily focused his magics and visualised being within the cool dark crypt inside the graveyard. He made certain to recall every detail, every crack and spot of mould, lest the spell deviate and deposit him in a wall or some equally fatal or incapacitating solid object. The spell churned and enveloped him in a yellow sulphurous smog that dissolved his form and reassembled it in the desired place.

Throwing the bolts on the crypt's exterior door, he entered the tunnel, replaced the slab, and at a quick pace returned into the depths.

Chapter thirty three

Jakob handed the merchant his steaming pie and accepted the payment. Halrida's meat pies sold exceptionally well, and allowed him to watch the house without arousing suspicion. After splitting the profits with the Halfling, he still came away with a tidy sum, making the stake out profitable as well.

The house had been subjected to the odd comings and goings, but recently more people than usual were visiting the abode, and in groups of increasing size. Something of consequence was definitely transpiring within.

Elldrigar spotted Jakob, and after pulling his flute out, traversed the crowds to arrive at his side. He had just attended a refreshing performance by the Elven Lightsingers at the Royal gardens, and although reluctant, he was ready to take over from Jakob for the next six hours.

'Anything new?' he asked.

'Its getting busy in there. I think we had best go in soon,' replied Jakob, checking over his merchandise and reviewing the house from under his brow.

'Tonight then?' suggested Elldrigar, dropping his hat to the floor and wriggling his fingers to loosen up the joints and muscles.

'I think so. I had best go and get Hergar. Keep an eye on the place until we get back. Is there anything you want picked up?'

'My sword, bow and quiver, and could you put these in my room,' he said, handing over the programme and few other trinkets he had acquired during his exploration of the festival.

'See you soon,' Jakob promised, and headed into the thick stream of people as Elldrigar put the instrument to his lips and began to perform a merry melody. With his eyes squinting to give the appearance that he was absorbed in his music, he watched the house with new vigour.

Chapter thirty four

Grey Seer Skarbitik stood upon a ledge overlooking the scene of toil. The Clanrats were busy clearing away the last of the rubble and reinforcing the ceiling with sturdy braces. Some of the rocks were splashed with dry blood from those crushed beneath. What little remains that had been uncovered were quickly devoured by the hungry workers, an unexpected treat for those assigned to clearing up after the collapse.

The Grey Seer was wondering how to continue hampering Maulokk. He had ensured that the Manlings learned of the raids, and steered his troops into the patrols that were sent out after them. Now he was stuck here. Bilquik had been foolish in causing the collapse, it was too suspicious. He felt sure Maulokk was not wise to his own plans, merely angry at his failure.

If he could find a way to warn the Manlings of the invasion then they would greatly impede it, but until he knew where the assault would commence - east or west - it remained a purely theoretical plan.

Goading the Clanrats into activity, he noticed Maulokk heading towards him, flanked by his accursed Stormvermin. Wondering as to what the Warlock-Engineer Lord wanted Skarbitik jumped down and bowed slightly at Maulokk's approach. It was a chafing act of abasement, that he, a Grey Seer, the chosen of the Horned Rat be placed beneath this sorcerous...tinkerer.

'I have a task for you, Grey Seer Skarbitik,' the Warlock announced.

'What does it concern,' he replied with true eagerness, glad of the opportunity to ruin a new plan of the Clan Skryre fool.

'Take to the north of the Great Park sewers. Follow the eastern route southwards. A Manling Cultist will meet you somewhere en route. Tell him that 'there has been a change of plans. We will attack in the west and he is to lure all city guards from that area, thereby allowing us time to ascend in force'. He knows the plan already, you need only deliver my message.'

The Grey Seer briefly wondered as to the reasoning behind this alteration, but with the tunnel collapse in the east, the newly created backup tunnels would need to be used, hence the change to the west. Other doubts remained however, and he voiced

his most pressing one.

'Why me, Commander?'

'A Grey Seer will have the fool Manling quaking with fear of the consequences of failure, and I need him to succeed,' stressed Maulokk.

'I shall leave immediately.'

'Good,' stated Maulokk, turning and striding away as Skarbitik concealed his exultation.

You stupid imbecile, he pondered. I will have your Manling act in the west, and I will have every City Guard, Watchman, Militia, Knight, Soldier, Cleric, Wizard and Manling who can hold a weapon there also, and when your attack crumbles into a slaughter of Skaven I will take great pride in taking you personally to be condemned by your own father and the other Lords of Decay at Skavenblight. Seerlord Kritislik will reward me well for crushing you, Maulokk, and I hope I am permitted the honour of cutting your upstart head from your carcass.

With triumph in his heart, the Grey Seer called six Stormvermin to his side, gathered twelve Clanrats as extra escort and headed for the sewer bound tunnel.

Chapter thirty five

Captain Keisler quickly entered the briefing room. Time was running out. Five sergeants snapped to attention and four robed wizards stood apathetically to one side. The Guild had committed support to the policing of the city many decades ago, sending its membership to accompany occasional internal patrols and provide magical aid in more specialised incidents, such as hostage situations, sieges, and the ambush now being planned.

He opened the roll of parchment under his arm and spread it across the table, setting tankards on the corners to hold it open.

The map of the sewer system had been gained with difficulty from the Kommission of Public Works. The red tape-obsessed clerks had been most reluctant to give up a map of the Great Park area without a plethora of fully filled in forms.

Keisler had a possible Skaven invasion brewing and he had no time for asinine irksome bureaucracy. After several dead end referrals to other offices, he had finally lost his patience. His anger flared, and he had been forced to resort to cracking heads to get what he wanted. The remaining (conscious) pedantic clerks had quickly relinquished the data amidst promises to complain most vehemently to his superiors.

Keisler had faced Ratmen before. He knew they were within the Fauschlag, but had hoped it was only a small force, one to monitor and not act. It sickened him the way the Empire and most of the Old World purposefully blinded itself to the Skaven threat, but he could understand why, and even sympathise with such gross negligence. If the populous knew the numbers involved, and the sheer power of the creatures, then panic and fear would cause more harm than the Skaven ever did. The foul race rarely acted, but when they did, they left little in their passage. It seemed more productive to channel resources into the very real and obvious threat of Chaos, while in the dark the Skaven's strength grew, and they waited, for what? He had no idea, but he dreaded it anyway, whatever it was.

The 'Witch Hunter' could have been an agent for a more sinister force, but there were other indications that the Skaven were up to something. Minor outbreaks of disease that were impossible to determine the extent of while the Carnival raged. The product of ill hygiene? Or perhaps an evil outrider preceding the Ratmen? There had been raids to east, north and south. Skaven had been seen, but had been customarily labelled as 'rodent Beastmen'.

By calling in a few favours he had managed to convince the Grandmaster of the Knights of the White Wolf to mount some 'Cleansing Crusades' in the local forests.

Several times the Knights had run into Skaven forces, and taken by surprise, the Ratmen were annihilated. The Skaven had vanished as quickly as they had come, the raids coming to an abrupt halt. That is until a few days ago, when villages were found devastated, the scene of horror within and the pitifully few survivors leaving no doubt as to the culprits.

The Ratmen seemed to be heading for the town of Bergsburg, and the Grandmaster had quickly decided that his Order would sally forth and destroy the threat once and for all. Keisler had carried his reservations in silence when the Knights galloped out of Middenheim, to ride ahead of the Skaven passage and lay in wait at the settlement.

The Grandmaster's duty was clear, he was a Knight of Ulric and as such was an enemy of all that bore the mark of Chaos. Keisler's duty was less straight forward, and often conflicted with the wishes of politicians and nobility, because effectively policing and protecting a city was no cheap matter, and if there was one thing such types treasured above everything else it was money. Sometimes he yearned to hark back to his old Watchmen days, where he simply patrolled and arrested, solving crimes and following leads. It seemed so much simpler than all the responsibility of his current role. Everyone wanted a crime free and safe city, but no one wanted to pay for it. It was exasperating.

'I have reason to believe that a Beastman Warband will shortly be following this route,' he certified, tracing the path his hopefully benign informer had revealed.

'They will be meeting Cultists of their foul Chaos deity to plot with, but they are in for a shock, for we shall be awaiting their arrival in force. Sergeant Fleischer and sergeant Ungluck, you will await here,' he commanded, pointing into a side tunnel near the north of the main sewer where the enemy were expected.

'Sergeants Ekelhaft, Fronen and Wucht will wait here,' he ordered and indicated another tunnel, this one further along.

'When the enemy pass, you attack from the rear. Once the other unit hear the sounds of battle, they are to immediately assault from the other direction.'

'What do you want of us?' a middle aged Wizard enquired.

'Amongst them will be a grey-robed sorcerer. He must be taken alive. I cannot stress how vital it is that we capture him for questioning. He'll know all of their plans, the lairs of other Beastmen, the Cultists everything. Use your sorcery to counter his own and above all, do not kill him.'

Keisler would have preferred to have Wizards from the Colleges of Magic with him, for their potent sorceries would make short work of the Skaven scum. But the Middenheim Guild was one of Human magic, developed from shamanic roots, not taught by the High Elves of Ulthuan. Consequently it was not as powerful nor deadly. From his rudimentary understanding he knew that the power of the Independent Wizards stemmed from some inner well of energy, making it weaker than College sorcery which drew directly on the vast power stored in the Winds of Magic. Independent Wizards were peaceful academics (unlike their battle-trained College cousins) making them highly unwilling to become embroiled in warfare, and unreliable and ineffective if they did. It was this inefficiency during the last Chaos incursion that had precipitated the Elves into creating the Colleges in the first place.

'Are there any questions?...No? Good. We leave immediately. Sergeants, call your patrols to arms, and may Ulric be with us.'

Chapter thirty six

It had taken ages to find Hergar, for he had been involved in another intense bar crawl. After sobering the intoxicated Dwarf up a little, collecting Elldrigar's arms and his own collection of armour, they headed back to the house.

'Are you sure you took long enough?' Elldrigar complained.

'If you recall, my shift wasn't due for another six hours,' rebuked Hergar.

'Never mind, we are all here, so let's get on with it,' voiced Jakob, 'First, let's slip into the alley so we can get ready unseen.'

Once within the dark, thin passage and away from the bustling crowds, the group began preparing for combat. While readying, they discussed how to go about their planned break in.

'How do we get in?' questioned Jakob, posing the first problem. 'We don't have any of Dieter's magic to pick the lock.'

'What about the windows?' Hergar pondered.

'There's people all about it,' replied Elldrigar.

'Then we go in the old fashioned way,' grinned Hergar, the smile causing Elldrigar to close his eyes and give a groan of futile concern.

Chapter thirty seven

Pushing upon the secret door, Skarbitik entered the dark tunnels of the Manling sewer. With his Stormvermin guards about him, the Grey Seer trudged through the thick effluent. The little brethren squeaked and scuttled about the uneven brickwork, while many swam in the stream about the Skaven, as if somehow attracted to their more blessed and highly evolved kin.

His plotting and contemplating was interrupted by the sudden resounding rattle of charging armoured bodies from the rear. Instinctively his hand darted to the curved sword on his back, pulling it free. The sound of striking metal followed shouts and squeaks - it was a Manling ambush.

Over the sounds of fighting, Skarbitik could discern the distinctive flow of chants caused by spell casting. Against sorcery his escort would soon fall and leave him exposed unless he aided them.

Skarbitik began his own incantations, calling upon the Horned Rat's power and weaving his spell with a scowl of anger that he had missed the poised forces.

Warpstone gas arose in torrents from every pore of his flesh, lifting his fur and billowing up his robes on shimmering dark vortices. The energy within him was forced outward and sent in curling waves over the Skaven warriors, the glowing tendrils of smog sliding about their forms, permeating the air with their influence.

Once the warriors breathed in the pungent sorcerous black mist, its power began coursing through their veins, filling them with unearthly vigour. The fog boiled in their brains, arousing a terrible berserk fury that could only be sated with the indiscriminate killing of their foes. The Skaven leapt at the enemy, screeching and hacking wildly. Two Clanrats dropped dead from coronaries brought about by over exertion, their bodies unable to meet the demands of the sanguinary sorcery. Oblivious to the hazards of their actions, the others continued in an unholy rabid frenzy, screeching with rancour.

Skarbitik heard rushing footfalls coming from behind him, revealing that more Manlings were sealing the Skaven in. Cursing the situation he once more drew upon his power and channelled destructive forces against the reinforcements.

The Watch at the approaching front line lit lamps and immediately saw Skarbitik reach down and touch the tunnel floor. Black energy flowed along his arm and into the brick, the tendrils of power transforming into lancing cracks. The Manlings hurled themselves desperately aside to avoid the yawning crevasse that snapped open beneath them, but many failed and fell into the dark pit, the confines of the tunnel preventing escape. Before the dispelling magics of frantic Wizards could take effect, the sheer rocky jaws slammed shut, crushing all those within, the terrified wail of the doomed Manlings ending abruptly with a deep resonant clap of stone against stone.

The effluent flowed across the reknitted tunnel and turned red as the buried bodies slowly oozed their contents up through the slender split.

Those who had managed to evade the chasm quickly charged forward, yelling their curses at the Grey Seer responsible for serving such a gruesome end to their friends and comrades.

In reply, Skarbitik met their attack with fervour, slashing maniacally left and right. Using one of his long blades and his enchanted falchion, he drove back the Watchmen and freely caused the most grievous and mortal wounds upon those who strayed too close.

With bodies and severed limbs at his feet, he suddenly felt Manling sorcery groping in his mind, seeking a grip within his synapses. Skarbitik threw magical energies into repulsing the attack and after a brief strain of effort he was successful. Another came, and again he forced out the sorcery, ensuring it did not touch him as he eviscerated a nearby Watchman with the tip of his sword.

His powers were being drained quickly by this fight, and he needed fresh influxes to sustain him, he needed Warpstone. The Seer span his dagger, grabbed it by the point and hurled the weapon to give himself a free hand. The point drilled into the face of a Wizard, the tip exploding amidst bloody spray from the back of his skull, the body falling back to the aghast horror of his fellow spell casters. They were not battle troops, and such carnage on their own disturbed them greatly.

Desperation touched Skarbitik while he fumbled for the precious nuggets, releasing broad sweeps with his blade, hoping to gain vital time. He felt the condensed raw magic rock, grabbed it and tossed it into his mouth. The Warpstone landed on his tongue and fizzled as twin sorcerous assaults of terrified reprisal bored into his brain. He repulsed one, but despite all his best efforts and the draining of his powers he could not hold out the second.

Everything faded and the nugget fell from his slack lips, landing in the effluent with a soft plop. Skarbitik's thoughts dulled, his vision faltered and faded, and his body became flaccid as all recollection ended.

Chapter thirty eight

Jakob wrapped his cloak about his body and raised the hood to conceal his armoured features. He walked across the street to join the others at the front of the house, where Hergar stood out of sight on the door's right, Elldrigar on the left. After rapping heavily upon the thick wood, he stepped back.

A full minute past, during which time the passing street revellers paid them little heed. Growing concerned, Jakob moved up, banged his fist thrice upon the door and retreated once more.

The sound of locks being unfastened lifted the group's spirits and they tensed in anticipation. The door opened slightly to reveal a grim faced middle-aged man with curly brown hair.

'Ye-' he began, and was sent hurtling back as Hergar barged the door, slamming it into the man's face and sending him staggering backwards. The Dwarf rushed in, Jakob and Elldrigar followed, trying vainly to look inconspicuous. The man reached for a blade while holding his nose, blood running steadily between his fingers. Hergar kicked up, his boot thudding into the man's groin. The Human gave a muffled cry and then collapsed straight into Hergar's upsweeping fist. The man's head jerked up with the blow and he arched away to sprawl loosely to the floor with a languid thump.

The Dwarf wiped the blood that now covered his knuckles onto his trousers, spat disdainfully upon the slack form and looked about. Jakob gently shut the front door, ensuring privacy.

The interior was dusty and poorly furnished, and from its neglect it was clear that this house was no residence.

'Look for a way downstairs,' Jakob whispered, hoping that the others in the house had not heard the attack. They had to make haste, they would only have a few

minutes before the enemy came to investigate their associates tardiness in merely answering the door.

Creeping along the hallway, they began to gently open the doors and peer within.

Elldrigar stopped outside a room, stepped away and backtracked to the adjacent chamber, where he looked in and scrutinised the right wall. He smiled and strode back before feeling a section of the hallway.

'What?' Jakob questioned softly.

'The rooms,' he whispered. 'There's a gap of at least a yard between them.'

'A hidden door!' Hergar declared quietly and joined the search while Jacob kept watch and listened for any approach.

'I have it,' stated Elldrigar, pulling on a fake lamp opposite the suspicious area. The wall gave a click and a section swung back, revealing a dimly lit staircase leading down. The sounds of digging arose faintly from below, the din an excellent cover for their approach.

Elldrigar and Jakob slowly drew swords. Hergar hoisted up his hammer and began pugnaciously walking down, the sounds of toil getting more distinct with every step.

The large cellar below bore several sturdy chests against the right wall, and suspended on the left were three mouldering black wood planks, tied with dirty rope into a triangle with lengths of string randomly nailed over the surfaces, each bearing a dirty rat skull.

Two men knelt before this macabre icon as if in prayer, a table to their left bearing sacrificial daggers and other eldritch pseudo-religious paraphernalia, much of it flecked with red. A crude ragged tunnel ate outward several yards into the wall opposite the entrance, and three men in rough clothes continued to excavate, placing the rubble in a large barrel situated behind them, the container half full.

'Good morning rat lickers,' announced Hergar, stepping around the corner, his hammer resting across his brawny shoulders.

The men span and stared at him and each other in confusion.

Elldrigar stepped out on Hergar's left, sword drawn, while Jakob moved to the right, pulling his parrying dagger free.

The two men before the altar arose and hastily unsheathed long blades from within their doublets. Those tunnelling stepped out and changed the grip on their picks from that of a tool to that of a weapon.

Elldrigar darted out and flinched forward, provoking the jumpy, pick-armed Human before him into making a premature lunge. The Human's blow was wild and Elldrigar needed to move very little to avoid it. Taking a small step left he then thrust, his sword tip striking the bridge of the off balance Human's nose, smashing it and then cutting a deep gash to the left before slicing through the eyelid and then punching into his eyeball. The man squealed and staggered back, clear fluid and torrents of blood pouring from the ruptured hole.

Elldrigar swept at the adjacent miner, slashing a shallow cut over his arm and forcing him back. The third tunneller threw his pick at the nimble Elf in an under arm arc. The point ripped through his breeches and grazed his flesh, the blunt tool causing more pain than harm. The Elf scowled and put his sword to the pick while falling back a step. With three twists he forced the weapon from his opponent's hand and hurled it aside.

Hergar leapt at the worshipper opposite him, bringing his hammer savagely down at the Human's head. The man frantically side-stepped and slashed at Hergar's side, the dagger whistling against the air. The keen edge ran along his skin, unzipping the flesh and opening a cut down to the hipbone. The Dwarf hissed, and infuriated by the pain, swung low with venom.

The solid head of the hammer smashed into his adversary's knee with

irresistible might. The cap burst from his flesh, the ligaments ripped, his leg bending acutely in a hideously unnatural direction. The Human dropped to the floor, shrieking, his blade falling from his hand as all his awareness was captured by the grievous agony in his leg.

The shadow of the hammer fell upon his face, preceding the utter destruction of his skull by the subsequent fierce impact. The hammer gouged through his cranium and shattered a section of floor, punching a small crater for itself after having demolished the man's head.

Jakob allowed the worshipper before him to attack first, deliberately holding himself in abeyance. The adversary lunged, only to have his long knife caught in the embrace of Jakob's dagger. Shoving up, he carried the weapon high and thrust with his sword. The heavy blade pierced his opponent's flank and tore a deep wound. With a jerking push, Jakob forced the blade of the Cultist from his dagger and took a stride back. Instantly the foe jumped forward and hacked horizontally with a shout of animus.

Jakob ducked, allowing the weapon to sail over his head before springing up, carrying his sword before him. The crack of rib echoed and the bastard sword slid stiffly into the man's chest. The face of his enemy screwed up into a contorted mask and the dagger dropped from his grasp. Twisting viciously, Jakob brought a cry from the foe as he mangled the innards before ramming the blade onward. The point punched from the base of his opponent's neck amidst a bloody cascade, and with a harsh yank he freed his weapon and turned his attention elsewhere. The skewered Human clutched at the grievous wound, the mortal stab now letting his life gush forth in steady bursts, sending warm spray over the hands seeking in vain to staunch the flow. With a grimace he fell flatly forward, gurgling softly.

Elldrigar ducked aside as the disarmed Human threw his body forward, arms outstretched. With a lightning thrust, the Elf jammed his weapon into the exposed armpit, the crunch of bone reverberating as the blade tunnelled through his torso to emerge from the opposite side. Transfixed upon the blade, the warrior gave a violent throe and stiffened, his outstretched arms falling torpidly to his sides as he cried out, his wail emerging as crimson flecks, his lungs opened and ruined.

Immediately Elldrigar withdrew his weapon, the fleshy sheath clinging to the steel with fanaticism and forcing him to employ all his strength to defeat the grab. Leaping forward to slash at the wounded tunneller, his arm still bleeding steadily, the pick the Human bore met the gore encrusted sword with a desperate swing and stopped it. The Elf span on his heel, carrying the slender weapon about in a full arc before ploughing it into the man's side. The keen edge ripped deep left a ragged slice that vomited opulent cascades of blood with fragments of innards riding upon the dark flood. The Human doubled up and collapsed, twitching as his life poured from him.

Rushing forward, Hergar smacked his weapon into the base of the spine of the blinded Human as he held the wound and wailed in suffering. The vertebra gave a satisfying snap and the paralysed enemy sprawled, shrieking from the mordant havoc being inflicted on him.

Ignoring the pleading sobs, Hergar hoisted his weapon high and then brought it down upon the presented features, staving in the skull with a resonant crunch. Gobs of brain and bone flew outward and blood gushed up in a tall red fountain, flecking the upper torso and face of the Dwarf. Hergar tugged free the weapon, the babbling font clinging to it, as with a strong yank and stern sucking pop the hammer reluctantly came away.

Turning around, his weapon drooling thick globules of ghastly residue, Hergar could locate no other opponents and so swung his hammer onto his shoulder and wandered irritably over to a chest. Finding the heavy box locked, he smashed it open.

Elldrigar and Jakob began searching the bodies as Hergar opened the other chests with equal brutality, the Slayer venting his anger at the sudden end to the fight on inanimate conquests.

'Anything?' asked Jakob, the Dwarf having rummaged about in a newly exposed box.

'Files, and...money!'

Lifting up a bulging purse, then another, his eyes gleamed with avarice.

'There's got to be at least a thousand crowns in here!' he grinned.

Jakob rushed over, and found that the Dwarf was not exaggerating. Ten fat purses lay amongst the ragged, rune embroidered robes and a number of medallions. Each amulet bore the symbol of the Horned Rat on one side, and a black onyx silhouetted rat's head with curling horns and red crystal eyes embossed on the other. They ignored it all, their attentions fixed upon the sparkling coins of gold.

'Let's take them all,' Jakob said greedily, lovingly caressing a purse.

'You think?' retorted Hergar with merry sarcasm.

Elldrigar fished beneath the clothes of a Cultist's body and pulled the chain that he found about the cadaver's neck. A medallion identical to those in the chests arose. Upon checking the rest of the corpses, he found similar decoration on each.

'They all wear one,' he declared, trying to draw his companions from their gold lust.

They failed to respond, consumed with fulfilled cupidity. Giving up, he began going through the files.

Once the pair had fully pocketed the looted wealth, Jakob spoke, finally returned to the matter at hand.

'Find anything?'

'Members, contacts, enemies, adversaries, nothing so far about any plots though.'

'Begin a search of the room, if there's anything to be found, you are the most likely to uncover it.'

'Well yes, I was going to, I would have said but you were busy drooling over shiny discs of metal,' he aired with a caustic edge.

Jakob ignored him, for he had behaved as any normal person would have and so had no cause for shame. Aloof attitudes were far easier to present when one had wealth to lounge upon and support such lofty ideals.

'Hergar and I will continue the search,' he said, ignoring the aloof slur as Elldrigar began a thorough visual and physical scrutiny of the walls and floor, starting with the altar. Hergar and Jakob had almost finished scanning the paperwork when the Elf's nimble fingers found something.

'Here!' he declared with triumph.

They looked up and saw him pulling a brick from the wall, revealing a small chamber. Cautiously reaching in, he removed a stout cylinder, opened the end and pulled out the neatly rolled parchments within. After handing some to Hergar and Jakob, all three unfurled the documents and began reading them. Jakob was the first to speak, setting a trend of disbelief.

'By the Gods, the Skaven plan an attack, a huge one. They will arise in the east of the city.'

'This outlines the plan, but there's no provision made for any resistance. It's as if they expect everyone to just ignore them,' related Hergar in astonishment, rereading the words to see if he had gathered the data correctly.

'I think I know why,' gravely expressed Elldrigar.

'What?' said Jakob.

'The Watch Captain in the east. Keisler. He is one of their agents.'

'Surely not,' Jakob uttered with dismay.

'Bloody Watch, I knew it! You can't trust a single one of them. Thagi, each and every one of 'em!' spat Hergar with contempt.

'According to this he's been protecting them for years, and will no doubt be ensuring that all opposition is elsewhere at the appointed time,' continued Elldrigar,

skimming the texts.

'But if that happens, the city will fall,' stated Jakob.

'Aye, we have to stop him,' interjected Hergar, eager to pursue the opportunity for combat, especially against the Watch of the city that had so alienated him.

'How?' wondered Jakob.

'Let's just take this to the Commander of the Watch. Let them take care of it,' Hergar grumbled with animosity, bearing little love for the city's police force, torn between acting against them, and refusing to get entangled in their internal strife.

'A few uncorroborated notes? He would never believe it,' Jakob stated with certainty.

'We need more evidence,' concurred Elldrigar.

'And how by Grugni's beard do we get it?' Hergar snapped.

'I have absolutely no idea,' Jakob responded tersely, stumped as to how to progress. He was a warrior not a detective, he didn't know how to cope with this sort of intrigue.

'Well, we had best discuss this elsewhere in case any more of their friends turn up,' said Elldrigar, indicating the blood-soaked and mangled remains of the Cult's following.

'Very well. Let's take all the relevant files, the money, and some medallions. We'll get some sleep and talk tomorrow,' proposed Jakob, hoping that some divine inspiration might strike during the night, for they were at a loss as to a resolution.

Chapter thirty nine

Maulokk spoke to the shadow within the shadows, exposing his plot to the invisible operative as he stood in the middle of the tunnel with his Stormvermin about him.

'Go forth and make an attempt on Grey Seer Skarbitik's life. It must look convincing, and it must fail. Ensure that he is nicked by a weapon coated in this.'

Dragging a vial from within his robes, he flicked it covertly into the darkness where it was effortlessly caught. The poison inside was deadly, but small amounts caused a delirium which considerably broke down mental resistance.

The Clan Eshin operatives had learned from the little brethren of the Grey Seer's capture and where he was being held. The mission of the assassin was to ensure that Skarbitik confessed fully, and also to add vital credibility to the authenticity of his revelations when his own kind tried to silence him.

Maulokk had been deliberately abroad since sending the Grey Seer into the ambush, allowing Clan Eshin to establish contact without exposing themselves. Now that they had, he could head back and get on with his work.

With his guards beside him, he was passing an area of Clanrat warrens, where many Skaven were resting from the tunnel work. Suddenly, from a side passage and into his path stepped a powerfully built Stormvermin warrior.

Maulokk's guards stepped before him, levelling their halberds, points presented to the threat, their eyes fixed and ready to kill him the instant Maulokk gave permission.

The Skaven aggressor wore a simple tunic, bore a fine greatsword, yet strangely nothing else.

'Clan Skreek calls you 'Warlord', Maulokk,' he broadcast with derision. 'I Cikcrit, challenge your position, and as a Chieftain of Clan Skreek, I demand the Rite of Dominance under the gaze of the Horned Rat to determine who leads the Clan.'

Maulokk knew he had to accept. His position as unofficial Warlord was tenuous to say the least. Although the Rite would strengthen his claim to control over the Clan and benefit him greatly, it was clear that this individual had been prepared for the challenge, a trait that warranted extreme caution.

Without word he began removing his armour, for the Rite was designed to allow

the strongest to win, not the best equipped or armed. The Rite was primarily a warrior ritual, but it also covered sorcerer and Seer alike, resulting in deadly magical duels that could lay waste to entire areas and result in numerous spectator deaths. However, Maulokk's current appointed position fell into the category of warrior caste, thus exposing him to threats from the Warlord Clan's feudal military hierarchy.

The Stormvermin guards moved back into the forming ring of eager voyeurs, powerless to intervene in the sacred ceremonial combat.

Maulokk removed his amulets, rings, armaments and robes, only teeth and claws were allowed as weapons, and no item or artefact was permitted to be worn. His opponent pulled off the tunic and put his sword aside before moving into the impromptu arena. The carefree step and blithe attitude of his challenger gave Maulokk sudden cause for even greater concern.

The Warlock stepped before Cikcrit, and both immediately arched their backs, setting fur on end. With heads lowered they began circling each other, sniffing vehemently.

Cikcrit released rapid ultrasonic pulses, his teeth rattling with berserk rage, his body trembling with wild aggression, giving Maulokk distinct reason to suspect the work of chemicals within the Stormvermin's burly frame.

For drawn out and hesitant minutes they waited, each analysing their opponent, orientating themselves intimately with the combat area. It was Cikcrit who eventually instigated the conflict, straightening and suddenly leaping at Maulokk, jaws wide.

The speed of the Stormvermin was great indeed and Maulokk had trouble matching it. Ducking left, he threw his elbow out and into the ribs of the flying enemy, releasing a deep thump as the joint struck harshly.

Cikcrit winced but landed nimbly, spinning on his toes and circle kicking Maulokk in the side. The blow was glancing but agonisingly harsh, causing Maulokk to fall back, his flank numb from the ferocity of the blow. Cikcrit was upon him again in an instant, kicking squarely into Maulokk's chest and flinging the Warlock into the air with the sheer impetus of the assault.

The ground embraced him savagely as he landed in an awkward sprawl, his ribs bruised, his breath stolen. Shaking his snout to clear the fog of the attack, he arose into Cikcrit's poised arms. The Stormvermin grabbed him about the throat and lifted him into the air with ease.

Suddenly unable to breathe and with the blood flow to his brain being hampered, Maulokk took hold of the wrists and pulled with all his strength. The muscles were like wrought iron and were quite immobile, leaving the vice grip unchanged and in full force.

The Warlock curled his legs up to his chest and kicked rapidly at Cikcrit's abdomen, ripping off great tufts of fur and opening deep scratches. The Stormvermin grunted under the successive volley of abrasive kicks and his hold slackened, allowing Maulokk to pull one of the strangling hands off.

Maulokk seized the chance and swiftly delivered a truculent swing to the side of his opponent's snout. The effects were minimal, the flesh being unnaturally dense. Undeterred, he speedily rained six fierce punches into the Stormvermin's head, gradually forcing the stalwart muzzle aside, allowing Maulokk to totally break free with a twisting leap.

Hastily backing up, he gasped in recovery, seeking to erase the giddiness caused by his oxygen starvation, his throat raw from the abuse visited upon it.

The Stormvermin charged, leading with his teeth. Maulokk stood his ground and at the last moment pushed his forearm up and into the jaws heading for his throat. The maw snapped closed, but only the molars ground upon the arm for he had pushed the limb beyond the lethal incisors. Even though his skin was not pierced, the bite was crushing his flesh and causing intense debilitating pain, Cikcrit's horrendous strength punishing the extremity, feeling as though it were going to shatter bones any moment.

Overriding the duress with his will, Maulokk shoved up and snapped at Cikcrit's exposed throat. The Stormvermin spied the attack and hastily slapped a hand over Maulokk's snout, preventing his access as with his other hand he drove a fist into Maulokk's flank. The Warlock's feet left the ground from the power of the blow and enraged him with added pains.

Driving a knee into the groin of the Stormvermin, he caused a brief cessation in the battle and weakened the hand that was held firmly over his nose. With a sweep of the arm, he swatted the protecting limb away, lunged, and bit into the base of Cikcrit's neck. As his teeth sunk into the tough flesh, his adversary roared and retaliated by pulling at the arm lodged in his mouth. Snarling, Maulokk took hold of the black furred chin just above his face and tried to pry apart the jaws before his arm was torn off.

A savage punch was rammed into Maulokk's stomach, the power of it winding him and driving him a few inches back into the air. Another followed, and another, all the time Maulokk remained unmoved, not from the blows, but from the gathering of his magical energy. The fourth potent punch landed and his spell was born.

Dark festering power churned in his lungs, pouring into and filling each and every alveolus, growing bloated on the energy fed to it by its creator.

The Warlock released his anchoring bite and opened his jaws. A straining retch and an acute exhale brought black, pestilent vapour out in a swirling stream. The putrid breath engulfed the Stormvermin and he instantly released Maulokk and fell back, overcome by the deadly fumes, swatting at them as they clung to his pelt.

The Warlock moved swiftly away, catching his breath and nursing his inert arm. The pain he had been ignorant of while lost to the divine pleasure of channelling the power of the Horned Rat was encroaching with a sudden vengeance, making him dizzy.

Cikcrit emerged unscathed from the cloud of clinging noisome death. What would have sloughed the flesh from a living being's bones in black steaming clumps had not even touched him. Maulokk knew then the extent of the preparations Cikcrit's backers had undertaken. The potions and brews needed to grant such drastic resistance to sorcery, although highly effective, were eventually fatal to the consumer, a fact Cikcrit was sure to be ignorant of.

The engineered adversary charged, leaping into the air and onto Maulokk, who rolled with the assault, bringing up a leg and then kicking out to catapult the Stormvermin over him. Cikcrit landed heavily upon his back a few yards away and flipped agilely up to his feet from his supine position, chattering his teeth with rancour and turning to face the Warlock.

Rolling upright, Maulokk called up fresh energy. There was no way of directly affecting the Stormvermin with sorcery, but he could still be harmed by it.

Unseen tentacles of power lambasted the floor about him, and where they touched a sinister glowing-eyed black rat was spawned from the very air. Within a split second a heaving swarm was created, milling briefly in a great mass of spiky fur, claws, teeth and fulgent eyes until Maulokk indicated in the direction of the now upright opponent.

The tide of vermin obediently surged forward, sweeping onto the foe at a scampering charge. They leapt into the air and sank their wickedly sharp teeth into his flesh before wriggling feverishly, pulling at the meat until it came free, ripping with their claws, boring at the Stormvermin's hide.

Cikcrit tugged them off, or crushed them in his mighty grip, but where one rat died and faded into the ether, another replaced the slain rodent, generated from within the seething bristle furred carpet. The mindless mass moved on, deserting the warrior and in turn being abandoned by Maulokk. Once his control left them they rapidly dissipated into a thin, sickly mist of opaque shades.

Bleeding from dozens of bites, Cikcrit turned and stormed Maulokk, who could now see the sluggishness in his limbs. The attacks had inflicted enough damage to drain him of some of the artificially instilled prowess, giving the Warlock the advantage

he badly needed.

A torpid punch lunged for his stomach and was swatted away with a blocking forearm. Clapping a hand to each side of the Stormvermin's muscular neck, Maulokk yanked him forward and into a savage headbutt to the snout tip, momentarily dazing him. Acting without hesitation in the few seconds before Cikcrit recovered, Maulokk whirled in a full circle, stealing momentum and swinging an elbow into Cikcrit's gut before whirling in the other direction and redelivering the opposite joint into the base of the warrior's jaw. The bone fractured, further weakening the incensed enemy, who staggered back, seeking space to act and time to recover.

Maulokk dropped into a low crouch and sideways on, kicked up into Cikcrit's stomach with all his might, doubling over the towering enemy with a croaking gasp. As the face of his foe fell towards him, Maulokk lowered further. Clapping his hands to the soil he deployed all his ferocious might and jerked his abdomen into the air. Locking his palms to the ground, resting on his arms, he fired both of his feet into the presented face, kicking fully out and with an echoing smack hurled Cikcrit away to crash upon the floor and skid to a halt.

Maulokk wanted to exploit this massive opportunity and go for the kill, but the Stormvermin's resistance to his magic had made his sorcery seem ineffectual. He had to display otherwise or every Stormvermin and Chieftain in Clan Skreek would be challenging him.

'Enough! It is time to end this scuffle!' he roared, and raised his arms, releasing incantations that reverberated through the throng who had gathered to watch this fight for power. The spell was one of the forbidden sorceries taught to him by Ikit Claw, and was like all the enchantments of terrible Dark Magic he had been bestowed - terrifying.

Maulokk's flesh rippled and suddenly burst outward, flecking the inner circle of witnesses with black blood. Collapsing onto his front, his legs and body swelled, his head cracking open like a blossoming organic flower, the excess flesh falling away in black steaming clods. The pulsating dangling flaps of his cranium formed into seven wriggling stalks that began to grow and rise up, the sickening transformation continuing with unearthly vigour. The blood-matted fur of the Warlock retracted, revealing dense interlocking scales. His limbs became stout and powerful, tipped with foot long, keen edged claws that supported his reptilian frame, while a snaking tail pushed outward, his spine elongating and becoming sheathed in cold, scale-coated flesh. Dark, serpentine heads coalesced on the tips of the stalks, which became long swaying necks to carry the new heads aloft. All seven snapped open their jaws in unison and released a dreadful sibilant hiss, revealing twin rows of savage needle teeth.

Cikcrit fought the compulsion to flee as the terrible monster stomped forward and seven hideous maws screeched for his blood. The Clanrat spectators peeled away and fled in terror, others dropped and gibbered in abject horror. Only the dynamic aggression bestowed from the drugs administered by the Plaguemaster gave him courage enough to face the beast Maulokk had become, but he still had no idea how he would fight such a thing.

Looking upon the Stormvermin with fourteen eyes that witnessed a complex collage of infra red heat patterns and bright colours, Maulokk advanced with a defiant roar. The little form hurled itself vainly at his Hydra form, and the many heads plucked it from the air, sinking multitudes of fangs into the warm flesh before hoisting the struggling body high.

Cikcrit screamed, myriad teeth piercing his hide, pulling him slowly apart, racking him in the most obscene manner. The supporting heads plunged and smashed him down onto the floor. He punched and kicked and bit, the drugs and potions keeping him alive and aware as the beast tore off great ragged chunks of his muscle and flesh, while he himself could not even harm the unnatural hide. His own blood splashed his face, the wet tearing shred of his body filling his ears even over his wailing cry of unsurpassed horror and agony.

The heads withdrew and gloated at the fiery inferno of manic heat patterns before them, watching as their tail encircled Cikcrit's neck, hauling him up and slowly throttling the mutilated Stormvermin challenger. Pulling and tugging against the deadly grip, his movements became weaker with every ebbing heart beat, his blood drooling in steady torrents from the massive opened craters of his frame, the beast watching his flickering thermal diagram of suffering with eager amusement. Finally he simply hung limp and lifeless, his swollen bloodied tongue lolling from his maw, coated in strangled foam that fell onto the rent portions of his body below.

Maulokk watched the feet twitch thrice and then let it fall, releasing the flow of power into his sorcery and depriving the spell of sustenance. His body swiftly began to resume its natural shape, retracting the scales and heads, sloughing the image of the reptilian abomination.

The Clanrats watched the reversed metamorphosis in awe from a safe distance, and once Maulokk was fully restored to his normal white furred form, he walked over to the corpse and knelt beside it. The audience watched respectfully as he proceeded with the Rite, sinking his fingers into the ribcage of the Stormvermin and then with a violent tug and loud crunch, wrenched it open. Maulokk looked at the glistening display of still organs before him, and then gave the words required of the victor.

'I thank the Horned Rat for his protection and favour, and I take my opponents vitality in His name.'

Maulokk leaned down and sank his snout into the warm viscera arrayed before him, guzzling it down until the chest cavity was emptied. The end of the Rite was no mere tradition or custom, it was a vital survival consideration, for the energy expended during the fight had to be reclaimed, lest the devouring Black Hunger claim the victor soon after their victory.

Maulokk did not fear the presence of contagion or poison in the meat, for such traps would too easily indicate the perpetrator, allowing him to feast with peace of mind.

Once the offal was fully ingested, Maulokk fought to keep his residual pains from the crowd and lifted the considerably lighter body over his head. Bellowing to the assembled Skaven he felt his bruises wailing in protest against such strenuous use, but retained the facade of normality.

'My strength is your strength. My victories, are your victories. My reward...is your reward!'

Hurling the cadaver into their midst, they swiftly fell upon it, seeking to gain a portion of Cikcrit's strength through consumption of his flesh. While they fed, Maulokk refastened his armour and rearmed himself, wincing as the metal tightened against his tender contusions.

When the hordes cleared, only the skin and the tail were left, Maulokk's act seeking to add another grain of loyalty to that which he had crafted from his troops.

Heading back to his warren to rest before continuing his work, Maulokk gave orders that everything that was Cikcrit's - his females, armour, weapons, and wealth - were to be sold or redistributed. He wanted none of it, it was useless, and could only be a method to harm him. A female agent in his warren to slay him, weapons with devious booby traps or cursed enchantments, any number of subtle techniques could be lurking in Cikcrit's warren. It was safer to rid himself of the spoils of victory, for he had survived, and that was all he really needed.

Chapter forty

From the corner of the room, Captain Keisler watched as sergeant Hauer wiped the accumulated blood from his brass knuckles and delivered another punch to the restrained Grey Seer.

Skarbitik's head span aside and lolled, red trails dribbling down his chin and

gore-matted fur. His eyes were almost swollen shut, and his mouth was filled with gaps, the teeth smote from the gums by barbarous attention. His fingers were broken, every claw ripped out at the root, and his left arm was fractured in several places as were a number of ribs.

'What is your plan? How many troops do you have?' Keisler insisted equably, having lost count of how many times he had said the same words in the last two hours. Once more the Skaven remained silent.

Keisler was sure that the thing could speak Old Worlder, and was merely holding out on them to protect its precious secrets. The fact that it was not saying anything in its native tongue or any other language for that matter gave credit to his suspicions. He wished he had just one of the Amethyst Wizards from the Colleges of Magic in Altdorf. With enough work, their telepathic powers could draw the secrets from the skull of even the most strong-willed creature, but such means were too costly for all but the Electorate and the richest Imperial nobility.

Sergeant Hauer drove another punch into the Skaven's stomach, then another. After grabbing the Grey Seer's snout he struck it heavily across the tip.

'Talk, freak!' Hauer hissed, sadistically twisting the snapped fingers of the Skaven before plunging a fist into its side, cracking another rib.

Rocking on the sturdy chair he was tied securely to, Skarbitik snorted outward to clear his nose of blood.

If he could just rest, he could recuperate his powers and use sorcery to escape. He swore he would die rather than tell the Manlings anything.

He could reveal Maulokk's plan, that much was true, and thereby cause the attack to fail. This was the very mission he was here to fulfil, but to do so would result in his instant execution when he became of little use to the Humans and only a danger to keep alive. If he could hold out, he might yet escape and still manage to spoil Maulokk's plans.

He felt sure that it was the Warlock who had betrayed him and sent him into the trap, no doubt hoping that the Humans would kill him and rid Maulokk of his presence. But contrary to the subterfuge, the Manlings had managed to capture him.

Another punch landed, cracking another rib and causing him to swear vile vengeance upon Maulokk for this ordeal. His thoughts blurred and his consciousness began to waver as the hot tides of mordant pain rolled from the wound and Skarbitik blacked out once more.

'Get another bucket of water,' Keisler commanded.

There was a soft whistle and something flew past. A spinning opaque shape slashed a shallow cut on the Skaven's neck and then lodged in the wall with a sharp metallic tone.

Keisler whirled to see a dark form suddenly move from obscuring the early morning twilight issuing from one of the chamber's arrow slits. Hollering the alarm he ran over to the opening as a cloaked ragged shape leapt an impossible distance to the nearest rooftop, its hairless tail outstretched. After landing without injury, it folded its cloak about itself and seemed to fade from view, becoming an eerie transparent ripple, its shadow remaining as the only clue to its presence. The form scuttled into the tenebrous depths of the streets below with a slithering grace and then simply vanished from view.

Keisler smiled. The Skaven had sought to silence their leader which meant that the plan was still running, and he knew roughly what that plan was. But he wanted details, for they would help save the lives of countless Middenheimers. Looking to his Grey Seer captive, he saw a tell-tale twitching in the creature's limbs and panic arose in his heart.

'Get a physician. Quick!' he yelled, running to the triangular device wedged in the stone. Wary of its blade he ran a gloved finger over the flat of its razor-edged circumference. A dark sticky residue came away - poison. He should have guessed

sooner, but like some raw Imperial recruit he had been congratulating himself instead of thinking.

A physician burst in, gasping for breath, his medical bag in hand. From his perplexed look it was clear that he was wondering why he was here, and also what manner of aberration it was that lay bleeding in the room's heart.

'Poison! Make sure he does not perish,' Keisler shouted, dispelling the doctor's stunned disgust.

'He?' the physician muttered under his breath, wondering how gender had been discerned from a humanoid vermin.

'Just do it!'

Reluctantly the doctor checked the Grey Seer, while the sound of guards rushing about echoed through the passages, bolstering security. Once he had finished his examination the doctor closed his bag and straightened up.

'As far as I can tell, whatever this thing is, it will live. Very little toxin entered its system. What is it? A Beastman?'

'Aye. A mutant. And one that I must ask you to remain silent as to the existence of,' ordered Keisler with a severe demeanour.

'If you insist,' the doctor reputed flippantly, because he could not see what the need for secrecy was, Beastmen were not exactly uncommon.

'I do!' Keisler added with stern gravity.

The Watch Captain breathed a sigh of relief once the physician had gone. His prisoner was still alive, leaving its valuable knowledge still accessible.

He had Hauer resume questioning after hurling an icy cold bucket of water onto the creature as though it were a slap, stirring the abomination from unconsciousness. Within moments, much to his astonishment, results were gained. Had the assassination attempt by his own race given the Grey Seer cause to protect his own kind no longer?

In delirious pain the creature slowly confessed, revealing that the Skaven would arise in the west on the final night of the Carnival, with feeble Rat Ogres, and none of the usual terrible devices of Skavendom save those spawned by something he called Clan Pestilens. They were without the accursed Jezzails with their mangling explosive bullets, without any flesh consuming Warfire or any lightning enshrouded Doomwheels, or any hideous Screaming Bells, only strength of numbers. Lacking even the element of surprise for the rodents, victory for Middenheim was certain.

Chapter forty one

Elldrigar, Hergar and Jakob had slept poorly. The autumn sunlight and the roar of noise from the Carnival made their sleep come in small restless periods, always to be disturbed by an eruption of fresh and startling noise from without. When the skies began to darken, they gave up, dressed, and went to dine.

They had all visited the local doctor at dawn, who tended their wounds and cleared up any sign of infection in exchange for looted gold, an excess of which also helped to ensure his silence. Following the medical visit, Jakob and Elldrigar had equipped for the forthcoming conflict, spending freely of their good fortune. Upon entering the establishment of a prestigious armourers, Jakob was wide eyed and jiggling with barely suppressed excitement, the array of steel on offer making his mouth water. Finally he had the funds and opportunity to acquire the personal protection he had been dreaming of for years.

Nearly five hundred gold crowns went towards purchasing a full suit of plate for Jakob, with a chainmail and padded leather gambeson beneath. Half of the same amount went on Elldrigar, furnishing him with a hauberk and cuirass. Most of what remained paid for rent and board to cover the rest of the week, and to buy backpacks filled with vital equipment such as tents, lanterns, snares, waterskins, pots, rope, and other wilderness survival equipment, just in case they had to flee the city in a hurry. To

Jakob it almost seemed like a reward for helping Middenheim, compensation from their foes for all they had endured since ascending in their chairlifts.

The revelry of the night was well under way after having steadily accelerated during the evening. The streets were swollen with people and many had clearly spent much of the day at the real ale festival in the Great Park, drinking themselves into an obstreperous frenzy throughout this, the third day of the Carnival.

Over dinner they discussed how to continue their private struggle against the Skaven hordes.

'We need evidence. That is for certain,' began Elldrigar.

'But how do we get it? Steal it?' questioned Jakob.

'Why not?' Hergar asked, seeing no problem in such actions.

'Because he's a Watch Captain? And if we're caught, we'll be spending the rest of our lives in prison?' attested Jakob.

'Not if we're careful,' rebuked Hergar.

'How then do you propose to get through a city gate to his office?' posed Jakob.

'He won't have anything incriminating there, we need to get into his house,' Elldrigar pointed out.

'So how do we find out his home address? Consult a fortune teller? Pray for divine guidance d-' Jakob sneered.

'Look in the file?' retorted Elldrigar, patting the small pile of paper beside him.

'It's in there?' Jakob said, surprised and irritated at his own oversight.

'Since we stole it, it has been,' equably stated Elldrigar, taking it up and flicking through the sheets in search of the data.

'So where does he live?' asked Jakob, peering up to try and spot it. Elldrigar stopped, turned back several sheets and ran his finger down the lines of text before stopping and tapping the data.

'Ulricsmund district, fourteen Heilige Strasse.'

'So we bust in and beat the truth out of him?' eagerly interjected Hergar, the plan to injure and kill one of the Watch meeting his tastes perfectly.

'You deranged thug. That is the stupidest thing you have said this week, and there's been some stiff competition,' spat Elldrigar.

'Crawl back to your trees, Elgi. This is no work for some effeminate stick,' grumbled Hergar, banging his emptied tankard on the table.

'Not weakness, oaf, grace. You Dwarves are all the same, you elevate stupidity and ignorant violence,' muttered Elldrigar, leaning inward to meet the rigorous glower of the Slayer.

'I'll show you violence aplenty, you Elgi puke,' growled Hergar, his muscles rippling as he tensed for the fight.

'Give the bickering a rest! We've got more important things to deal with,' interrupted Jakob, exasperated at their unceasing arguing.

'Hmmmph. What do we do then? Seeing as neither of you have got the balls to go through with my idea,' Hergar grumbled, leaning back into his chair and waving his tankard in the air to demand a refill.

Elldrigar sat back and decided to let Jakob come up with the obvious; at least the obstinate Dwarf would listen to the Human. He wanted this done right, and so had to play things diplomatically.

'We stake it out as before, and find out when's the safest time to go in,' stated Jakob, looking to each of his irritated fellows.

'This is Marktag, right?' asked Hergar grumpily as a serving wench refilled his tankard with frothing ale and then scuttled onwards to handle the intoxicated appetites of others.

'Aye,' replied Jakob, confused as to the reason for the question.

'The third day of the Carnival? We've until the last to stop the Skaven, and yet you're willing to happily waste time on pointless surveillance and spying.'

Elldrigar stood up sharply, his patience fully evaporated. Without rebuttal he stormed upstairs, for if he stayed he would have once more exchanged cross words with the psychotic cretin, and there was too much at stake to let racial enmities ruin everything.

The Dwarf looked up sourly as the Elf departed, certain that if all Dwarfdom met Elldrigar, then they would deem that by putting up with such an accursed presence, his Slayer vows would be more than fulfilled.

'Hergar!' Jakob said sternly, gaining the attention of the Dwarf. 'We've got to find out what we're up against, and the best time to go in and remain undetected.'

'I suppose so, but how do I 'merge' with the people in a district of middle class Humans? I'll be spotted straight away.'

'We're running low on funds after preparing for this raid. There were a series of purges of the local forest by the Knights of the White Wolf. They brought back a number of Chaos beasts, so there is an extra day of Minotaur fights on in a couple of days,' said Jakob, his information gleaned from chatting with his customers while selling pies on the last stake out.

'Great. Just as a Skaven attack is brewing, the Knights bugger off on some wilderness rampage,' mumbled Hergar, shaking his head and taking a deep and soothing draught of his ale.

'You can handle a Minotaur, can't you?' said Jakob, causing Hergar's eyes to jump wide and glare at the Human over the rim of his tankard as he drained the whole thing. Slamming it down, he belched and slapped his hands to his belly.

'With my breath,' Hergar replied confidently. 'But what about tonight?'

'I'll take the first watch, Elldrigar can do some busking until he takes over. We'll carry on like we did at the house. You can try and raise some cash in the meantime - arm wrestles, duels, I heard that there's some pit fighting going on in the Altquartier,' suggested Jakob, knowing that he would have to keep the Slayer out of the way and yet still placate his rage for battle. Having him gather some extra money was a wise added bonus.

'That suits me well,' Hergar grinned. Either he would fulfil his vow or make some money, and both outcomes were equally desirable.

Chapter forty two

The forces under Karikk streamed from the forest. They scampered up the far side of the ditch and nimbly scaled the stone defensive wall. The delay was not hazardous, for the Manling lookouts had been silenced by snipers and their arrow speckled bodies thrown to the ravenous Clanrats mustering below.

Garssen was the wealthiest of the three targets, its prosperity derived from farming and preserves. The populous of forty souls slept on, exhausted by a day's toil that the Skaven had watched from their hiding places, leaving the Manlings ignorant of their hungry gaze.

The armoured Stormvermin led Clanrats sweeping into the homes, slaughtering men, women and children in their bed, quaffing their blood and scoffing down mouthfuls of warm Human meat before stripping the houses and grainstores as they had stripped the bodies.

Karikk's blood lust was raging as he entered the fray. He slashed left, opening a Human's chest from collar to waist as another Manling ineptly raised a sword against him. Karikk hacked off the arm at the shoulder before impaling his gizzard and slashing down and outward to disembowel the villager.

Striding forth, he drove his halberd through a Manling's skull and lifted the body into the air by the weapon. The Human jerked and spasmed until his wriggings caused his head to split and allow him to fall from the blade, leaving great ragged strands of brain, skull and hair about the tip. Karikk slashed at the air, flicking the

gore from his halberd, slapping it against a wall and leaving it to slide languidly down where it caught the light and winked at him with pearls of moisture.

With a grin of satisfaction the homicidal Stormvermin sought fresh prey.

In the last few days, his personal troops had acquired a profound taste for Human flesh, and had also been revelling in their newfound power and authority. The attacks had been a purging catharsis for them all, allowing his Stormvermin to vent their frustration and pent up rage on any who crossed their path, releasing their hate, letting it all out in three brutal sessions. Now they were eager to return to Middenheim and be present at the invasion. Rumours concerning every aspect of the Commander's plans were spreading by the hour, and interest was at a fervent peak.

The former Clan Rakib elite would prove themselves superior to persecutor, betrayer, and condemner alike. They all firmly believed that Maulokk would carry them into the upper echelons of society and beyond. Freed of their bitter rancour, their slavery becoming a distant half-recalled memory, they now aspired to become the most feared and deadly fighting force Skavendom had ever seen, a force to rival even the mute albino Stormvermin of the Horned Rat's temple.

Chapter forty three

Deep beneath the sun lashed surface, in the ragged-toothed wide tunnels of the Skaven Under-Empire, Skrabic waited, breathing slowly of the musty air.

For one full day he had languored with grey Seer Bilquik and the Skaven force. The Grey Seer was starting to become suspicious that everything was not as he had been told. If the Rat Ogres did not turn up soon, then he would have to be dealt with ahead of schedule.

The merchandise shipment was to travel south east from Hell Pit, following the tunnels down past Karak Ungor and then weave around to the north of Black Water and Zhufbar.

Skrabic and the others were dwelling at a junction around fifty miles south of Tunnel Skritch, this being the branch that led off of the Great Tunnel of Verminscratch to exclusively access Karak Kadrin.

After several hours, one of Maulokk's guards rushed up.

'There is a Clan Moulder convoy heading this way,' he reported, and the Stormvermin all looked straight to Skrabic for instruction.

The Grey Seer exhaled irritably, ignorant of the fact that this was the reason for their presence.

'When is this Clanrat unit actually meant to arrive?' he questioned vapidly.

Skrabic nodded his head slightly, twitched his whiskers thrice and pulled the ensorcerelled dagger free from the back of his belt before pushing its tip into the accommodating poison bottle.

The Stormvermin recognised the command signal, hefted his halberd and lunged.

'What treachery is this!' Bilquik hissed, leaping back away from the lethal blow and lowering his spear at the aggressive Stormvermin as he turned and readied to attack again.

Bilquik saw Skrabic step beside him, but by the time he sensed the extent of the betrayal it was too late. The Warlock jabbed out, the blade sinking deep into the Grey Seer's chest, the sorcerous edge opening his rib cage as though it were made of warm butter, the enchanted dagger ripping through organs and releasing a massive bleeding flow.

The Grey Seer shoved Skrabic away with a roar of pain before the Warlock could pull the weapon out and repeat the stab. Skrabic moved with the push, deserting the blade and scampering well back.

Taking advantage of this unexpected space, Bilquik lifted his spear like a

javelin, fighting off death by sheer force of will so that he might at least slay his murderer. The feel of his life cascading down his front was terrible and distinct, his chest a volcano of pain that only fuelled his enraged strength.

A spasm ran down his limbs, tightening every muscle and tendon, revealing to Bilquik that he had been poisoned. A titanic convulsion followed and the Grey Seer fell stiffly to the floor, his eyes bulging as he was left helpless to the relentless onslaught of death.

'Attack positions!' Skrabic yelled, ignoring the gurgling spasming body at his feet and taking refuge in the darker depths of the walls. Producing the scroll, he decided to quickly read through it one more time before the targets arrived.

There was a unified clatter of metal and the sound of claws scratching against stone as the forces scampered into position, the Stormvermin bringing the Clanrats from their idleness. In moments the forces were in cover and completely hidden amidst the deep shadows of the crooked tunnel.

Several minutes passed during which time the sound of thundering footsteps and the squeal of wheels grew slowly in volume until it vibrated the tunnel with its severity.

From the gloom rumbled a column of iron wheeled cages, driven by whip wielding Packmasters. Hairless, flaccid-skinned quadrupeds with large bovine heads and heavy jowls that hung from their features to grant a morose visage drew the carts.

'Attack!' yelled Skrabic when the carts were close by, the command going unheard by the targets because of the din produced by their vehicles.

The Skaven attacked swiftly and showed no clemency or restraint. Packmaster's shrieked as suddenly from the shadows, halberds flashed forth and plunged into their flesh. Whips cracked, trying to keep the enemy back while they drew weapons and sought to free the caged Rat Ogres. But Maulokk's Stormvermin had lived under the lash, and the pain of the scourge was hardly noticed. Proven as an ineffective deterrent, the stinging cracks of leather tongues only sent them into a monstrous blood fury as the sensation dredged up the bitter memories of their slavery.

Skrabic began to draw up forces of energy about him, coalescing a spell of Warp Lightning when he spied a Packmaster playing the locks of a cage as two others shielded him from assault. The mangling blades of Stormvermin warriors hissed through the air and hacked down the guardians, but the Packmasters had bought time with their lives and the heavy lock was now open.

One of the Rat Ogres within shoved open the door and stepped forth, its footstep shaking the ground as it curled back its lips and released a squeaking roar of fury. Suddenly the abomination was overwhelmed by streaks of black power that ripped into its misshapen flesh, tearing great chunks of meat from its huge skeleton and leaving blackened smouldering holes. The stone shuddered and split beneath it as the lifeless Rat Ogre was blasted into the air by the spell and then impacted upon the tunnel floor. Laying twisted on its side, curling lines of cloying smoke wafted from its injuries, the token fur of the beast smouldering in places.

The Packmaster who had unleashed the monster was decapitated by a halberd and the door was quickly re-secured to prevent any other escapes.

The final Packmaster was cut down and the Skaven quickly devoured the dead, destroying the evidence and keeping the Black Hunger sated now that it had been kindled by exertion.

Skrabic muttered a grumble of complaint to himself, the ravenous killing frenzy of the forces having stolen all survivors from him. He had wanted to use the spell on a living being even though a corpse would serve just as effectively. Choosing to proceed with the plan, he spotted a Packmaster whose neck had been broken. Stepping forward, he kicked a Clanrat from a body, sending the creature tumbling aside and to quickly run off to find other sustenance.

Dragging the untouched corpse over to Bilquik's twisted cadaver he laid it over

the Grey Seer's body as instructed and put the Packmaster's hand to the dagger, closing the fingers tightly about the hilt. After laying down a ragged sheet of linen, he produced the scroll and began to chant the words that would release the magic stored within.

Skrabic's hand pulsed with a bubonic green light that formed into a throbbing sickly aura. The scroll began to disintegrate as the speedy flight of the magic stored in its structure proved too much for the material to bear. The last pieces of parchment collapsed into pulsating viridescent motes and Skrabic touched the Packmaster.

The energy instantly flooded into the body, transferring from his flesh into that of the cadaver's. With a crunch of constricting bone and the crackle of displacing, desiccating flesh, the corpse shrank and withered, shrivelled down to the size of his foot.

Skrabic looked over the results of the enchantment and stood by the body to ensure it was not disturbed as he commenced his giving of orders once more.

The reject Rat Ogres were swiftly wheeled in from their nearby secret location, and the superior specimens were drawn away to be covertly smuggled back to Middenheim. Skrabic rolled up the sheet that bore the glowing ashes of the scroll and placed them in his pouch. All had transpired as Maulokk had intended.

Chapter forty four

Seeing movement stir amidst the shadows, Maulokk's hand darted to the sword upon his back, but he released the hilt upon seeing the sleek, black furred little brethren emerge and roll onto its back before him. Maulokk cautiously removed the note attached to its tail and unrolled it. The paper bore one word - 'meeting'.

The little brethren retreated, shuffling back into darkness as the influence of the Rat King was diverted elsewhere. Maulokk finished the engineering stage he was currently working on and after collecting a pair of guards, went for a walk using the pretence of an inspection upon the tunnel work.

He halted as a toneless voice addressed him.

'Commander Maulokk.'

'Why have you called for me?' he whispered in reply.

'The group monitor the captain's house,' came the soft response from a hidden mouth.

As he had hoped, the group had killed the traitor cultists that the Manling, Maximillian, had placed in the old Horned Rat temple. The Rat King had been used to discover who of the cultists were genuine and who were spies or informants to other powers, allowing them to be issued the task of being fed to a trap. Some traitors might well remain, but the majority had been dealt with and any left behind would calm their treachery once the internal purging came to light.

The set up had served another purpose as well, because thanks to the forged documents they now suspected the Captain of being one of the Skaven agents. The trick was to use Keisler while he was useful, and then eliminate him just before he posed a hindrance. Maulokk tossed the prepared bag into the shadows, where it was snatched from the air and secreted.

'Continue as planned,' he stated.

'As you wish,' came a barren reply.

Chapter forty five

Standing proudly in the forty yard wide centre of the pit, Hergar bathed in the sounds of the crowd, the wooden benches of the amphitheatre filled with spectators all eager to see blood spilt, be it Hergar's or his opponent's.

The dense iron gate opposite cranked upward, accompanied by a great wild

cheer as something moved in the shadows within.

Hergar ran a hand along his spiny hair to ensure it was straight, lifted his hammer, and coldly regarded the hulking Minotaur that stomped out upon its cloven hooves. The crowd erupted with roars and shouts, boos, whistles, cheers, gasps of shock as the monster emerged into the sun light.

The great beast gave a bovine roar and lifted its sturdy club in one hand, the three-yard length embellished with lines of heavy studs. Ignoring the crowd, the creature had eyes that glowered at Hergar with hateful contempt, its massive hands wringing the makeshift weapon.

Hergar edged forward, the creature keeping a vehement gaze upon him, pawing the ground, readying to charge. Like a steam tank it lurched forward, its hooves pounding the soil like thunder as it accelerated rapidly. The crowd brayed and screamed with excitement.

Despite its immense size, the monster was frighteningly fast. While raising the huge club behind its head, the beast hurled a punch at Hergar. The solid knuckles smacked against his cheek, spinning the Dwarf like a Night Goblin fanatic and sending him crashing into the dust. His vision swam and his face blazed with numbing pain as he tried to recover in time to defend himself.

Hergar rolled quickly aside when he heard the whistling rush of a rapidly descending object. The spot he vacated erupted under the club, which slammed down and caused a cough of dust to halo the crater it created for itself.

Changing direction, Hergar rolled back, bringing his hammer with him in an arc that carried it viciously into the monster's shoulder. There was a loud smack of metal to flesh and the Minotaur tottered back, nursing the deadened joint, allowing Hergar a much needed opportunity to rise.

The beast lashed out with the club in a skimming sweep. Resolute, Hergar threw his hammer to meet the blow and there was an angry resonant crack as the club was halted in the air. Intense shock waves ran along both weapons and vibrated the arms of each combatant, almost causing them to lose their grips.

The creature lifted up the mighty weapon and brought it down in a single, rapid motion that was almost fluid in its flow. Swatting up at the huge weapon, Hergar deviated it from its intended path.

The club struck the floor and Hergar quickly launched the hammer back, catching the Minotaur's chin and slamming its jaw violently shut.

Swaying, the Minotaur dribbled blood-flecked foam and Hergar pressed his momentary advantage. The hammer cracked the strain-whitened knuckles holding the immense bludgeoning weapon, knocking it from the creature's grasp. The beast bellowed and backed hastily up, nursing the contused fist and seeking space to defend itself from the tiny form assailing it with such zeal.

Charging and unleashing a lashing blow that forced the Minotaur to leap away, Hergar put even more space between the foe and its deserted club. With a scowl of glee the Slayer promptly closed the gap before leaping into the air while his opponent was off balance from the evasion of his last attack.

The hammer was savagely delivered into the monster's skull, causing it to stumble away, momentarily concussed. Hergar stormed forward again, dropping a blow into the Minotaur's hip. The beast winced and jerked down, then with a hiss it kicked out furiously in reprisal, the iron shod hoof opening a deep gash on Hergar's shin and rendering the whole lower half of the limb insensible.

With equal ferocity the Slayer retaliated, swinging his hammer into the creature's chest, cracking a couple of ribs and taking the wind from his adversary's lungs. The Minotaur exhaled sharply, grimaced and punched Hergar in the gut, the titanic fist almost as large as Hergar's whole torso. The meteoric blow slipped through his defence and lifted the Slayer a full two yards into the air, robbing him of all breath.

Landing awkwardly, he sprained his ankles and dropped to his knees, scowling

in pain as the powerful crushing grip of the Minotaur snatched him about the torso. His ribcage groaned with protest under the strain and a second later he was hoisted effortlessly into the air and hurled at the ground as if he were a child's ball.

The ground hurtled beneath him as a blur and then flashed with a white dazing pulse as he struck it. The Dwarf bounced twice and skidded to a stop, long abrasions opening along the length of his side.

Spitting blood from his mouth, Hergar's blood rage ignited from the scent of possible defeat and with a joyous yell he leapt to his feet, giving the Slayer's battle cry to welcome death.

Shrugging off the paralysing agony caused by the jarring effects of his landing he ran forward. The Minotaur curled an arm back as Hergar charged and with a furious bray it swung the hideously potent backhanded blow into Hergar's head. The assault ripped the Dwarf from his feet and sent him crashing back to the floor after a brief flight, reviving his bruises and adding new ones.

Dribbling a steady stream of blood from his nose, he sought to rise and received a pile driving jab to the brow while still on his knees. The Dwarf shot back, scraping along the ground under the tremendous velocity of the impact, finally coming to rest seven yards away, his world whirling about him.

Snorting, the Minotaur retrieved the club before returning to the delirious figure, which was once more starting to rise. The beast launched a brutal kick at the tiny form, which unexpectedly rolled aside, leaving the hoof to sail up into the air.

With the last dregs of his energy, Hergar rammed the head of the hammer into the exposed groin of the Minotaur. The beast doubled up with a growling gasp, presenting a new hope of victory to the Slayer. Focusing his swimming vision, Hergar swung his weapon in a full overhead circle, bringing it down onto the back of the beast's skull. The crunch of bone echoed, the beast gave a violent throe and staggered back, blood flowing down its features from a long tear in its scalp.

With a yell, Hergar forced his aching, exhausted muscles onward, continuing with a volley of successive blows, driving one into its side, another into its chest, and a third into its stomach. The hammer beat a deep drum tone with each attack, the muscles and bone of the beast dense and resilient.

The foe dropped to a crouch in a dazed stupor, only to receive a savage strike to the temple that snapped a horn and sent the Minotaur into an inert sprawl, its breathing shallow.

Lost to the killing frenzy of being denied release from his Slayer vows, Hergar raised his hammer high to finish the beast. Hands suddenly grabbed him, pulling him back. Roaring and struggling, he cursed his grapplers with every insult his Old Worlder vocabulary could muster. The 'bullies' were present to save Minotaur or combatant should either be in mortal danger, and Hergar was threatening the life of a highly valuable and very rare beast. Although the Dwarf noted that they had been strangely lax in rushing to his aid when the Minotaur was beating him to a pulp.

The insensible beast was quickly carried away for urgent medical treatment, and a bucket of cold water doused Hergar's fury once relocated to the perimeter.

A robust, scar-faced bully walked from within the stadium and presented the heavily breathing water-sodden Dwarf with a rough linen bag.

'Ere's ya money. A tenth of the crowd. Two 'undred and eighty crowns. Not bad fer a minute's work, eh shorty?'

Hergar snatched it and punched the bully squarely on the nose, breaking it and sending him rolling across the ground, his nostrils leaving a sporadic spatter of blood to mark his route.

After a derogatory comment as to the Bully's relationship with his mother, Hergar limped off, furious at having been deprived of the kill, even though he knew such a slaying was not permitted when he had entered the arena.

Chapter forty six

Elldrigar absently played his flute, keeping a discreet eye upon Keisler's home. For two days now they had watched the residence of the nefarious Captain - Jakob by night as a beggar or pie seller and himself during the hours of daylight as an entertainer.

It was afternoon. The sun was slowly sinking towards the horizon, and the Carnival was still growing steadily in fervour. Snotling football supporters cruised the streets in drunken gangs, chanting the name of their favoured team in a slurred repetitive litany. The Red Arrows flying Wizard display were just finishing their high altitude dives, loops and cross flights, the majority of the display visible to much of the city.

Keisler seemed to be a man of unwavering routine. Since they had been watching he always returned at sunrise, and then only to stay long enough to sleep before returning to duty. The Captain spent every waking hour at work, which was suspicious in itself. Why was he working so hard? What was he up to? The only logical explanation was that he was ensuring that his own forces were in the wrong place when his Skaven masters arose.

Since leaving Athel Loren Elldrigar had witnessed and fought many strange unnatural beings - Beastmen, Fimir, Centaurs, Lizardmen, Minotaurs, and many others. Most of them had been aligned to Chaos, and he loathed Chaos, but only for the Skaven did he have a boiling unequivocal hatred.

The Elf often missed the sedate tranquillity of his homeland. The lands of men ran at a frantic pace, the short-lived Humans cramming as much into their brief lifetime as possible. His longevity, coupled with the usual unhurried Elven upbringing made such a desperate rush to live life to the fullest extent an alien concept. The peace of Athel Loren made one idle, while the hectic, dangerous lands of men inspired living for the moment, because death could strike at any time. It was this strange, pessimistic outlook on life that had been a prime motivation in stirring him from the malady of mourning. Elldrigar had left his home because there was nothing left for him in the lands of his birth, only painful memories and bitter reminders, and if he had not broken his lethargy by departing, then he would surely have remained in an apathetic stupor of grieving for the rest of his days.

Within the hour Keisler left his home, locked his door and turned towards the city gate. Elldrigar looked impatiently about for Jakob. The Human was supposed to get Hergar and come straight back, but he guessed that the Dwarf was probably proving difficult to find. Elldrigar had welcomed these few days respite from Hergar's annoying presence, but the break was over, they were enter the house tonight.

When his companions finally arrived, Elldrigar noticed the fresh bruises and cuts upon the Dwarf, surely gained from the battle with the Minotaur the previous day. Elldrigar could not resist a wry jibe.

'So, you lost the fight then.'

'Actually, Elgi, I beat twenty shades of sh-'

Deciding to interrupt the brewing argument in its infancy, Jakob interjected. 'Has he left?'

'Yes, a few minutes ago,' replied Elldrigar.

'Right on schedule,' confirmed Jakob, glad that it looked like business as usual for the traitor.

'So we go in?' asked Hergar expectantly.

'Maybe we should wait a little while longer, just in case he's forgotten something and comes back,' offered Elldrigar, looking about the street.

'Oh, scared as usual, eh? Well don't worry, stick, we'll look after you,' mocked Hergar.

Elldrigar exaggerated a wide palled yawn.

'Predictable as always I see. I had hoped that Minotaur might have beaten some

sense into your empty head,' he blithely declared.

'You want an empty head? I'll split yours for you!' Hergar hissed and edged forward, raising his hammer threateningly.

Jakob stepped before him on cue and Elldrigar smirked and walked off.

'Don't go and fall asleep, shorty,' he added, the Dwarf glaring at the departing form with disdain.

'Hergar,' said Jakob, but the Slayer merely continued staring at the Elf, swimming in a black mood and wringing his hammer as though the wooden stem were Elldrigar's neck.

'Hergar!' he said more distinctly, snapping the warrior from his murderous fantasy.

'What? I heard you the first time, dammit!' he growled.

'Watch the front while we go in the back, okay?' said Jakob, trying to ensure that the Slayer not get distracted or bored and wander off while they were inside. They needed his eyes alert and working for them.

'Hmmmph,' the Dwarf acknowledged tersely, returning to watching with cantankerous severity as the Elf wandered towards the side alley running between the house and its neighbour.

'Keep an eye out, if anyone turns up, throw a rock through the window and pretend to be drunk,' suggested Jakob.

The Dwarf nodded and moved stoically back against the wall.

Jakob looked both ways for Watch and then headed into and down the slender winding passage that accessed the rear of the house. After checking that it was the correct abode, the two of them went to the back door, where Elldrigar kept a covert watch along the grimy alley while Jakob drew a crowbar and slotted its forked end between frame and door adjacent to the lock. With a sharp tug, the lock and unseen bolt beyond snapped and the portal swung ajar. They quickly bustled into the exposed kitchen, pushed the door shut behind them and propped a chair against the painted inner surface to keep breezes from blowing it open.

Briskly beginning their search of the interior, they pawed beneath rug and mattress, behind cupboard and wardrobe, in books, in and behind drawers, about shelves, behind paintings and anywhere else evidence might arise.

They guessed that the object of their quest would have to have been readily accessible, so there was no need to tear or cut open anything during their task, and therefore could replace everything exactly as they had found it.

Four hours crawled by, then Elldrigar suddenly called out in a stifled shout.

'Jakob! Here! In the bedroom.'

Setting the painting back on the wall and straightening it, Jakob ran upstairs and found the Elf before a rug that he had cast back and which had formally covered a section of loose floorboard. Elldrigar removed the piece of wood and leaned in, fishing out a leather bag.

'What's in it?'

Elldrigar drew out a set of Cultist robes akin to those they had already seen. There was a standard Horned Rat medallion, and a box. Elldrigar pried off the lid with his dagger and shook out the papers within. After a cursory glance through them he spoke.

'It's the Skaven plan to attack in the west. Sewer and manhole details, major targets, everything,' he said and then rolled them up and replaced them.

'What are you doing?' Jakob enquired in disbelief.

'Putting it back.'

'What? But that's our evidence!'

'It proves nothing. If we take it, we alert the Captain to our knowledge of his allegiance.'

'So? If we can convince others that he's a traitor, they'll arrest him and the city

will be ready for the attack!' barked Jakob.

'And when he's arrested, you think the Skaven will stick to obediently popping up into what they know will be an ambush? They'll change the plan, and without knowledge of it, the city could be caught unawares. At least this way we have a chance to keep them thinking we're not onto them and set things up right!' he stated with conviction.

'I suppose, but dammit Elldrigar, we need that evidence!' complained Jakob.

'Come on, old friend, you know I'm right on this. We've been through enough without bungling it at this stage,' offered Elldrigar, trying to convince the Human to do what was required and not pick the hasty easy route that could doom them all. Jakob took a deep breath and exhaled sharply, shrugging his shoulders.

'I know, but we've got everything right in front of us to prove what we're saying and we can't do anything about it. God's that's frustrating!'

Elldrigar put the bag back and replaced the floorboard, throwing the rug over the loose plank and straightening out the wrinkles.

'We had best leave and plan our next move,' Elldrigar stated, arising and heading back to the exit.

After staring briefly at the concealing rug, Jakob reluctantly followed, muttering under his breath.

Chapter forty seven

The Manling and the Elf departed, utilising their crude entry point, then the dark shape scaled the back wall and opened the window he had earlier unlocked with a slender hooked wire. The Clan Eshin assassin entered silently and moved to the bedroom, his soft tread not even causing the slightest of creaks to issue from the floorboards. Rolling back the rug he lifted the board he had pried up earlier and recovered that which Commander Maulokk had given him to plant.

It was not his place to have opinion on any plan, he was merely an enforcer. His Clan did not plot or plan, only ruthlessly and mercilessly carried out their contracts with complete detachment, these contracts often being the culmination of another's intricate scheme.

Securing the bag to his belt, the Skaven master of stealth slipped out and returned invisibly to the sewers.

Chapter forty eight

Straightening his uniform, Captain Keisler took a deep calming breath, opened the briefing room door and strode in.

The small hall already held the other three Watch Captains. Joseph Dreschler, Walter Stekel and Herman Kammerer, in addition to his superior - Watch Commander Ulrich Shutzmann.

Keisler saluted and the others responded with similar military protocol.

'So what matter is of such great import as to call us all here?' enquired Shutzmann.

'The city will be attacked on the last night of the Carnival,' Keisler flatly stated, causing the others to look at him sharply.

'By whom?' questioned Captain Stekel.

'How?' asked Captain Dreschler.

Keisler paused, mulled over the word that he knew would cause derision and disbelief, and voiced it anyway.

'Skaven,' he replied insipidly.

Kammerer scoffed audibly, Stekel frowned in confusion and Dreschler looked for affirmation from the unresponsive Shutzmann.

Keisler was used to the dismissive attitude and ignorant responses to the existence of the Ratmen, but he still continued unabated, knowing that he had to try, even though it might well end his career.

'An informant alerted me to the plot, and when I investigated we ambushed and killed a small force in the sewers. However, we captured their leader,' he reported, directing the last remarks at Kammerer, for it was too perilous to let anyone's disbelief or purposeful amnesia jeopardise the city's defence.

'I have him in a cell, under heavy guard because the Skaven have already sent one of their own to assassinate him before we could make him talk. Fortunately for us, they failed.'

Shutzmann paused in contemplation. There was no faulting Keisler's discovery, and although he kept it firmly secret, he himself had crossed swords with the foul race before. As a Commander of the Watch he had uncovered many traces of the Ratmen in the Fauschlag, Cults of the foetid breed in the city, and of late, the brutal pillaging of the local territories by the vermin.

'What do you propose?' he asked solemnly.

'Commander! Surely you do not believe such insanity?' Kammerer exclaimed with infuriated scepticism.

'Still your tongue, Captain!' Ulrich ordered with a stern bark. 'There is clearly a threat to the city, be it an attack, or a ploy to divert our attentions. *We must and will* prepare for it.'

Dreschler and Stekel nodded in agreement, sufficiently convinced to believe in the existence of the danger, but still doubtful as to the identity of the supposed perpetrators.

'I shall take this matter to the other Midden Marshals, and then to the Graf himself. Captain Keisler, bring all you know of this matter to me within the hour.'

'Yes sir,' Keisler declared gladly before saluting and hurriedly withdrawing.

The measures to be taken against the threat were no longer in his hands. The Midden Marshals - General Schwerzmutt, Marshal Von Gensher and the Commander himself would discuss the situation. Any disbelief in Skaven would slow or even stop the process at this initial stage. If word of the threat reached Graf Boris Todbringer's court, then once more fear and scorn would only aid the Skaven cause by wasting yet more preparation time, or even preventing the mobilisation of troops altogether.

'Curse bureaucracy,' he thought irritably as he headed away. 'It will be the death of us all.'

Chapter forty nine

Quaffing the last of his brew, Hergar burped proudly to annoy Elldrigar as the Elf took more refined sips from a brandy glass. Jakob pushed his empty dinner plate away and wiped the excess gravy from his lips with a napkin.

'We have no choice. We have to kill him.'

'Aye, that's the first sensible thing I've heard,' Hergar agreed, looking to Elldrigar to make the decision unanimous.

The Elf wanted to handle this another way. Assassination was not to his taste, the act being too akin to that of a cut throat, or a cowardly backstabber. Besides, they could still be wrong. But time was short, it may already be too late to stop the plans of the traitor, and if they did not act, the city would fall. It was one evil life balanced against thousands of innocents. With his death, the movement of troops away from the attack point would stop or be changed by his successor, because such movements had to appear odd or wrong. No one was going to question their superior on the plans, but the next captain would revoke them once he saw how oddly flawed they were.

The Skaven would not be warned that their agent's cover had been blown and

used to justify his murder. If the evidence was still in the house, the group could use it to exonerate their deed, and perhaps have the city alerted in full to ensure the Skaven met a co-ordinated military strike as they emerged.

'I suppose we have little alternative,' he finally conceded. They had to stop Keisler.

'We know when he arrives. We know when he departs. We'll kill the filthy scum at his home,' proposed Jakob.

'Ambush the Thagi as he returns?' queried Hergar.

'Aye. The back door already lies open, so we have an easy way in and out,' stated Jakob.

'Suppose the break in has been discovered?' asked Elldrigar, seeing many flaws in such a plan.

'Then we break in again,' retorted Jakob, tired of delay and sneaking around. He wanted to do something, to make himself feel like their actions were actually accomplishing something other than enlightening them as to the inevitable massacre. They had to stop learning more about it and do something to stop it.

Elldrigar could clearly see that the Human and Dwarf had firmly set their minds to this method, so there was little point trying to concoct a better one.

'Very well,' he sighed.

Jakob and Hergar smiled victoriously and continued with a measure of excitement in their voices.

'We have hours until he is due back. Firstly, I will shed my armour and look less conspicuous. Then we go and check the home, pass by a few times, look for any sign of occupancy, and then go in and wait for the dastard,' Jakob decided.

Elldrigar stifled a groan of despair and slumped into his seat. He had a hollow pit of foreboding in his gut about this venture.

Chapter fifty

Standing before his congregation, Grey Seer Tikric enthralled the astutely listening Clanrats, the masses spellbound by the words of the Seer who spoke in the Horned Rat's stead. Prophets and visionaries, they were the spiritual overseers of all Skavendom, ruling through fear and scripture.

Tikric continued his sermon to inspire and reassure the Clanrats.

'We have many enemies without, but remember this - children of the Horned Rat - our Lord gave us these blessings to test us and make us strong, to grant us the gifts which we ourselves must take, for such is the way of the Horned Rat.'

'He gave us Elves as foes, that we might steal their magic and knowledge and have them show us the folly of civilisation.'

'He gave us Dwarves as enemies, that we might take their strongholds for our own, wear their fine armour, carry their keen weapons into battle, and have them show us the folly of pride.'

'He gave us Orcs as rivals, that we might have strong backs and small brains for slaves that we may fill easily with loyalty to their masters, and have them teach us the folly of ignorance.'

'He gave us Goblins as irritants, that we might crush them underfoot and thus warn us as to how low a creature can sink.'

'And he gave us Manlings as adversaries, that we might keep our bellies full and teach us the folly of complacency. All this is the gift of the Horned Rat, and we will take it in His name.'

Maulokk had bade him give such speeches to boost moral. The Warlock knew all too well, as did he, that every battle is won or lost before a single foot lands on the battlefield, or the first sword leaves its scabbard.

Their strange and unholy alliance had been forged just over a year ago. A Warlock Master had gained the support of a minor Warlord Clan, and was using them to create all manner of havoc with Tikric's schemes. When he stumbled upon a plot to cause an explosion in Maulokk's workshop, he saw an excellent opportunity and approached the Warlock-Engineer Lord with a deal.

Consequently, Maulokk had been strangely absent and the Warlock Master culprit was 'unexpectedly' present when the eruption took place, spreading him across most of the chamber. Since that day, the two had mutually aided each other with exchanged secrets and by being the eyes and ears of the other in the rival Clans. It was a terribly dangerous position for them, but it was one that was highly beneficial when used.

By being here, he could aid Maulokk, and in the process be greatly rewarded after a successful attack on Middenheim. Such benefits would far outweigh any consequences of failing to bring down Maulokk and cause the plan to degenerate into disaster, besides, one of his own schemes required certain Human captives that could be supplied as a by product of Maulokk's favour. The added bonus of course was that Maulokk would be in his debt, and the more powerful the Warlock became, the more valuable such a debt would be. Even as a Grey Seer he had many hazards about him, his life as precarious as any other Skaven.

Chapter fifty one

Strolling in the early morning light of the day of Konigstag, Captain Keisler yawned and fished for his key. Pulling it free, he held his greatsword under his arm while pushing it into the lock and opening the door.

He had spent the entire night working on secret preparation in case the court of the Graf did not believe in the existence of the threat. Patrols in the west had been scheduled for drastic increase using the pretence that there was expected activity for organised crime in that area. The underworld were supposedly going to use the cover of the Black Pool illuminations grand finale to cover their unscrupulous deeds, and such a story was believable enough to warrant the massive increases he had instigated.

Stepping across the portal, he instantly spied danger and the door was kicked shut by a man hiding behind it. Keisler's reactions had been honed to an almost unerring peak on the cruel and unforgiving streets of Middenheim and he responded immediately using tactics to quickly disable. With a sweeping kick he drove toes into the approaching spike haired and battered groin of a Dwarf, while simultaneously butting forward at the roughly dressed and unarmoured Human beside him. The sound of his helmet smacking against flesh was accompanied by the sharp snap of nose bone.

The Dwarf dropped the warhammer that had been raised over his head and sagged, his eyes watering, his teeth clenched. The man staggered back, one hand about his bleeding nose, the other groping blindly for a handhold to support his ailing balance. His fingers clawed along the wall until with a loud thump he struck the floor.

Keisler grabbed the Dwarf about the back of the neck and smashed him face first into the wall, leaving behind a starburst of crimson fluid. Keeping the hold, the Dwarf's resistance melted from the effects of the barbarous strike and Keisler continued, throwing his hands down and slamming a brutal knee upwards to impact against the Dwarf's already badly bruised forehead.

Keisler's mail leggings protected him from harm while heightening that caused to the target. With a shrill crack, Hergar sped back and skidded to a limp halt.

Throwing his scabbard from his greatsword with a wide swing, Keisler assessed his opponents at a glance. The butted man was crawling to his knees, the blood spewing from his nostrils slowly abating. Keisler stepped forward and kicked him across the face, severely stunning the adversary before lifting his greatsword and readying to skewer the dazed intruder.

Suddenly he caught a glimpse of movement in his periphery vision, there was a soft, brief whistle and pain lanced through his breast. He tottered back as though punched, his sword falling from his grasp and clanging to the floor as his strength drained from him. Looking down he saw an arrow sunk deep into the smooth surface of his breastplate, piercing the mail beneath as blood welled about the feather flight. He knew he would not be able to storm his attacker before he was shot again, so instead of trying he span and charged to the door, confident that he could make it before the attacker reloaded.

Throwing open the door, another arrow burrowed into his back, penetrating the armour and sinking into the flesh. Keisler was momentarily too shocked at the unexpected strike to feel the pain. With a wild fling he leapt out onto the street, his vision faltering, the rattle of his breath and the blood tainting his lips indicating that one of his lungs had been punctured. He managed a few more steps and collapsed, wondering why a marksman who could get two shots off so astoundingly quickly had not been employed as a sniper to shoot him from a rooftop while he walked the street.

Chapter fifty two

Screams ran out over the sounds of merriment as the armoured Captain collapsed into the ranks of people, depriving him of a follow up shot.

Elldrigar ran to the door, kicked it shut, threw the bolt, and sprinted over to Jakob. The Human was unconscious and despite vigorous shaking, he failed to come to.

There were only a few minutes before the Watch would be breaking down the doors and marching in. If he tried to take his companions, he would be caught for sure. The Elf was forced to make a hard decision and it was one that was alien to his nature. Loathe though he was to do so, he snatched their purses because the arresting Watch would no doubt 'liberate' such monies. After shoving them into his belt he took up Hergar's hammer, knowing the value of such heirlooms. Turning about he dashed for the back door, shouldering his bow as he went.

Exiting, he hastily wove a path deep into the backstreets, while trying to convince himself that he was doing the right thing. The Skaven still plotted, Keisler might still live, his comrades were arrested for certain, all of it required that someone be abroad to resolve these matters, someone free, and with funds. The Dwarf's winnings would probably help save them all.

After returning to the Hungry Halfling, he speedily gathered their possessions and found trouble with the extensive collection of armour. Covertly lowering the sacks of metal from a window, he utilised the same route, following the baggage and relocating to the Templars Arms - an Inn to the south of Great Park. At first the Landlord claimed that his establishment was full, but a sizeable cash incentive cancelled a reservation and gained Elldrigar fresh lodgings under a false name.

Exhausted and coated in a sheen of panicked and laboured sweat, he lay down in his new room and wondered on his next move, his heart thumping against his ribs and echoing into his stomach.

Chapter fifty three

Watch Commander Shutzmann was awoken suddenly in the early evening by heavy pounding upon his door. Slipping out of bed, he immediately felt the unnatural chill.

The sunken square before the palace - the Square of Martials - had been filled by sorcerous hailstorms earlier in the day, and was then subjected to freezing wizardry to create a smooth, flat rink for the ice skating competitions. When it thawed, the resulting pool would house the water polo championship, but until then he would have to live with the radiating cold that touched all the homes about the square, including

the residences of the other Midden Marshals.

Taking a thick robe, he donned it before going to the door. The frantic rapping recommenced as he approached.

'Alright! Alright! Gods damn you! I'm coming!' he roared irritably, his eyelids heavy, his mouth dry and his sense still a little groggy.

'What!' he shouted, throwing open the door.

The sergeant standing before him quickly saluted with exaggerated military precision.

'Sorry to disturb you sir, but there was an incident this morning.'

'Yes?' he asked, perturbed, rubbing his eyes and yawning to try and banish the lingering effects of interrupted sleep.

'Captain Keisler. There was an attempt on his life. He lies in the Temple of Shallya, suffering from most grievous wounds.'

'How did it happen?' he snapped, jerked fully awake by the news.

'The assassins waited within his home after breaking in via the back door. We captured two, but have reason to believe that one escaped,' reported the officer.

'Why?'

'The Captain was shot twice, but neither captive bore a bow or any other missile weapon,' related the sergeant. The heat of his sprint to get here was quickly vanishing and he started to shiver as the sheet of ice behind him continued to chill his skin.

'Have you identified them yet?' asked Shutzmann.

'Not as yet, they are in interrogation now. One of them is a Dwarf Slayer though sir,' warily revealed the sergeant.

'A Slayer?' asked Shutzmann with shock, for this did not fit with what he knew of the Dwarves. He was familiar with their culture because there were many of them in Middenheim, and they were responsible for the creation of much of the city's sturdy fortifications. He knew Slayers sought redemption through death in combat, for whatever reason it was that had caused them to take the vows in the first place, but to try and kill a Watch Captain?

'Aye,' the sergeant confirmed during the long pondering gap.

'Then keep this quiet. I have no wish to unduly upset the Dwarven community until we've got some answers. What of the other criminal?'

'A Human. I found these on him, sir.'

The sergeant held forth a medallion and a shuriken. Ulrich immediately recognised the symbol, but kept his knowledge and alarm to himself. The Human was in league with the Skaven. If he was allied with this man, could that mean the Dwarf was one of Chaos? He knew virtually nothing of such matters, only that the Chaos Dwarves existed and were to be feared. Could a Slayer become such an abomination?

'Find out their masters plans, call in that torturer...' he paused, trying to recall the name. '...Folter. He has not failed us yet, get him, and hurry, time is short.'

Returning to bed, Ulrich ran through the events of the day. The meeting with the Midden Marshals had gone well. They had both agreed that a threat existed, and when they brought the matter unanimously to the court of the Graf, they managed to ride over the scorn and disbelief and gain permission to act. Indeed, so convincing had they been that not only were they given full authority to protect the west, but also promised militia, Knights and troops to man the east, for the Graf suspected that perhaps the entire thing was merely an elaborate deception to draw attention as far away from the true invasion point as possible.

Pulling his blankets over him and cursing how all the heat had fled them, he drifted into a sleep tainted with a sense of foreboding and dreams filled with darkness and beady-eyed, bristle-furred vermin.

Maulokk stopped as once more a shadow called to him. Summoned again by a Rat King influenced little brethren, he listened as the Clan Eshin assassin quietly addressed him.

Maulokk was glad to be instigating his plan so soon. The fees for employing the Clan Eshin team and the Rat King were astronomical, but had been invaluable and he had no regrets concerning the decision to commission their unique services and extraordinary talents.

'The Manling - Keisler, has been mortally wounded. He lies in the Temple of Shallya. The Longbeard and his Manling companion have been caught. The Elf evaded the Watch and has moved to another Inn where he remains to the present.'

His puppets had failed. By the Horned Rat! Could they do nothing right! Maulokk swiftly assessed the problem and found that perhaps it was better this way. He chose to let the blundering inept fools perform one last service to him.

'When nightfall comes, slay the captives,' he stated tersely, flipping his tail with agitation.

'As you wish,' he replied, and a slight breeze signalled the departure of the assassin.

On his way back, Maulokk continued to scrutinise the current events. His plans were coming together fairly perfectly. Clan Skreek had accepted him as their Warlord, and after seeing Cikcrit's fate, no others felt confident to challenge him, or accept the backing of other agencies to ready them for another fight. Until his command ended, Clan Skreek was his.

The new Rat Ogres had arrived earlier, fortunately just before the Packmasters returned. The Clan Moulder Skaven had been faced with little choice but to accept the lie that Maulokk had been feeding them a variety of growth and muscle enhancing potions of his own devising. They did not believe it of course, but could not complain, else reveal the bribery that had caused the problem in the first place. If word of their perfidy spread, it would greatly harm future purchases of their products by destroying trust in the reliability of the Clan.

If knowledge of the switch reached the Grey Seers, they would easily guess what had happened, but they would be just as unable to complain of the theft. The Grey Seers wouldn't dare declare that they had paid for him to have the rejects because it would exonerate Maulokk of any other failures, offering the reasoning that the Seers had intentionally caused all of Maulokk's misfortune. Such political exposure would also harm the priesthood, shattering their illusion of impartiality and causing a considerable escalation in the strife between Clan Skryre and the priesthood.

The attack on the Captain gave more weight to the plot that his Human puppets had 'uncovered', and removed the detrimental effects his leadership over the Manlings would have had for the Skaven. The slaying of his incompetent assassins would further indict them as Skaven agents sent to silence Keisler, and also stop them from refuting such charges. The Elf was of no consequence, a fugitive from justice, wanted for attempted murder, he was not going to cause any more problems.

Back in his private workshop, he continued with the final touches to his creations and then proudly looked over them. His only disappointment was that he would have to wait over two full days before he could see what they did to flesh.

Chapter fifty five

Clinging to the rugged wall near the eastern city gate, Ikitik felt the night breeze ruffling his dark fur beneath the chameleonic Cloak of Shadows, the garment hiding him from all eyes.

The patrol of City guard on the battlements above moved lazily past, and Ikitik ascended effortlessly, using the spiked soles and palms that were firmly attached to his extremities to bestow an excellent grip.

As a Master of Assassins he had been placed as the head of the cell sent to Middenheim, yet despite his importance to the overall mission he had chosen to undertake this task personally. It was partly because of the difficulty, but mostly it was because he enjoyed performing a termination contract so much.

Wondering briefly as to why Maulokk wanted this deed done, he quickly lost such questions. It did not really matter; his opinion was not required, only his skill at artful murder. The Warlock had never fully seen him, and did not know his name, yet they had met many times. Like all assassins he almost always worked anonymously for two vital reasons, firstly, it made the Clan appear all the more faceless and frightening, and secondly, it prevented reprisals by persons wanting revenge on a specific assassin who had undertaken a commission that had caused offence.

Under the Rat King's guidance the little brethren had surveyed and walked his route for him earlier, providing the safest downward path to take. In the distance, over by the lake that the Manlings called the Black pool, the sky was illuminated by bright colourful explosions, soaring flaming streaks, multi-hued flashes and other aerial fireworks caused by sorcery and alchemy for no purpose he could fathom.

Ikitik quickly descended, instinctively evading the light, following the darkest, emptiest path to give further stealth to his movements.

Approaching his destination, the agonised screams of the tortured targets reached his sensitive ear.

Ikitik drew a Weeping Blade and while allowing it to accumulate a full measure of sorcerous toxin, he pulled free two Warpstars. Moving to the door, he tilted the caustic blade to the lock and let the poison trickle into the internal mechanism. The soft hiss of dissolving metal was drowned out by a convenient fresh batch of screaming.

Shoving the door open he stormed forward, his feet tickling the ground with the barest of touches. The Manling and the Dwarf were tied to tables by thick ropes. A thin man clad in dark robes with a leather apron and a scalpel stood before the Longbeard, both items flecked with the victim's blood. A Watchman reluctantly occupied each of the four corners of the chamber, while a sergeant shouted questions into the Dwarf's torment twisted face.

They all looked to the door as it flew back seemingly of its own accord, but failed to see Ikitik until the Cloak of Shadows was parted, allowing him to operate unhindered by its flowing folds.

The eyes of the sergeant widened in shock and then rolled back as the Weeping Blade swept into his open mouth, the tip piercing the Human's palate and tearing through his brain to punch through the top of his skull. The exposed tissue sizzled loudly and began to melt under the touch of the most virulent of venoms and the assassin's other hand swept out to the left, casting the Warpstars lodged between his fingers.

The first shuriken deposited a trail of dark light that issued from the Warpstone nugget at the device's heart and sank into the forehead of a Watchman. The impact activated the sorcery and detonated the precious rock, the nugget now semi-submerged in the bone. The Manling's head burst outward in all directions amidst a thunderclap and forks of wanton black energy, spattering the wall with moist chunks of crimson matter. The decapitated body jerked and toppled, spewing fonts of spray from the ragged stump of neck that remained. Residual black voltage crackled about the exposed meat, the tissue shrivelling as it was saturated with the last dregs of wicked energy.

The other Warpstar hurled into the Watchman to his right, the razor edged weapon biting into the target's chest and erupting, throwing him back against the wall. The cataclysmic blast ripped open his torso, gouging out his ribs and causing the full contents of his chest to tumble out, slide down his legs and drop to the floor with a loud and grisly splat. The Human slithered down into a loose heap amidst his spilt offal, grim tendrils of steam and smoke rising from the terrible wound as more arcs of opaque power jerked through the open cavity of his torso.

Tugging his Weeping Blade free of the cranium it was sheathed in, Ikitik lashed out, carrying the weapon in a wide drooling arc that cut across the torturer's throat. The mortal slice grew in size as the venom ate fizzing canyons down to his collar. The Manling stood briefly still, frozen with shock, red blood flowing down his torso. Swaying and sinking to the floor, he began groping in panic at the wound, ignorant of the scalpel still clutched in his hand which cut jagged incisions over his jawline.

The two Watchmen opposite became alert, the bodies of their comrades still in the process of falling, so quickly had they been slaughtered.

Ikitik drew his second Weeping Blade and thrust it into the chest of the Watchman immediately on his right. The sorcerous tip gnawed easily through his obstructing shield and the armour beneath, burrowing deep into his anatomy before jerking back out. The Human fell into the corner and slid slowly down, his transfixed heart being eaten away by the devouring crimson venom.

Ikitik vaulted the table that bore the restrained Manling and landed nimbly before the other Watchman. Throwing his right weapon down in a feint towards the Manling's thigh Ikitik ensured he aimed to the left, for this was the side of his opponent that bore the shield. The Watchman desperately ducked his shield to deflect the blow, fully exposing himself in the process. The assassin thrust an elbow forth into the Manling's forehead, knocking his head back and stunning him. Ikitik wasted no time and clamped his jaws about the open throat, biting deeply to silence any cries and tugging fiercely outward several times, each wrench being accompanied by the moist rending of flesh. On the fifth pull, the meat gave out and came away from the bone that remained visible for a mere instant before a cascade of bloody spray poured forth from the huge hole and concealed it again.

Ikitik plunged both blades into the spasming chest of the Manling while swallowing the warm mouthful - such snacks being a definite perk of a contract. Licking his teeth, he turned his attention to the genuine targets. The Manling and the Dwarf spat curses at him in the tongue of Old Worlder, speaking too quickly for his rudimentary knowledge to discern what they were saying. Striding up, he heard the sound of running troops as they approached the site of distress. The words of the victims had been detected as being no product of torture and had raised the alarm. Ikitik exploited their utter helplessness and swiftly cut their throats from ear to ear. As they gurgled and spasmed, their blood pouring freely from the lethal slices, he cast his cloak about him, sheathed his blades and scampered away, disappearing back into the beloved depths of darkness.

Chapter fifty six

Elldrigar made for the Templars Arms, the potent stink of the Last Drop Inn still clogging his nostrils. The infamous slum dive was a disgusting place, and one he would never think of frequenting under normal circumstances. But it allowed him to make contact with the sort of people who could acquire what he wanted. In a secret back room gambling den he had met an individual called 'Paulus', and with a quantity of gold, Elldrigar had ordered a Watch uniform, details of where his companions were being held, and a sure method of getting to them. Now all he had to do was wait in his room until they contacted him, and hope that he was not the victim of a double cross.

Chapter fifty seven

It was the eve of the attack and Maulokk sat in the shadows of his dimly lit warren, thinking. His anticipation was great and it was a constant struggle to keep his mind clear of such tangles of emotional confusion. His entire future hung upon the following night's events.

Continuing to scrutinise his previous decisions and acts, he looked for

secondary plots against him, schemes he had not detected at the time, traitors as yet uncovered.

He had given the orders to reduce food distribution and the Black Hunger would now give his forces a frenzied advantage. The Hunger would be insufficient to cause cannibalism because with the looming attack, all the forces wanted to be in prime fighting condition and not wounded from battles trying to devour weaker Clanrats. But it would be at a perfect level to give them a relentless killer instinct.

Kerick'k had finished work on the Warrockets, and now oversaw the final tunnel work in the east, giving Maulokk opportunity to check over the Warlock's work and remove any booby traps. Taking ardent caution in case Kerick'k had placed traps to take him when such an anticipated act was undertaken, he found nothing.

Maulokk felt sure Clan Pestilens would use Kerick'k to strike at him before the invasion. The rockets were the obvious method, but what was the subtle?

Tomorrow, he thought positively. *Tomorrow, Maulokk, first-son of Morskittar will begin his climb to the Council. I will not fail. I will have it or die.*

Chapter fifty eight

Watch Commander Ulrich Shutzmann studied the map with intensity. The city lay before him, reduced to tiny squares and detailed weaving lines with meticulous labels to identify each minute road and alley.

Shutzmann's Watch were concentrated in the west. General Schwerzmutt's City guard were strategically placed to survey the city so they might rush in force to where ever the attack took place. Marshal Von Gensher's troops and mercenaries were strengthened by draftees from the Militia, and were located discreetly throughout the east.

In silence he continued to examine the schematic layout the Marshal and General were currently working on, coming up with plans or disapproving other strategies. It was unanimous that the sewers should not be guarded. Instead, the military leaders had chosen to assault the foe while they emerged from the manholes.

Even if the enemy had other exits, the nearby troops could easily defeat them and then block such portals. Only once the Ratmen had given up would they would they pursue, find their secret tunnels, enter and finish the foul brood, the purging assisted by the broken ranks and hopefully shattered morale of the verminous creatures.

If they had chosen to man the sewers they would lose many men from meeting the Skaven on their favoured terrain, and from the fact that they did not actually know where the enemy were going to emerge from. If indeed it were the sewers, Skaven ambushes would be a great hazard and such risks were unwarranted. They knew the enemy's plan and were prepared for it. The Skaven were truly doomed.

Chapter fifty nine

Stirred from his thoughts, Maulokk heard the call of the guard.

'Captain Karikk has returned Lord,' informed one of his Stormvermin sentries.

'When he comes here, show him in,' the Warlock replied, and arising, he brought forth his inventions and had just finished arranging them when the Stormvermin entered, bowing deeply.

'Arise, most trusted of my forces,' he said calmly.

The Captain obeyed, rising to his full height, his body now well defined by its size and strength, Maulokk's additions to his food having wrought spectacular results. The exercise and experience of his latest command had further hardened the warrior, erasing doubt, giving him confidence to match his martial prowess and brute strength.

It could not have been a more drastic contrast to the time Maulokk had laid eyes on a wretched Skavenslave and offered him freedom.

'How went the raids?' he inquired.

'Very well indeed, Lord. The only shock was upon the return journey. We saw explosions above and thought we had returned too late to participate in the attack.'

'Without my trusted guard? No. The foolish Manlings divert their minds from warfare to make colourful fancies in the sky,' reported Maulokk.

'Why? Protective sorcery?' quizzed Karikk, concerned that the enemy were wise to them.

'No, it has no real purpose. But who can comprehend the ways of Manlings? Still, it matters not, such foolishness will cover our ascent, so it is to our advantage and poses no harm, except to the energies of the Wizards who create them,' he replied.

'Perhaps it is a kindness to slay these imbeciles,' Karikk lightly wondered, frowning as he tried to conjure a rationale to explain such wasteful frivolity.

Maulokk gave a wry smile and a soft agreeing snort before speaking of more serious matters.

'I want you to choose six of your best troops. They must have an excellent aim, and be able to assimilate new knowledge with speed.'

'Certainly Lord, may I ask why?'

'These devices,' he replied, indicating six slab-like metallic backpacks, the straps modified to become thick leather harnesses.

A large banded lead hemisphere protruded from the centre of each, while copper coils and intricate piping formed a complex lattice work about them. From the right side protruded two pipes, tied together, which snaked out and connected to a device akin to a gun. With the outward appearance of a musket, the barrel was long, thin and ended in a dark metallic sphere. The wooden grips, casing and butt were laced with wires and strange eerie symbols that seemed to shift in the light. Karikk had never seen anything like them.

'What are they?' he wondered.

'Warp Lightning Projectors. I will tutor your troops in their usage, and the firing mechanism is simple enough, it is little more than point and shoot.'

'They are your creations?'

'Yes. A secret project to aid against the armoured Manlings, for the lightning will be attracted to and its harmful effects immensely magnified by metal,' revealed Maulokk.

'I believe I know who to use,' Karikk confirmed, the names of the Stormvermin already springing to mind. The six had proven themselves the most adept snipers to use against the various sentries of the attacked settlements, and with their recent practice, they would be ideal.

'Send them immediately for tuition, they must be familiar with the devices before their deployment.'

The Stormvermin bowed and departed to follow his orders.

Maulokk would only need to show how to set the fire arc controls, which regulated the width of the lightning cone. A slender beam would be needed to affect flesh and stone, but heavily armoured troops could each be just as easily mauled with a wider arc, the weaker bolts being attracted to and enhanced by the conductive metal. They were worthy substitutes for the other products of his Clan's arsenal.

Chapter sixty

Putting on the Watch uniform, Elldrigar used his hair to conceal his Elven features and acute tipped ears and after practising a swaggering loutish gait, he tried to look as Human as possible.

It was three hours into the last day of the Carnival. He had thought himself

betrayed by his sources. But there was little relief when the underworld contact had turned up for he had been left just a single day in which to act. Furthermore he needed the cover of night to be successful, which crushed his time into a pitiful handful of hours at most before the attack commenced. He recalled the other, more disturbing information while donning the clothing and cumbersome armour of the uniform.

There was an attempt on their lives, that's all we know. They are kept in a cell beneath the north east gate, here's a rough map.

Dropping the provided pot helm onto his head, he re-examined the parchment, following the corridors, discerning the best route before tossing it onto the fire and hefting the two large sacks onto his shoulder, the interiors clattering loudly.

Chapter sixty one

The tunnels echoed with the shuffle of ravenous Skaven and the accompanying metallic chime of armour bumping armour. The hordes poured from the secret doors and filled the sewers to bursting with their furred bodies, the Black Hunger gnawing at the vitals of all, their maws dripping with expectant saliva as they listened to the Manlings celebrate above their heads.

Maulokk sent the prepared units off to the east and west, intending to keep the enemy occupied while sending the bulk of his forces to the south. The Rat Ogres would be herded into the Manlings of the east and the Plague Monks with their virulent and deadly Plague Censer bearers would move into the west.

Maulokk decided to travel with his lieutenants, the Warrockets, and the Warp Lightning Projectors to conduct his own business.

The festivities above were nearing their peak as the Skaven mustered, awaiting the roar of the Black Pool illuminations that was the Manling's own signal to initiate the attack.

Chapter sixty two

The guards at the gate house doors paid no heed as Elldrigar walked confidently past and headed into the bowels of the place. There were unnaturally few sentries and the building seemed almost deserted. Allocating blame for the odd situation to the demands of the Carnival he continued onwards, his unease growing with every step.

At the cell door indicated by his map stood two Watchmen. He began to walk past, then quickly turned and pointed down the corridor before giving a shout.

'There!'

They glanced instinctively in the direction the 'fellow Watchmen' had indicated and in that instant Elldrigar acted. Pulling his dagger free, he slammed the pommel into the base of the nearest Human's skull, rendering him instantly unconscious with the well placed blow. The other turned, his hand going to his sword. It was halfway from the scabbard when Elldrigar's boot swept into his groin. With a croak the man jerked, grimacing and swaying as he mewled some agonised gasps. Elldrigar held his dagger across the guard and smashed it into the side of the Watchman's head, sending him to join his colleague with a loud thud.

Swiftly fishing amongst their uniforms he located the keys. Upon finding the ring, he began individually inserting each into the lock, seeking the correct one, his forehead welling with beads of anxious perspiration. Finally the lock opened and he quickly dragged in the guards and shut the door behind him.

Hergar and Jakob lay upon rough cots and looked sourly up, their grim faces turning to smiles as Elldrigar pulled off his pot helm and swept back his hair.

'Mind if I drop in?' he beamed.

'Elldrigar!' laughed Jakob, pulling himself up from the bed.

'I heard you had been killed,' the Elf asked, seeing no visible harm on the two. 'Aye, a damn rat assassin cut our throats while the bastard Watch tortured us, thinking us Skaven agents.'

Lifting his head back, Jakob revealed a white lumpy scar running from ear to ear, and then kneeling down he instantly began to strip the Watch of their uniforms and possessions. His motions were a little shaky, the extreme close brush with death having clearly rattled his nerves.

'It was bloody fortunate that there was a wizard to heal us before we perished. Turns out they had called in the Guild High Wizard, that Helseher fellow. He wanted to question us as well. About our 'masters' sorcery or something. It was his healing magic that saved us,' reported Jakob as he worked.

'Pah!' Hergar grumbled. 'They only wanted us healed so they could have us wriggle and make for better entertainment when they burned us at the stake.'

He arose and stomped up to the Elf, looking up at the tall form.

'So, come back to help us at last did you?'

'Where else am I going to find some one as irritating as you?' replied Elldrigar with a sneer.

'Look in the mirror some time.'

Both smiled.

'It's good too see you for once, stick.'

'You to, stunty.'

Jakob stood up, buckling the weapon belt of the sentry about his waist. One of the Watchmen stirred, and Jakob leant down and harshly butted him back into concussed slumber.

'So, we head back to the Halfling then? Get our stuff?' Hergar questioned.

'I moved us to the Templars Arms,' revealed Elldrigar, replacing his disguise.

'Then that's where we head?'

'No. The attack is due any time now. I stashed all our possessions in a nearby alley.'

'What about me? What do I use as a weapon? My butt?' Hergar angrily questioned.

'I wouldn't advise using such a noxious and bulbous weapon as that. I think you'd best use your precious mallet, oaf,' Elldrigar laughed.

'You have it?' the dwarf replied dubiously, wondering if this were perhaps some sick joke of the Elf.

'I took it with me when you got yourself beaten up again.'

The Dwarf ruthlessly crushed a smile of gratitude and through stiff lips spoke with genuine gladness.

'I thank you for that...Elldrigar.'

'You would have done the same for me.'

'Perhaps,' Hergar muttered softly, knowing that he probably wouldn't have.

'Let us waste no time in retrieving our possessions then,' Jakob pronounced, now fully disguised and eager to leave the dreadful place. After his incarceration and recent events, he was actually looking forward to battle.

Holding Hergar between them as a prisoner, the two 'Watchmen' began to head for the street.

Chapter sixty three

Filtering down from above came a peel of explosions and in reply a squeaking symphony of Skaven war cries reverberated throughout the tunnels, the hordes scampering upward as the invasion began. Clawed hands wrung weapons and clutched shields in anticipation as manhole covers were lifted, and with a frenzy of barging and shoving, the children of the Horned Rat arose from the Fauschlag into the city of the

White Wolf.

Chapter sixty four

Shutzmann stood with a patrol in an alleyway. The grimy passage wove into the eastern Altmarkt district and was near the renowned dive of thieves and murderers called the Last Drop Inn, which was the reason for their placement so far from the rest of the Watch in the west. A martial presence near this hive of villains was deemed a prudent safeguard on such a wild night of festivities, lest iniquitous elements try and take advantage of the distraction.

Normally the alley gave an excellent view of the manhole cover in the centre of the street. But now the vantage point only overlooked a sea of joyful people, most of whose attention lay on the spectacle spreading colour and light across the night sky, hiding the stars behind thousands of brief artificial ones.

Gasps and cries of awe echoed as the heavens were brightly lit by rainbow eruptions and arcing fiery streams. From where he stood, although he could not see the Knights and militia, he knew they were there, poised in the other alleys and backstreets, ready for any sign of attack, and being especially suspicious of the hidden manholes.

The citizens always went wild when the Carnival came, and their manic revelry never ceased to grow more fervent as the days past. Now, on the final night of the festival, there would be virtually no Watch on active duty to police these party crazed masses. The heavy military presence in the east, west and upon the city walls would deter some, but professional crime would be running wild within hours. But better criminals than homicidal bipedal rat aberrations from the bowels of the earth.

Screams of horror pierced the sounds of merriment and aerial detonations. Shutzmann stared intently to the section of street where the people were peeling away, clawing at each other to escape, trampling mercilessly on those who fell.

He saw serrated weapons flash in the strobing light and caught glimpses of armoured furred forms leaping at the populous and tearing at their flesh.

Roaring the order to attack, Shutzmann instantly led the charge, barging through the panicked people, trying to reach the scene before too many of the Skaven got out.

Bursting through the fleeing throng, he sheathed his sword in the throat of a startled Ratman and his colleagues followed into the fray, quickly forming a perimeter about the pocket of vicious vermin, fencing them in.

Ulrich slashed vigorously at the enemy, bringing his full fury to bear on the Skaven while his troops pressed their temporary numerical advantage, forcing the Skaven ever back and preventing others from leaving the manholes. The bodies continued to fall on both sides, making the ground treacherous underfoot as they piled higher with each second, the dead falling on the dead, the ground slippery and slick with loosed life.

Chapter sixty five

Striding out onto the street, Maulokk kept his Stormvermin about him and Karikk faithfully at his side as a personal bodyguard.

The revellers that sought to flee the coming of the Skaven were blocking his intended path, the panic having spread swiftly along the streets and consumed all. Together with Kerick'k and Skrabic, he called a spell to mind and then into being. Three tides of sleek black little brethren winked into existence, seeming to coalesce from the very air. With a hateful unanimous shriek the mystic hordes scuttled forward, swamping the Humans.

The Manlings screamed their terror and pain, feeling the hot foetid breath upon

them, the chisel-shaped yellow fangs ripping open their skin, tearing out their eyes, while eager tongues lapped at their freely flowing blood and hooked claws burrowed into their torn raw wounds. The swarms ran forth, slaying and maiming indiscriminately, their supernatural hunger unsatiable as they continued to replenish their numbers from within their own sorcerous mass.

The three Warlocks remained motionless while their creations ran amok, applying their will to keep the mystic rodents in this reality, allowing them to maim and kill without relent. In moments the street was clearing as people fled in absolute calamity.

Maulokk was the first to break his spell, the others quickly following and causing the entire phalanx of vermin to fade in mid feast. The group walked through the slaughter generated space, advancing with haste and ignoring the pitiful agonised cries of the crippled and slowly dying.

The Clanrats most afflicted by the Black Hunger fell upon the quivering sustenance in their leader's passage, feverishly silencing the wounded prey and guzzling as much of the warm flesh as possible before rushing to catch up with their fellows.

Chapter sixty six

Watch Commander Shutzmann was beginning to send his troops down into the sewers to pursue the Skaven when he heard fresh cries. Looking in the direction of the sound, he was rendered incoherent at the mind numbing sight.

A line of towering forms advanced inexorably down the street. The enormous muscular humanoids were of at least ten feet in height, and their oily flesh was laden with many blemishes such as warts, boils, and occasional furry tufts. Atop stocky necks lay massive rodent craniums with long yellow teeth, now incarnadine with the blood of butchered people. Their gargantuan claw tipped hands rose and fell with a savage rhythm that crushed and tore the bodies in their passage or hurled broken carcasses and sundered body parts high into the air to rain down about them.

Frantically he ordered his men out, and severe losses were taken as the Skaven still beneath retaliated against the retreating Humans. All the time the monstrous Rat Ogres closed in steadily, sweeping all before them either by fright and panic from their fearsome visage or with their constant, brutal assault.

Fighting against the suddenly reversed fleeing tide of people, he led the troops and Watch towards the monsters while calling for reinforcements. It did not matter how this had occurred, all that mattered was that it had and now needed to be dealt with quick, before the battle was lost.

Closing in, he could see the whip-wielding Packmasters goading the aberrations on from behind. Beyond the lambasting multi-armed Skaven stretched a carpet of the dark vermin, the rows of beady eyes sparkling like gems in the light, their churning numbers defying estimation. It was then that Shutzmann felt the chill embrace of fear enveloping his heart.

'Ulric and Sigmar preserve us,' he pleaded softly in stunned shock, but the Gods were not listening this night.

Chapter sixty seven

Standing proudly at the head of his Plague Monks, Festrik and his followers became as one mind while their identities were lost to the churning vigour of sacred pestilence. Entering the manic, foaming frenzy of wanton carnage and sanguinary fury that was the Plaguerage, they squeaked in glee at the revulsion the Manlings displayed towards their rotten appearance. The Monks shrieked their rapture as the pink flesh parted under their blades and warm Manling blood pelted their rank fur, matting it and

running in streams down their sweaty hides.

The Plague Censer bearers swung their chain borne thuribles as they copiously spewed choking virulent fumes. Each breathed deeply of the pocket of potent sickly fog that it fuelled and each was lost in the trance-like state of ecstatic nirvana the foul issue caused.

The Manlings could not so appreciate the heady miasmic exhumations for when it entered their lungs, the bubonic vapours began their dread work. Throats blistered, lungs burned and ruptured, causing the victims to collapse, straining to draw breath with organs that could no longer comply. The afflicted pawed at their throat and at the ground, dying from a gloriously combined death of poisoning and asphyxiation.

Occasionally a censer bearer fell, overcome by the toxic product of their dance. While the body was still spasming in its severe death throes and the broad rictus grin of pleasure was spreading over their dying features, another took up the censer, drunk in a deep savouring breath of the fumes and began to swing the spiked ball with ecclesiastical ecstasy.

The troops facing the Plague Monks frenzied advance were massacred, the Skaven advance unstoppable, and slowly the resisting Middenheim forces were repelled or slain.

Chapter sixty eight

Through the streets, the Great Park became visible. Maulokk's Stormvermin swept the citizenry away, their halberds hacking off limbs, staving in heads and opening bodies with murderous alacrity.

Analysing the scene at a glance, Maulokk ordered that the Warprockets be deployed. Four Clanrats pushed up from behind, bearing the firing rack. They set down the wooden device and moved hastily away as Skrabic began placing the six rockets in their respective slots.

Assuming the range, Maulokk altered the rack accordingly. The Wizards were near the lake, busily exhausting their magical energies in entertaining the lowly peasants, most of whom still remained ignorant, for the Skaven approach had moved faster than the word of their coming, and all the warning shouts had been drowned out by the display and the festivities.

'Let us see how these Manlings respond to some real fireworks,' Maulokk muttered, and tersely gave the order to fire.

Running a flame along the fuses, Skrabic jumped away and stood back. In rapid succession the rockets launched into the sky, spewing thick black smoke in their wake, their tailfire a roaring fountain of darkness laced with brilliant yellow sparks. Maulokk casually drew his telescope and put it to his eye so he might witness the effects in full.

Six glorious explosions tore into the park, each preceded by a wide area pulse of sinister consuming blackness. The shadowy shell seemed to cause intense crippling pain to the Manling sorcerers, some of them even dropping dead from its caress. Their spells were not unaffected either as the opaque light touched them and the sorcery vanished in mid flight, or dissipated while in preparation. The actual explosion was considerably smaller than the pulse, but still wrought terrible carnage upon those nearest it. The concussive force shredded flesh, the belching flame scorched it and speeding shrapnel comprised of flying bone, rocket and stone fragments inflicted widespread grievous lacerations. Six sooty mushroom clouds curled up into the sky, leaving behind torn pits in the soil that burned sedately, consuming the surrounding atrocious mayhem as wails from wounds arose in a steady squealing dirge.

The slaughter served to alert all to the inhuman presence, and the citizenry immediately sought to flee as once more the Skaven began advancing, turning the area into a charnel house.

Surviving Wizards took to the air, raising the alarm, seeking vantage points from

which to rain spells down upon the invaders. Troops emerged onto the battle scene, drawn to the conflict as the sheer level of havoc became noticed. Maulokk responded to their unwelcome intrusion with the Warp Lightning Projectors.

'Narrow beam on the Wizards. Wide beam on the soldiers. Pick your targets and fire at will!' he ordered.

The Stormvermin adjusted the controls after selecting their intended targets, aimed and fired.

The generators upon their backs purred with a dull note, the long rod at the head of the weapon suddenly crackling with curling black electrical energy. The Warpstone / copper ball at the tip flared like an evil star and a blast of dark lightning streaked forth. The energy wove in zigzagging erratic aerial arcs to stroke the Middenheim warriors, the scourging dark power blazing with sudden intensity and engulfing them, carried by their metal skins, blackening and tearing flesh from their bones and leaving sizzling, smoking corpses in its wake. Concentrated streams sought the Wizards, who after spying no bow or crossbow amongst the Skaven had thought themselves safe to weave their magics from rooftop and balcony. Their oversight rendered them easy prey, and they were blown from their perches with chests bored through, faces and scalps torn from skulls, bellies gouged open by the thin beams of scorching malignant power.

The perpetual stream of Warp Lightning was directed onto fresh targets as soon as the previous victim was slain, the Skaven pouring the vile streams onto anything they spotted. The Stormvermin were soon squeaking in sadistic glee as they conducted their private massacres, revelling in their work.

Fiery balls and crackling searing bolts rained down upon the Skaven from stalwart Wizards, causing the Clanrats and Stormvermin to vent shrill shrieks as their fur burned and their hides were charred by the hostile incendiary magic. Maulokk, Skrabic, and Kerick'k each threw up waves of counter spelling sorcery, destroying the Manling spells targeted at themselves or at the Warp Lightning Projectors which were dealing so readily with the prone attackers.

Exhausted from previous pointless spell casting and vulnerable to the issue of the new weapons, the few remaining wizards fled, seeking aid as the bodies of their fellows lay ripped and blackened.

Maulokk caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, where a trio of Manling soldiers had distracted his Stormvermin with a manic charge.

A Clanrat lunged at him with a curved punch dagger and Maulokk's hand lanced to the wrist that bore the weapon, catching it and establishing a solid hold. Clamping his other hand about the murderous Clanrat's neck, the Warlock lifted him into the air and gradually turned the Skaven's forearm, redirecting it towards the wielder's gut. The Skaven fought the inevitable with frantic might as Maulokk's greater strength overcame his own. The Warlock paused suddenly, noticing a dimly glowing black residue upon the blade. It could only be Warpvenom - the deadly and immensely expensive sorcerous poison that filled the target with mutating power, drawing on their own life force to fund its ravages. The victim warped and twisted grotesquely until they expired. Warpvenom had been used upon the battlefield on occasion, introduced by missile to the heart of an enemy regiment, causing the unit to panic and disperse from the horror growing in their midst. Dangerous and deadly mutations would often ensure the demise of all about the affected target before the life drain eventually slew them. This was the trap, because if Maulokk killed him with his own weapon, the assassin could still slay him amidst a plethora of savage and mortal mutations.

The Clanrat's face was a mask of suppressed terror, for Warpvenom's effects were excruciatingly painful, and the Skaven was clearly all too aware of that fact.

Maulokk cast the Clanrat to the floor, drew his sword and rammed it through the assassin's heart before he could straighten. Wondering who might have sent this killer, he removed the dagger and wrapped it in cloth before pocketing the envenomed

weapon, the poison rare and expensive and worth saving.

The Stormvermin closed about him tightly after killing the Manling warriors. Their lapse had almost resulted in the slaying of their master and protector, and they were determined not to be so ineffectual again.

Chapter sixty nine

Threading a path through the backstreets towards their Inn, Hergar, Jakob and Elldrigar had seen the attack erupt about them. It seemed that the Skaven had been unperturbed at losing their traitor Watch Captain and had attacked anyway.

The people rampaging northwards away from the Skaven relentlessly trampled each other, caring only for their own lives. The fast flowing river of routing citizenry effectively blocked the passage forward for the trio, and they could only watch while seeking a clear path.

Climbing upon a set of stone stairs to escape the jostling flow lest they be swept away, they stared out across the terrible nightmarish scene of mortal jeopardy and terror. It was apocalyptic.

From the towering temple of Ulric to the immediate west of the Great Park, Clerics began to hurl forth the spells their deity had gifted them with in defence of the cathedral.

Troops and militia were pouring into the area, torrents of Skaven at their heels. It seemed that the majority of the conflict would be settled amidst the once sedate halcyon greenery that was now serving as an impromptu battlefield.

Templars and guards took up bow and crossbow in the windows of the Ulrican temple and began firing at the furred hordes below. Many of their comrades fought to keep the Skaven out at the lowest floors, manning window and battered down door to repel the vermin that assailed them so relentlessly in seemingly ceaseless numbers.

A silver haired Elven sorceress led the group from the Wizards and Alchemists guild deep into the fray, the small force sending immobilising howling gales before them, while others in their number projected blazing death onto the wind swept enemy.

From their vantage point, Elldrigar noticed a group of heavily armoured Skaven, with robed Magi amongst them. They were preceded by six, black furred Ratmen whose baroque devices hurled constant streams of malevolent lethal energy at all that blocked their path. Each of the weapon bearers were escorted by two, brown furred kin of smaller stature who flanked them as a token protection.

'I think I can see their leaders,' he called out.

'What?' Jakob roared, unable to hear the Elf over the screams and din of battle and routing citizenry, his eyes wide with dismay at the sight of the immense Skaven war host at work.

'The Leader! I can see him!'

'Where?'

Elldrigar pointed, stabbing his finger in the correct direction. Jakob followed his indication and spotted them, just as they disappeared into the Neumarkt district, east of the Great Park. He nudged Hergar, who was still slightly groggy from having been harshly trodden underfoot during the initial surge.

'We're moving! The leaders!' he bellowed.

Nodding grimly, Hergar hefted his hammer onto his shoulder, his jaw clenched at the sight of the beasts that had broken whole Dwarven strongholds and effectively ended the golden age of his race.

Proceeding to the top of the stairs, they kicked open the door, stormed inside the unoccupied house and threw a chair through a rear window so as to gain access to a less crowded, narrow and grimy backstreet, which more easily carried them eastwards.

Chapter seventy

Grey Seer Tikric watched as the Plague Monks spearheaded the advance into the west. Heavy retaliation was coming from the nearby temple of Myrmidia - the Manling goddess of war. The Skaven bore the sorcerous attacks unperturbed, their numbers requiring that Tikric only dispel those sorceries directed on his position, allowing the unleashed magics to do their worst with full confidence that there was no danger of a rout. He was intent on conserving his power lest he be forced to take the risky step of supplementing his energies by consuming Warpstone nuggets. The hazards of being overcome and reduced to warped gibbering Spawn were small, but nether the less it was a danger still lurking and patiently waiting to strike.

Mercenaries, troops, and ferocious knights of the Blazing Sun protected the clergy who hurled forth volley upon volley of deadly sorcery into the massed Skaven ranks. The priests also saturated wide areas with magical forces that bolstered the Manlings morale, greatly enhancing their combat strength, protected them from harm, and bestowing an unearthly courage to stand and face the squeaking vermin hordes. Such spells were fortunately brief, for as they sought to keep the sorcery in effect, the push and shove of the soldiers and the flow and ebb of the front line soon contrived to break their vital concentration.

Time was running out, he had to gain the right captives before the Skaven were forced to withdraw from the city. Such retreat was inevitable, there were just too many troops and spellcasters and not enough Skaven elite forces to be able to hold Middenheim.

Chapter seventy one

The signs of Maulokk's destination became apparent. The area had already been the scene of much fighting, but the Human forces that had occupied this position had been compelled to head southwards to meet the full Skaven assault. The twisted bodies of Clanrat 'bait' dotted the area, lodged amongst the cadavers of Human citizens and troops. A nearby manhole lay open, marked by a wreath of deeply piled Skaven bodies. Maulokk felt little pity for them. They had perished serving Skavendom, and so had died well and with purpose. A place in the realm of the Horned Rat was assured, and the afterlife was much more of an important consideration to the short-lived Skaven than to the Manlings who lived up to three times the length of a Clanrat. A true Skaven gained eternity in paradise. Those who were judged unworthy were denied and destroyed, consumed and condemned to oblivion everlasting.

Maulokk turned to his Stormvermin.

'Enter the forges, capture the Manling blacksmiths and kill all their families,' he ordered.

Maulokk wanted these captives to create weapons and armour for his cause and for the Warlord Clan of ex-slaves he would mould. Superior Dwarven artisans which were also available elsewhere in the city would never succumb to such enslavement, so Manlings were the substandard alternative. The captives would be of great value to him, negating the need to draw high quality arms from the costly forges of Clan Gnarsh, and saving him vast sums which could be better employed elsewhere. By killing the families of these captives, they would of course hate the Skaven, but would they not hate their enslavers anyway? With the death of mates and offspring they had nothing to aspire to return to, and so they would eventually become futilely resigned to their lot. He was no expert on Manling psychology, but it seemed that his course of action was sound.

The Stormvermin smashed open the doors and set upon those within. Most of the occupants had been celebrating in the Great Park, and had easily made it back to their nearby homes before the Skaven advance outpaced them. Sheltering in their

abodes, they had hid and barricaded themselves in their businesses with their family and apprentices, hoping that the Skaven would not gain a chance to ransack the city.

Sounds of conflict issued from the stores, the smithies desperately trying to drive out the intruders. Screams and distinct cries of hate and anger rang out before wails of anguish as women and children were put to the sword before their menfolk. The chagrin artisans were quickly overcome and dragged out and Clanrats ran in to gather the tools, pre-manufactured arms and armour, and also to devour what remained of the butchered Humans. The captives cried in horror and struggled to escape upon seeing the Clanrats tearing apart the bodies of their wives, relatives, offspring and infants, gulping down the quivering flesh of their loved ones with ravenous gusto.

'Skrabic,' Maulokk announced. 'Take the Manlings to the sewer entrance over there, and make sure that the Clanrats do not hold back on the pillaged arms. I want captives taken straight back and kept safely under heavy guard.'

The Warlock-Champion gave a nod of affirmation and walked off, giving fresh orders as he went.

Maulokk could discern sounds of heavy fighting to the south west and that gave him cause for concern. He had to ensure he gained enough time to achieve all he wanted. If the Council had allowed him access to the full might of Clan Skryre, he could have achieved a complete victory. With Warlocks to counter the high population of Wizards and Clerics in Middenheim, and Warfire throwers, Poison Wind Globadiers, Warplock Jezzail teams, perhaps even some Doomwheels and Screaming Bells, he could have taken the city and held it for many weeks. Stripping it bare in that time it might even pave the way for other such inspired uprisings across the Empire. Such actions would have had the year named after them, but he had been sent here to fail, not to single-handedly try and initiate the Great Armageddon.

There was time yet to receive honours such as having something as important and lengthy as a whole year remembered and named after one of his deeds.

'Warp Lightning bearers, take thirty Clanrats as support and head south west to aid our forces there.'

The Stormvermin raised the potent weapons in salute, and marched quickly away, calling forth their troops and brusquely barging a path towards their goal, keeping their aim sharp for any resistance on the way.

Chapter seventy two

The forces of Plaguemaster Festrík were meeting much heavier resistance now, not that their insane frenzy allowed them to even notice the danger. The cursed Elven populous of Middenheim were now amongst the enemy, the expert aim of the Wood Elves picking off the Plague Monks while the strength and speed of the lithe folk in close quarter combat was greatly strengthening the combined ranks of the foe.

Festrík slashed to his right, gouging open a startled face and creating an opening. Suddenly a towering armoured warrior emerged before Festrík, leaping into the vacated spot on the front line. Clad in a full suit of bright but blood-spattered armour, he bore the insignia of the Imperial house of Todbringer and carried an ornate gore-encrusted greatsword. Undaunted by the size and stature of the Manling, Festrík chattered his mouldering teeth and leapt at the Human, his rusty edged Plagueblades raised high.

Baron Heinrich Todbringer swallowed his disgust and drove away the desire to flee from the hideous thing before him. He was the eldest son of the Graf, and had to show no fear for the sake of his already demoralised troops.

Slashing viciously outward, he caused Festrík to fall back against the Monks behind him, a deep, almost mortal gash drooling blood across his chest. The manic

Plagerage withdrew under his guidance, for this was a trained warrior he faced, one who would assuredly kill him if he did not curb his frenzy.

Pressing the attack, Heinrich thrust. With a swat, Festrik knocked the blow aside with difficulty, his opponent being considerably stronger than himself. The blade sheathed itself in a neighbouring Monk, the Skaven airing a sudden pip of surprise as his skull was transfixed.

Tugging it back, Heinrich cast the blade around for a more brutal hack. The act of preparation gave Festrik an instant of weakness to exploit. Stabbing with his second blade, the blow was repelled by the sorcerously treated breastplate and slipped harmlessly aside amidst a coruscating puff of angry particles. Heinrich brought the readied blade down at an angle, slicing savagely at his adversary, forcing Festrik to duck. The humming blade took the tip from his left ear and sailed overhead to stave in a row of ribs and bury in the side of a neighbouring Plague Priest. The rotten Skaven fell, squeaking, his side a ragged spurting pit.

Festrik sprung upward from his crouch, driving both Plagueblades before him in a dual assault. One tip rattled upon the breastplate and was repelled, the other slid to the shoulder with a screech, found purchase under the crested pauldron, slid in, pierced the gambeson beneath and drew blood. The doughty Human instantly resisted the virulent enchantments of deadly contagion upon his weapon, so Festrik was resolved to slaying his enemy through physical trauma.

Shifting his weight onto the weapon already through the obstinate barrier of the armour, Festrik sought to try and drive it deeper and into the heart of the Manling.

Clenching his teeth, Heinrich endured the pain and jerked his head forward, solidly butting the Skaven. The sturdy visor burst Festrik's nose and dislodged one of his incisors. With his blood shot eyes watering, the Plaguemaster tottered back, pulling his blade with him.

Spitting out the tooth, he gave an ultrasonic pip of hatred, a truculent snarl, and charged forward. Pain unexpectedly lanced through his abdomen and looking down he saw the Manling's greatsword buried deep in his belly. With a sanguinary hiss, Festrik shifted forward along the blade, seeking to tear out the Human's throat with his remaining teeth. Dropping a blade he clawed for the Manling, trying to grab hold of him, closing in a short distance. Festrik gave a convulsive throe and shrieked, the sword that was embedded in his abdomen being twisted to paralyse him with waves of intense pain. Spasming uncontrollably, his intestines were being minced by the rotating weapon. With a weak jab, a Plagueblade clanged loudly but vainly against Heinrich's enchanted helm and fell aside.

The greatsword was yanked free and brought in an overhead arc that smashed open Festrik's skull. The blade sank down to his neck and the two sides of his head lolled apart like the petals of a torn flower. Prolific gouts spewed forth and the Plaguemaster collapsed, his jerking twitches making the twin raw flaps of his cranium flop slack and loose.

Heinrich gave thanks to Ulric that he had decided to return early from a diplomatic mission of his father's, and moved into the other Plague Monks with a rallying yell and a deluge of deadly flesh rending hacks.

'For Middenheim and Graf Boris!'

Chapter seventy three

Leaning back against the cool surface of a wall, Jakob panted. Hergar's face was contorted with rage as he drove his hammer into the wounded Skaven's skull, mashing the tissue and sending torn matter along the cobblestones in a dark cone of manifested horror.

Elldrigar turned and aiming swiftly, fired an arrow into the throat of a wounded Clanrat who was running to either escape or call for aid. The Skaven gave a choking

grunt and tumbled as an inanimate wreck.

This was the second enemy unit they had encountered while seeking the leader of the invasion. The first had been dispatched with ease, but this second group had taken longer due to the fatigue of the trio. Each of them bled from a number of small wounds, and were caked in the blood of their defeated adversaries.

Jakob straightened and moved into the adjacent alley. Hergar pulled his hammer out of the Skaven's ruined head and followed, while Elldrigar backed in warily, scanning for sight of anymore Ratmen, another arrow notched in readiness.

They jogged down the thin alleyway, following the winding path and never deviating from their south east direction.

Turning a corner into the entrance of another slender alley, Jakob leapt to the other side and out of the opening, making Hergar skid to a halt and Elldrigar to freeze suddenly before they themselves charged into the passage.

'What?' hissed Hergar.

Jakob pointed to the alley they had almost sprinted down, and which they now hovered just outside of.

'Three sentries, backs to us.'

'You think this is it?' Elldrigar asked.

'Maybe?'

'I bloody hope so. I could do with a real challenge,' Hergar grumbled testily, spitting on the ground, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths, his eyes sparkling with the joy of battle.

'Hergar, you take the one on the right. Elldrigar, the one on the left. I'll take point and hit the centre. Let's do it!'

Moving in, following the shadow smothered grimy walls toward the three Clanrats, they slowed as they neared the enemy, moving more silently until they were only a few yards from them. The sounds of battle and the shrieks from beyond concealed their approach until it was too late. The Skaven on the left turned, detecting the noise, and met Elldrigar's sword as it punched through his temple and drilled through his skull. Jakob grabbed his allotted target from behind, locked a hand to its snout, pulled the head up and slit its throat with the edge of his blood soaked sword. Gripping the last Skaven as Jakob had done, Hergar pulled the head around more violently and to a far greater degree, snapping the neck with a soft crunch. The Clanrat gave a violent twitch, fell limp in the Slayer's tight grasp and was thrown disdainfully to the floor.

'Now that's what I *call* pest control,' growled Hergar.

Chapter seventy four

Grimacing, Shutzmann gently removed his left vambrace, the jagged edges of the split enchanted surfaces catching the deep slash beneath. Blood ran continually down his forearm, vein and muscle severed, all feeling having fled the limp extremity.

A grey robed cleric of Sigmar approached, drew some lint and began calling into being magics of healing. Sorcery filed the wound and the rustle of migrating flesh became audible over the sounds of fighting and wanton death.

They were in the south east of the city, near the wall and the second chairlift terminus. They had rushed to meet the Skaven, but had gradually been forced further back towards the city perimeter, for the Skaven were everywhere, pouring forth in a seemingly endless tide. The current battle lines raged only fifty or so yards away.

Shutzmann prayed that they hold this time, because they were rapidly running out of space to retreat into. Much needed aid was hopefully imminent - the Knights of the royal palace, led by the Graf and his son Heinrich were seeking to reach and relieve the besieged forces by trying to penetrate the heavy Skaven resistance obstructing

them. It was just a question of who would reach them first - friend or foe, and it was becoming increasingly unlikely that it would be the Imperial forces.

Ulrich had been forced to back out of the fighting after a halberd had cleaved open his arm. He had moved to where all the wounded lay, receiving all the aid that could be mustered to either save the defender's lives or get them back into the fray.

The clank of marching armoured troops resounded, and with a jolt of dismay, Shutzmann snatched up his blade and looked up in confusion to see lines of metal covered Dwarves issuing from the Chapel of Grugni. They were led by a long bearded ancient Dwarf in studded heavy platemail, the cuirass bearing three glowing Runes, while three more Runes lay upon his double headed fearsome greataxe.

Shutzmann did not recognise this Dwarf, but he did know Mungrim Dalmrin, the cleric in charge of the Chapel who walked a step behind the armoured dour faced General.

The two leaders of warrior and spirit ordered their troops into the conflict, sending them in four groups to join the main battle areas where the defenders had spotted Skaven insurgents and engaged. The two ancient Dwarves approached the Commander with twenty grim Dwarven warriors behind them. The dead stern stare on all their faces, the battle scars and trophies worn brazenly upon their superbly crafted armour proved that these were no ordinary troops, they were elite veteran warriors.

'We trust you have no objection to our aid?' declared Mungrim.

'Most certainly not,' he replied, sitting up and buckling a new but mundane vambrace on to replace his damaged ensorcerelled one now that the wound was fully healed.

The Commander wondered where this massive fighting force had come from. They were not Middenheim Dwarves, these were professional warriors, and the General was no artisan, he was clearly an experienced leader of many battles.

'But I am curious as to why you did not emerge earlier. There was some heavy fighting outside your temple and I lost many men,' Shutzmann said, trying to hold his gal in check.

The local Dwarven residents had flocked to join them against this ancient enemy that had pillaged their mountain Empire and now threatened their new home. Yet of this small army there had been no sign even as their own kind spilled their life at the steps of the small temple from whence this regiment had sprang.

'We were not present then,' the cleric stated.

'But wh-'

'We may not reveal such things,' the General interrupted abruptly.

Realising that they must have been in the tunnels, perhaps combating the Skaven from below, Ulrich knew this explained the amount of heavy troops, so he dropped the subject. If it were so, then they would not reveal such secrets to a non-Dwarf.

Ulrich climbed to his feet and picked up his sword and shield.

'The worst of the fighting is to the west - south of Great Park.'

'Then that is where we shall go,' the General declared gruffly.

Leading them at a brisk march along the body and blood-drenched streets, Shutzmann occasional paused to aid the people against small groups of Skaven marauders, the support of the Dwarves making such engagements brief and exceedingly one sided.

Nearing the front line, they could see that the fighting had intensified. The Skaven were breaking through in numerous places, causing backstreets to be left dangerously unguarded. The many citizens voluntarily aiding the city's forces were on the verge of routing.

With a bloodthirsty battle cry roar to their Gods, the Dwarves surged forward as a tide of dark metal. The squat fighters slammed into the enemy with tremendous force, driving back the Skaven under the impetus of their initial charge and reinforcing the

ailing Human lines. Their hammers and axes rose and fell like scythes in a harvest, cracking bones and cleaving open bodies. The Skaven responded with equal venom, dragging down their adversaries and literally tearing them apart. Serrated blades gouged ragged wounds and split the thick armour of the Dwarves.

Running to the front, Shutzmann led his men and bolstered the flagging morale of the people. The air was thick with the stench of opened bodies and the hot sweat of battle. Agonised screams of suffering issued from the dying and maimed of both sides. The solid clang of metal against metal constantly sounded along with the wet rip of slicing flesh, the splash of spilt fluid, and the thud of falling bodies and sundered limbs snapped from joints.

The Skaven began to burst from windows at the Middenheimer's flanks, the vast numbers of the vermin sweeping and traversing the houses after being blocked in the street by the resistance. The Ratmen sprang out and instantly beset the nearest troops, the vermin being quickly reinforced by a steady stream from behind, the Skaven's desperate need for meat overcoming their trepidation of leaving safety of vast numbers.

The Dwarves and Humans were forced to retreat to more defensible positions, reluctantly leaving their dead and wounded to be pitilessly devoured by the hordes.

Slashing wildly to hamper their pursuit, Shutzmann covered the withdrawal of his troops as best he could, his arm pulsating with intense mayhem as the freshly healed injury protested at such extreme use.

A huge Rat Ogre burst forth from the ranks, roaring loudly as a trio of Clanrats died under its feet. The beast was bigger than the others of its foul brood that now lay dead at no small cost in Human lives. The creature's flesh was laced with lumpy black lines that appeared to be warped burned scars and it was missing an eye and two of its clawed fingers from the left hand. The other Skaven leapt aside to avoid being crushed as the Rat Ogre stormed on, heedless of those in its path.

Ulrich knew that the creature would slay many as they retreated, unless he could hold it, no matter how briefly.

'Come on you ugly bastard, you'll not kill me without a fight.' he muttered, and slashed out, the tip of his blade raking the thick hide of its left thigh, opening a long deep slice.

The creature seemed to remain unaware of the cut and responded with a downward thrust of its claws. The curved talons struck his shield, buckling the surface and numbing his whole arm due to the sheer might of the vicious impact. Hastily giving ground, Ulrich stabbed to cover his withdrawal. The point of his blade met a moment's resistance against the preternatural toughness of its stomach and then opened a shallow hole in the iron abdominal muscles.

Two Skaven spears rattled vainly against his armour, the bearers quickly moving away again as the Rat Ogre advanced, lashing indiscriminately about itself.

The monster swept its claws up, once more catching Ulrich's shield and ripping the metal open with three ragged lines. The vambrace and couter beneath buckled slightly and his already numb flesh went dead, the life bashed from it. Thrusting desperately, he gouged across the creature's chest but was unable to pierce the ribs that were as unyielding as iron bars. The monstrous beast clenched its massive hand into a fist and punched forward. Ducking aside as the battering ram of claws and knuckles shot past as a blur, Ulrich had a Packmaster's goading whip lash out from behind the beast and encircle his ankle. The Skaven tugged harshly and sent the already off balance officer tumbling to the cobblestones. Landing heavily, he grabbed his sword and rolled, slashing down to cut the leather coil at his ankle.

The unleashed Rat Ogre loomed over him like a mountain and suddenly squealed in pain, its flank bursting open, a two handed rune axe erupting from the flesh and showering Ulrich in blood and slivers of rent muscle.

Ulrich rolled frantically aside, the Rat Ogre collapsing toward him. The ground he had vacated shuddered under the monumental impact, leaving him no doubt that he

would have been crushed had he not kept his wits and cut the whip.

The Dwarven General decapitated the squeaking and maniacally thrashing beast while his four guards kept the Skaven at bay with vengeful thrusts and slashes. Ulrich unwound the severed tip of the restraining whip cord, rolled to his feet and backed away, nursing his aching arm and swaying dizzily.

Having protected the Human's flight, the Dwarven warriors retreated under the pressure of the advance of the Skaven horde. One of the guards fell, his shoulder torn open. Before his companions could act, the dwarf was snagged and drawn into the throng, his gauntleted fingers scratching at the stone as he tried to save himself. The warrior vanished into the wall of fur and bellowed in terrible torment, his armour being torn aside as dozens of snouts burrowed feverishly into his body.

Reaching the newly formed and awaiting lines, Ulrich turned to thank the morose general for rescuing him, but the stalwart fighter was not there. Looking back further, he saw the rune axe rise from the depths of the advancing sea of fur and spiny metal, the swift footed Skaven having outrun the slower Dwarven troops and trapped them. They now fought bravely on in a tight circle, buried deep within the Skaven swarm, fighting with crazed fanaticism, selling their lives dearly.

Ulrich looked away in solemn disgust as they were dragged down, ripped asunder and eaten alive, their helms rising up on spear and halberd as trophies of the kill.

The Skaven charged again onto the new line and were once more held while their number gradually filtered into the adjacent homes and continued the cycle of retreat.

From a backstreet thundered the throbbing blazing crackle of lightning, followed by piercing screams and shouts. The Skaven warriors drew back, parting and allowing six lines of black electrical energy to spew from the foremost ranks.

Where it touched, all flesh was instantly scorched and torn. Metal erupted in black sparks to channel the power over its entirety, accentuating the inflicted trauma. Dwarves fell back, beards burning, armour crackling like stars of dark power, their flesh smouldering and sloughing from their bones in waxen clumps of untidy refuse.

The Skaven advanced, laying down streaming arcs of death, leaving the defending troops little choice but to ceaselessly withdraw. The lines of Middenheim once more fell back in disarray, the strange devices leading the pursuit, reaching out and hurling crackling doom into the retreating forces. A triumphant squeak went up across the Skaven host, for their enemy were visibly crumbling before them.

Resolutely defiant Dwarves were thrown aside, the energy deviating from intended paths to embrace the more attractive, heavily armoured warriors, lambasting them with deadly fingers of darkness, cooking them in their steel skins.

A wizard, lost in the complex processes of sorcery was left exposed by the troops now taking flight. Two fiery balls of blazing heat flew from his hands, just as the Skaven turned the beams of their weapons upon him in tight streams, ripping the Wizard apart with evil lashing arcs.

The Wizard's sorcery concentrated on and engulfed one of the Stormvermin, the flames enveloping him and reducing the warrior almost instantly to a charred husk.

More horrendous casualties were sustained, the forces being cut down as easily as sheaves of wheat. A group of archers quickly took cover, drew aim, and opened fire. Several of the Clanrat guards fell, punctured by misplaced shots, the archers too riven with fear to maintain their full accuracy. Yet two Stormvermin also collapsed, pierced by concentrated missile fire.

The delicate Warpstone generators detonated with extreme violence from the sudden jolt of their bearer's fall. Black energy burst forth, the opaque nova scattering the dead body attached to it outward in a hundred smoking pieces. Clanrats were rent apart by the rampaging eruption, many were hurled bodily through the air, trailing thick smoke from their smouldering fur and shattered limbs. When the fierce bleak

explosion cleared it was to expose a shattered crater and not one trace of the evil mechanisms or their operators.

The cover the archers exploited availed them little, for the energy discharge had no taste for stone and careered about corner and barricade alike, seeking metal, no matter how insignificant in quantity, be it breastplate, pot helm, sword, arrow head, button or buckle.

The Clanrats backed fearfully away from the weapons, leaving only the two shielding guards to protect each device. The archers saw the opportunity and wasted no time in seizing it as their ranks were pummelled by searing jets of electrical death.

They cut down two more, the resulting explosions tearing up the street and sending burning debris and pieces of the bearer and guards raining down over a wide area. More archers were speedily deployed, the previous unit utterly shredded by Warp Lightning. At the cost of their lives, the Stormvermin and the archers fired into each other, annihilating the opposition while they to were butchered. What appeared to be a dead Dwarven warrior at the feet of the last came to and hurled himself up, his charred hands locking about the neck of the Stormvermin. The creature fired instinctively, engulfing them both in a cage of black crackling bolts as the Dwarf channelled the energy via his throttling grip onto the armour of his foe.

Potent Warp explosions shook and gouged open the street, signalling the end of the first devastating assault by these experimental war machines.

The Skaven horde were no longer blocked by the devices or their cones of lethal discharge and charged forward, each ruled by their eternal hunger, denying the defenders of the city time to celebrate their meagre success.

Chapter seventy five

Watching with satisfaction Maulokk saw the last of the captured and bound smithies being loaded with stolen arms and tools and forced down into the sewers.

If his orders were being carried out, several Clanrat squads would be moving through the south, taking as many Manlings prisoner as possible, men and women alike. Such female slaves were still valuable to breed new serviles from, resulting in a stock more accustomed to their lot as the Skaven's property.

His attention was diverted to an alleyway, where three Clanrats dropped from their mortal wounds. From the shadows stormed three figures - a Dwarf, an Elf, and a fully armoured Manling. His three pawns no less, come to ignorantly turn upon their puppeteer.

They paused for a moment, looking about them at the sheer volume of troops moving upon the street, and after seeming to resolve themselves to a valiant final fight they continued a bounding advance, weapons raised.

'Leave them!' ordered Maulokk.

The Stormvermin and Clanrats readied to attack but did not close in. Maulokk unsheathed his rune sword, Kerick'k drew his slender blade, and Karikk levelled his halberd. Backing away, Skrabic readied a spell of Warp Lightning should he need it, running through the sorcery in his mind again and again as he watched the forces clash.

Leaping forward, Maulokk thrust at the Dwarf's gut. Hergar swung his hammer down and managed to reduce the skewering blow to a shallow cut to his hip, but suddenly his head began to feel dizzy, a blurring of his senses for which there was no reason.

Disorientating magic emanated from the Warpstone amulet about Maulokk's neck, the power that could not easily affect Skaven with their resistance to the holy substance now began to disrupt the workings of the Dwarf's mind.

With a roar of effort and strain, Hergar forced the encroaching fog from his brain. Slashing back, Maulokk forced the Slayer to duck away or be decapitated. His

reactions were still torpid and the rune sword cut a shallow slice across his left cheek, a stinging kiss that caused Hergar to recoil.

Facing his foe, Hergar sneered as he noticed what lay upon the Skaven's sword, the expression causing the flow of blood to increase from his cut. This...rat! Bore a Rune weapon. The vermin wielded sacred stolen Dwarven lore, and the sight of it enraged him with indignation.

Pressing the attack, Maulokk swiped one handed at the Slayer's flank to distract him. Hergar parried the blow with a swing of his haft, only to have the Skaven smash his couter to Hergar's throat, the spiked elbow guard ploughing a deep furrow and contusing the flesh.

With his neck ablaze from pain, the dwarf gasped for breath as Maulokk reversed his grip and swung overhead. Hergar's pain dulled senses sought to deflect the blow, casting up the hammer as a horizontal barricade but only succeeding in slowing it. The blade struck his collar and shattered the bone, sending a shockwave of agony down his left side. Blood poured profusely from the wound as Maulokk pulled the blade back, causing the serrates to run along the splintered bone and cut away morsels of Hergar's flesh.

The Slayer could see his death as being imminent - the battle, the torture, the cutting of his throat by one of these beasts, all of it had drained him physically. He had slain a score of Skaven to reach this place, and now he sought only to take this Warlock with him when he died.

'Drengi!' roared Hergar with jubilation and hate, thrusting outward, ramming for his opponent's face with every ounce of his fury as his shameful disgrace and the prospect of erasing it added fuel to his assault.

With a sneer of extreme effort Maulokk side-stepped and span, swinging his sword two handed in a full circle, dropping into a crouch as he whirled. The outstretched arms of the Dwarf could not withdraw to his flank in time and the resounding brittle crack of a ribs being shattered rang out. The flesh parted upon the keen blade and with the runes imbuing an awful potency it sunk deep into the chest of the Dwarf, ploughing into his heart, the point nudging his spine.

My vow is fulfilled, my honour restored, I go to join my ancestors, Hergar thought gladly, a wide grin spreading across his features as tears of joy rolled down his tattooed cheeks.

A gout of blood poured from the mortal wound and Maulokk tugged his sword free, letting the dwarf fall to his knees, his life cascading from the terrible injury. The blade swung down and swept overhead, sloughing away the gore that encrusted it before dropping with tremendous force onto Hergar's head. The entire top half caved inward with a resonant crunch and the gouging sword halted against the roof of the Dwarf's smiling mouth.

His hammer slipped from his grasp and clanged to the cobblestones, his features running with a bloody cascade that dribbled down his tattooed torso to form a deep puddle about him. The body dropped from beneath Maulokk's blade and thudded lifelessly next to Elldrigar.

Jakob lashed out with his sword, keeping his dagger close to his chest. The Stormvermin met the swipe with the centre of his halberd and pivoted upon the blade, bringing the head up at Jakob's groin. The Human thrust down and caught the blood encrusted blade on the wide guard of his parrying dagger.

With an ultra-sonic murmur, Karikk reversed his swing, throwing the counterweight at the Human's skull. Jakob responded quickly by drawing his blade from the haft and hurling the sword up to hold off the solid studded mace.

While the Manling's weapons were briefly holding each end of the halberd, Karikk shoved the haft at Jakob's neck, overcoming the exhausted strength of the

Human. On a sudden jerking leap the Manling cast himself back, dragging his weapons with him, the meticulously sharpened edges squealing against each other.

Karikk instantly swung backwards as the Human jumped away, letting the halberd slip in his grasp, extending his reach with the polearm. Calling up his full strength, the Stormvermin swept about in an arc that carried the blade swiftly round, its keen edge airing a sinister tune against the air.

Jakob was just landing when the whistling blade bit into his shin, cutting through the greave to gouge a deep wound in the meat, almost fracturing the bone with its formidable impetus.

Staggering back with a severe limp, blood and pain issued copiously from Jakob's gash, making him fight earnestly to retain a defence against this clearly expert warrior. Karikk rearranged his grip as he whirled the massive pole-arm, spacing his hands equally upon the shaft and charging, ramming the halberd at the armoured abdomen of his adversary.

Hacking out with his sword, Jakob struck the spiked axe head and sparks spat from the impact before the weighty weapon was diverted. Jakob hastily jabbed with his dagger, but the point merely rattled harmlessly upon Karikk's breastplate and failed to do more than dent and scratch the metal. The Stormvermin swung about, bringing the counterweight at Jakob's wound. The Human deftly leapt into the air, his wounded shin seeming to explode with torment from the sudden use of its impaired muscles.

The base of the halberd sailed beneath him and turning his agony into ferocity, he bashed his bastard sword onto the Skaven's head. The helm rang with the cruel impact and although it badly dented the metal, it failed to split it. Simultaneously, as the Human's dazing blow fell, Karikk seized the opportunity to attack the Manling while still vulnerable from his dodge. Kicking flatly outward, the Stormvermin struck Jakob in the stomach before he landed.

Karikk recoiled from the concussive strike to his head, his ears ringing, his sight washing from side to side. All harm wrought by his kick had been absorbed by the Human's armour, but the imparted impetus knocked him back, causing the Manling warrior to land clumsily. His feet slide and buckled beneath him, the full drop of his body and armour onto a crippling wound only adding to his debilitated state as an anguished roar leapt from the Human's throat.

Throwing off the effects of the Manling's strike, Karikk instantly slashed at his opponent's shoulder, the attack a little off as Karikk had to pick one of the three Manling images his eyes presented him with.

Jakob threw himself frantically aside and completely destroyed all equilibrium as the point of the axe-head clipped his armoured hip and bounced off. His feet slipped and he sprawled onto the cobblestoned street, his vision swimming from the punishment placed upon his wound.

The Stormvermin launched himself into the air, stabbing downward at the Manling with his weight fully sponsoring the halberd's descent. Deploying his last dregs of energy, Jakob rolled aside, causing the blade to spit bright scintillating bursts from the stones in his stead. The pole arm rose and fell in a blur of action, and disorientated from his desperate tumble, giddy with pain and blood loss, Jakob did not see the incoming lunge in time to evade it. The point pierced his backplate, instantly halting his attempt to roll or rise and pinning him in one place with a loud metallic chime.

Jakob bellowed in agony as the Skaven shoved the blade deeper into his back, piercing his kidneys, the yowl rising to an abrupt peak when the weapon was tugged free to permit the deliverance of the death blow. With vision fading, Jakob rolled back, bringing his sword with him, the surprise attack striking the Skaven's gut, piercing the armour and slicing a deep wound.

The Stormvermin had long since become accustomed to suffering and merely hissed before stabbing forcefully down, adding the spark of duress to his ferocity. There was a second metallic tone, and the breastplate split wide, letting the wide blade

burrow through his ribs, transfixing his heart. Twisting the halberd with a spiteful wrench, Karikk split open the ribcage, audibly churning the organs within. The ululating cry of his victim transformed into a spray of crimson that gushed in a stream through the breathing holes of his helm, decorating Karikk as he stood over him. The Manling pawed at the shaft with gurgling shrieks and slowly fell limp after a rapid series of convulsive twitches.

Lunging for the chest of Kerick'k, Elldrigar's blade was met by the Warlock's weapon and slid forth in a stabbing riposte. The Elf nimbly side-stepped and brought his blade round onto the Skaven's back. The hack failed to inflict any trauma greater than some harsh bruising upon the unnaturally tough flesh and Elldrigar surmised that his enemy was sorcerously protected.

The Skaven backed up, seeking room to manoeuvre. The Elf quickly closed the gap and hurled a jab at the Skaven's heart. Kerick'k desperately threw his sword at the speeding blade, but being no adept in swordsmanship the two weapons failed to meet. The blade struck a rib, slid aside and sank deep into flesh. The Warlock catapulted himself back with a cry, slapping his free hand to the wound. The injury was agonising, despite his having taken a large dose of tcheeka prior to the invasion to keep his acid burns quelled.

Elldrigar swept out to take the Skaven's black masked head, his own face hidden within a mask of unleashed loathing.

Kerick'k kicked out, hurling himself away from the decapitating blow. The Elf did not relent and charged his opponent, throwing a fake attack to meet the blade of his foe. The Skaven Warlock swatted amateurishly at the slash, whereupon Elldrigar twisted the slender pommel weapon from his hands. Defenceless, Kerick'k forsook the use of his horned brow and dove to recover his blade while it was still falling toward the ground. Pain shot through the Warlock's stomach as the Elf buried half of his blade length in the Skaven's gut. The momentum of the leap was countered and Kerick'k fell toward the floor.

Elldrigar tugged in the opposite direction as his opponent dropped, the drag of the blade unzipping skin and muscle and disembowelling him. Kerick'k struck the ground with a harsh inert thud, the impact causing the split skin to open and his intestines to spill out from the hole, slithering onto the street before him. He desperately clawed at the glistening viscera, the warm organs slipping through his ever weakening, shaking hands as he made a futile attempt to scoop them back in.

Elldrigar heard a thump beside him and glanced to see Hergar's ruined head. One sightless eye gazed blindly at him as the contents of his skull sluggishly dribbled from a horrendous injury.

The Elf spied the armoured, white furred Skaven standing over the cadaver, and forsaking the dying Warlock, he instantly charged Hergar's murderer.

Elldrigar lunged viciously, trying to keep his fury at bay, for reckless severity had not served Hergar, and thus he could safely assume that this Skaven was skilled in the minutiae of war. He felt the taint of dark sorcery tickling his synapses, seeking to dull his reactions, but his mind was strong and kept the invading tendrils at bay.

The blade was elegantly turned at the last moment by a sweep from the Skaven's own weapon. Maulokk carried his blade back and thrust in response, the Elf leaping away from the killing blow and upon his agile landing he swiftly advanced, slashing for the throat of his adversary. Maulokk raised his sword point, caught the attack, shoved the blade away and hacked at the flank of the Elf, forcing Elldrigar to once more spring back in avoidance of the assault.

Readying himself for his foe's imminent offensive, Maulokk heard the Manling cry out in lethal harrowing. Maulokk smiled - the Elf was now alone.

Incensed at the sound of Jakob's death, Elldrigar unleashed a berserk jab. Maulokk denied the sword access to his form once more and awaited the next attempt, keeping his body tensed like a spring, ready to strike.

The Elf slashed at his legs and Maulokk once more blocked the attack, his heavier, rune enhanced sword and greater strength easily overcoming the impetus of his adversary's assaults. Carrying his blade overhead, Elldrigar went for Maulokk's head, just as the Skaven simultaneously struck outwards. The lighter blade hit first, striking the helm near the visor. The point did not penetrate and was transmogrified into baleful energies by the vindictive armour, which spat them onto the body of the Elf, even as he nimbly twisted to avoid the stabbing rune blade that gouged for his vitals.

Dropping back with a shout, his limbs aching, his skin burning in places from the nauseating touch of the foul dark forces, Elldrigar fought to keep upright. Maulokk grinned, bared his teeth and sprang at the enemy with a broad slash. The Elf wove aside, bringing his sword over his shoulder in both hands and dragging the edge along Maulokk's stomach. The metal squealed and parted, allowing the blade to pierce and open a shallow furrow in the Warlock's flesh before its bearer leapt away.

Maulokk adopted a pure defensive stance and paused, irritated by the constant evasion of his adversary, but knowing that ultimately, such actions could not be maintained for long.

In the Skaven's moment of inaction Elldrigar pounced, sending a low blow at his enemy's legs. Maulokk prevented it and retaliated with a fierce riposte. The Elf danced away again, leaving Maulokk's rune blade to slice nought but empty air.

Resolving to draw the enemy in, Maulokk pretended to lower his guard a fraction, feigning exhaustion. The Elf charged and lashed at him with a yell of anger. Maulokk repulsed the blade but abstained from making any retaliation that would send the Elf skipping out of his clutches.

Seizing the chance to kill the Warlock, Elldrigar lunged, causing Maulokk to instantly act, side-stepping and letting the thrust over extend before kicking upward at the enemy's breast. Anticipating a dodge backwards, Maulokk opened his jaws.

Lured into acting as expected, Elldrigar arched away from the rising spiked poleyn and suddenly felt sharp teeth sink into his shoulder and take a firm hold. With a shout of virulence he brought his sword back to stab at the Skaven. Maulokk grabbed the wrist, determined not to allow the adversary escape, clenching his jaws with all his might. The Skaven Warlock quickly copied Elldrigar's offensive action, forcing the Elf to snatch his armoured wrist and prevent the rune blade being used against him. Maulokk shifted his weight and strength onto his jaws, forcing the Elf slowly to the ground as each sought to hold and fend off the other's weapon.

Fighting to resist, Elldrigar's awkward position hampered him, and the Skaven was just too strong and too heavy. The Elf sank into a crouch, then fell to his knees, and then was dropped onto his back.

Settling atop the supine enemy, Maulokk quickly released the bite and closed in on his opponent's neck. Elldrigar writhed frantically, trying to fend off or evade the approaching maw. With desperate vigour he tried to stab or slash at the enemy atop him. But because of the Skaven gauntlet clamped on his wrist, he lacked space to gather momentum and his weapon simply rattled upon the dark armour, lacking even the power to cause the unleashing of retributive dark force.

Neither combatant could go for a fresh weapon without releasing a hand and allowing the enemy to use the blade already drawn, so the fight now hinged on whether Elldrigar could escape the Skaven's grapple before he was slain. The Skaven's hot, bloody breath washed over him as he fought on, wriggling and trying to slip free from the oppressive restraining weight. Maulokk spied a sudden opening amidst the struggles and flashed downward, clamping his jaws about the throat of the Elf. The Warlock felt the life well in his mouth and swallowed the flood while wrenching his head from side to side, mercilessly opening the wounds.

Feeling his neck coming apart amidst waves of unimaginable pain, Elldrigar released his hold upon Maulokk's sword arm and grabbed the Skaven's armour sheathed snout, trying to prize the jaws apart and end the blazing agony ripping into

him. A horrendous wet tearing filled his ears and warmth flooded his face. The snout pulled away and then plunged back into the ragged hole, guzzling the blood with glee. Unable to voice his repulsion, suffering terribly, and filled with an absolute pinnacle of horror, Elldrigar beat his fists upon the Warlock, gradually becoming weaker as his body emptied of vitality. With a gurgling exhale, Elldrigar shuddered and fell languid.

Swallowing the fresh mouthful of meat and finding Elf flesh to his liking, Maulokk arose, wiping the rune blade upon the clothes of the cadaver. Sheathing it, he began licking the gore from about his snout, the exhilaration of his fight having greatly satisfied his need for mayhem.

'Take the body of Kerick'k below,' he ordered of the Clanrats. 'Touch none of his possessions and place him in his warren.'

After removing the breastplate and cutting open the presented gambeson, Karikk forced his fingers between the Manling's ribs and with a brutal tug opened the inert torso so that he might devour the shredded organs and abate the welling pangs of Black Hunger.

The Clanrats dragged the Longbeard away and hastily began to strip it, seeking to gain the Slayer's strength through consumption of his body.

Focusing his sorcerous powers, Maulokk transported himself instantaneously to a rooftop where he regally surveyed the battle scene, the wind whistling about him, removing the heat of the conflict.

Many fires ran amok across the cityscape, the amber flames bathing small sections of city in warm light. The temples that towered above the scene were quiet and still, their defenders having driven back their enemy and since having emerged to give pursuit. Clan Skreek was no match for the might of Middenheim, and only their cultivated hunger and shock assault had kept them upon the surface this long.

Shifting sorcerously back to the ground, Maulokk had seen all he needed to.

'We return,' he broadcast, all his planned goals fully achieved. 'Gather my guards and initiate the plan,' he said to the feasting Karikk, and made for the sewers.

Removing his snout, strings of viscera dangling from his dripping features, the Stormvermin swallowed his mouthful, snatched up his halberd and began issuing orders.

'You heard the Commander! We leave! Get moving you Clanrat scum, before I crush your skulls! All Stormvermin, with me, we are to make sure that all secret tunnel doors are broken open, leave none intact!' he yelled, obeying Maulokk's orders even though he did not understand the reasoning behind them.

Chapter seventy six

Tikric had his new guards take firm hold of the captive, who pleaded with the red furred Skaven holding him, begging them to let go. But the humanity within them was gone, they were Tikric's servants now in body and in soul.

Calling up the potent energies, cavorting back and forth, dancing a manic gait of spell weaving, a dark smoke began to flow in the wake of his body, forming into a swirling cloud of inky blackness as he continued threading an intricate mesh of throbbing tendrils into the opaque fog. Shrieking the words that would give full life to the spell, Tikric stopped abruptly.

The trembling Manling sagged in the grip of those restraining him as the Grey Seer turned an intense stare onto the Human. The smoke fled Tikric's physique, curling swiftly toward the captive and streaming in through his orifices, saturating his being with dark transmuting power.

The target screamed in soiled anguish and his flesh began to buck and quiver, his red hair migrating, speedily encompassing his whole body. With a series of groaning crunches his jawline extended, forming his features into the semblance of a Skaven's. Claws pushed from his fingers as a full pelt rustled from his roots and his legs

contorted. His spine poured free a long hairless tail and his stature diminished, condensing itself. The final dregs of mist trailed in and the Manling was fully transmogrified into a placid red furred Clanrat.

The creation was released by the guards, and instead of running, he stood obediently awaiting orders. The sorcerously manufactured Clanrat was loyal without question to he who had produced it. The potent hex was exclusive to the caste of the Grey Seers, and with it the greatest of their kind had manufactured the albino Stormvermin guard who defended the Temple of the Horned Rat. Now Tikric would create his own elite, born of the red haired Humans to give them a unifying identity to fear. He would immediately produce as many as his powers would allow to provide him escort on the way from Middenheim. Those he could not transform now, would be sorcerously altered at a later date, and would be transported in the meantime as slaves. By using Maulokk's favour, he would extract all those of red hair from the gathered slave populous before Maulokk allocated them to whatever fate he had planned. Then Tikric would magically engineer his own Clanrat regiment, one whose loyalty was absolute and could not be diverted, a Crimson Clan, with himself as absolute Warlord.

Chapter seventy seven

Elldrigar felt his consciousness shift from his body, and despite his greatest instinctive attempts to resist, his mind drained from his flesh like water squeezed from a wet cloth.

His vision swam and warped, and suddenly he was floating, drifting within a raging sea of colour, sound and light. The ocean was huge, beyond all mortal imagination, its very appearance placing a most grievous strain on Elldrigar's sanity. The firmament sea heaved and bucked as if an infinity of hurricanes raged wildly through it, churning the fluid substance that changed shape and colour at a constant incredible and frantic pace, never repeating the same combinations twice. Impossible hues flowed through the dazzling maelstrom of light and brilliance, colours he could never have thought possible. A deafening cacophony of maddening noise accompanied the sea of pure chaos, which was beautiful, terrible, rapturous and hideous all at the same time. If this were the afterlife, he was sure to go mad.

Elldrigar saw that he was not alone either, for strange shapes moved about in the vast, infinite distances. There were shoals of creatures, individual eldritch beings, and swarms of other less identifiable forms, whose structure defied and offended logic and nature.

He could not sense any passage of his own, so he could not discern whether the cloud came to him, or he to it. But the formation was vast, dark, and broiled in a self-contained raging tornado that was occasionally lit from within by multi-hued bolts of energy. The foreboding mass folded about him, unfelt, cutting out all external sound with its eerie embrace.

It was like being locked in some kind of strange surreal dream state. The cloud eddied and swirled about him in deathly silence, and the presence of something beyond mortal comprehension gradually arose and filled Elldrigar with dread. He had lost his flesh, his soul was all he had left, and the proximity of something so insidiously monstrous and evil made him fear greatly for it.

A voice issued from every direction, a voice of such coldness that he felt it could freeze whole oceans solid.

'You seek vengeance?' it stated insipidly.

'What do you mean? Who are you? What are you?' he shouted in terror and confusion.

Suddenly, upon his vision was stamped an all too familiar scene. A grassy clearing in the Loren forest, bathed in warm sunlight. Two bodies stared blindly, his son and his wife, their flesh gnawed to the bone in places, their eyes now empty incarnadine sockets, their clothes shredded and soaked in their own blood. All about

lay tracks, which he later discovered to be those of the hated Skaven.

The vision passed, leaving the hatred and bitter rage that had consumed him at the time, but which he had kept ruthlessly suppressed all these years. The clarity of the vision forced him to involuntarily recall the rest, how it seemed that his heart had been torn out, how he had ran to them and dropped to his knees, tears of sorrow and guilt streaming from his eyes as he cradled the mutilated remains, denied even a last look into the eyes of his beloved wife. He had stayed with them for three full days, lost in a whirlpool of grief. When he had finally clawed open the earth with his bare hands and laid them to rest, he had sworn to avenge their deaths. And how heinously he had forsaken that vow. His hatred had faded with time, his bitter thoughts being replaced by the fond memories of happiness that were all he had remaining of his previous life. The sightless eyes of his family returned upon occasion in his dreams, but he knew that he could not gain justice, for the race of Skaven were just too vast. To attempt revenge would be suicidal, and he knew that his wife - a woman who dearly treasured all life, would not wish this of him. The venom consumed his thoughts with barbed teeth, incensing him.

'You seek vengeance?' it repeated.

'Yes! YES! I want revenge!'

'Swear allegiance unto me and thou shall have it.'

'I swear it!' he yelled, without any hesitation, every fibre of his being totally committed to the pledge.

Pain filled him the moment he screamed the words, dark crackling power scourging him from all directions, pouring into every cell of his form, coursing through him like a tidal wave and strengthening that which it touched. Drawing a deep gasping breath, Elldrigar snapped open his eyes.

He could now see the smoke tainted skies of Middenheim and the tall leaning buildings of its closely packed streets. Grabbing his throat, he found that flesh had filled the sundered hole, but it had remained ragged and rough, not the natural smooth skin that it had been before the Skaven Warlock had torn it out.

Looking about the street he saw his companions laying dead. The opened and semi-consumed body of Jakob lay supine, lines of red emerging through the holes of his visor. A pile of red, yellow and orange hair was meshed with some shreds of tattooed skin that could only be what remained of Hergar.

Finding himself alone in a road filled with blood and bodies, he quickly pulled himself up to his feet and scuttled for cover. His heart burned in his chest with a terrible anger that remained an unyielding constant, an inferno within his mind and his chest that threatened never to fade again.

Moving into the shadows he heard the voice of his enigmatic patron echo in his mind.

'Vengeance!' it hissed softly into his mind.

'Vengeance,' repeated Elldrigar, a wide scowling grin opening across his face.

Epilogue

Once back within the dark tunnels, Maulokk issued orders that all Skaven were to evacuate immediately. He had lost well over half of his elite guard, but now that he was sure of his recruitment procedure, they were easily replaceable. The former slaves had acquitted themselves superbly. It seemed that having lived with death at their side for so long, they no longer feared it, making them perfect warrior material.

The captive blacksmiths were fitted with collars and threaded onto a single long chain, separate from the several hundred prisoners already taken, which apart from those Tikric had chosen, Maulokk had retained exclusive ownership of.

His guards quickly gathered their possessions and newly acquired spoils from their warrens and were ready to leave in moments. Skrabic packed what remained of

the workshop materials, while Maulokk saw to the readying for transport of his personal project, deactivating the generators in full.

Speed was essential. The Manlings, Dwarves and Elves would soon be entering the tunnels, seeking revenge. When outlying forces reached the city, all fear would vanish, and like Clanrats they would feel secure in their numbers and brave the darkness.

The remnants of Clan Skreek fell into looting the warrens of the dead and absent, taking the possessions and laying claim to the females. Once heavily weighed down with pillage, they scampered for safety of the Under-Empire.

Placing guards on the tunnel entrance, Maulokk had them extract a 'Warlord's share' from all loot, taking only choice items of real value and ignoring the trinkets.

The slaves were burdened with quality loads comprised of the city's wares - tools, arms, food, grain, liquor - taken from Middenheim and the Skaven reavers. The wretched Manlings were forced down through the depths of the Fauschlag, Maulokk and his private warrior elite at their head.

At the snaking tunnel that led into the Skaven Under-Empire, Maulokk called for the exclusive entrance to be collapsed.

Clanrats quickly scuttled up a short way and weakened the structure with rabid excavating, allowing explosives to be planted and then detonated once all were clear. The cave-in reverberated throughout the mountain and irrevocably sealed Middenheim's door to the hidden insidious realm of Skavendom.

The Manlings would purge the network above of all that drew breath or moved. Every Beastman, every Chaos worshipper, every mutant, every monster, all would be ruthlessly hunted down and butchered. The tunnel entrances from the surface would be sturdily sealed, leaving a pure, vast lair for the Skaven to return to and gather their strength and numbers, readying for the Great Armageddon.

And so Maulokk came to once more look upon Skavenblight's twisted streets, its enshrouding misty cloak and the cloud piercing sacred temple of the Horned Rat.

Word of his return had spread quickly and he found his passage wreathed by onlookers, who watched the Warlock preceding his columns of loot laden despairing captives. The slaves wailed, grizzled and wept at the sight of the glorious Skaven capital, and all their hopes perished when they saw the sheer multitudes of the race in infesting residence. Maulokk left them at the edge of the Clan Skryre district and continued with only Skrabic, his guards, and his blacksmith slaves.

It was a welcome sight to behold. The tunnels remained virtually unchanged, and the air rang with the familiar chaotic symphony of experimentation and labour. Taking a deep draught of the heady aromas, he relished the myriad smells like a fine perfume.

Maulokk felt a tide of gladness at being home, and especially in striding into his warren and seeing Crot's wizened form emerge, the aged retainer as gnarled and grizzled as always.

'Crot,' he declared happily.

'Welcome home, master.'

Maulokk turned to Karikk, the Stormvermin captain had been like a shadow on the long return journey, and had never left his side as his eyes scanned constantly for treachery or attack. Such loyalty deserved reward if it were to truly flourish.

'See to the stationing of the captives in a guarded warren, then you and the guard relax, you have more than earned a period of rest.'

'As you wish, Lord,' the Stormvermin said gladly, and bowed deeply before leaving.

'I need sleep,' declared Maulokk, his victory and the journey afterward having drained him both in mind and body.

He sank down onto his familiar nest, stretching out and releasing a wide

exhausted yawn, grimacing a little as the stitches of his stomach wound grumbled at being moved.

'I am afraid that you will have to wait, master. A Grey Seer delivered a message just prior to your arrival. Your presence is called for at the Council,' revealed Crot.

Maulokk arose with a start, quickly donned his cloak and straightening his equipment before bustling out, his viscera quivering with nervousness.

Heading for the surface he worked upon what his various reasons were, and why, leaving nothing to chance, rehearsing all possible questions and planning his responses.

Merging into the crowded street, he marched directly for the sky tearing temple, staring at the gargantuan building, still unable to believe that he was actually being summoned to enter and stand before the Council.

The Skaven shifted warily from his path, knowing who it was who passed them, but Maulokk barely noticed the new levels of fear he generated, for his mind was locked in fierce consideration while his muscles trembled involuntarily with anxiety.

At the great gates to the Temple of the Horned Rat, the albino guard awaited to escort him. The massive dark doors groaned reluctantly open to allow passage within, languidly drawing back as he stood tensed before them.

Acting speedily he brushed his whiskers with a hand, tidied his robes, took a deep breath and entered, the doors booming shut behind him after a long groaning period of closure.

The towering white Stormvermin fell into a square about the Warlock, their vacant red eyes fixed forward. They marched onward at a steady pace, one that allowed Maulokk opportunity to scan the Temple from the inside. Never before had he seen the awesome interior of the structure, and he did not intend to overlook the slightest detail presented by this opportunity.

The sinister robed forms of the Grey Seers and their initiates watched silently from the shadows. The only sound was the steady footsteps of his escort that echoed many times about the fractured arched walls and vaulted cracked ceilings. The quiet was oppressive and seemed to inspire further silence, making noise a blasphemous thing to create in this place of serene majesty.

Maulokk wondered how many others had been taken along this path, a path laced with relics and treasures from the far reaches of the world, illustrating how no corner of the globe was beyond the reaches of the Council.

How many Skaven had not returned after walking this very route and then failed to acquit their actions before the merciless intolerance of the Council of Thirteen? If he had time, he could have made an estimate, because the walls and chandeliers bore many thousands of Skaven skulls. Such remains could only be the product of executions, for they would have been fully devoured along with the rest of the body had the mode of death been any other.

It took a full hour of ever-ascending progress to reach a set of dominating black doors bearing the Horned Rat's symbol in Warpstone. The heraldic device glowed blacker than the midnight doors, a pure, divine radiance. The albino guards set at flanking positions by the doors pushed them open, the yard thick metal portals gliding apart at a touch as if made of smoke.

The darkness within rivalled the doors in intensity, and Maulokk had to rely upon the guard's intimate knowledge of the internal layout to guide him. The escort halted suddenly, forcing Maulokk to comply. From nowhere, a crimson beam of light lanced down upon him, spotlighting his form as if in grim accusation. The albino guard turned on their heels at some inaudible command and withdrew back into the nebulous folds of the hall.

His eyes slowly accustomed to the umbrage of light without the beam and began to make out the table encircling him. Thirteen Warpthread banners faced inward, and beyond these he could discern twelve seats, each bearing a single robed form, visible

only as a red tainted silhouette.

Maulokk turned to the symbolic place of the Horned Rat and bowed until on his knees. His heart thudded in his chest like thunder, he was before twelve of the most powerful beings on the globe, whose lifespans made his own seem as brief and insignificant as that of a gnat. The mere favoured agents of these beings were a match for the greatest heroes and leaders of the globe, what feats then were these unholy individuals capable of?

The Council remained silent for a full minute before Seerlord Kritislik spoke, his voice deep and booming, as ancient as it was wicked. The lengthy delay made Maulokk briefly wonder if they were testing his humility.

'Arise Commander Maulokk.'

He did so and turned to face the seat of the Seerlord, the ominous figure brooding without.

'Your return to us is premature,' stated the Lord of Decay.

'My task is done, Lord,' he replied humbly.

'Then why do Manlings still infest Middenheim?' said a new Lord from behind Maulokk. The rattling liquid voice could only be the Arch-Plaguelord's, one of his Clan's most determined foes.

'I have brought back many slaves for the Council, much food for the Council, many weapons and pieces of armour for the Council. I leave Middenheim to let it heal. The Manlings will cleanse the tunnels of all the denizens who hamper and oppose the Horned Rat, and when they have finished, the entire Fauschlag will be the Council's to do with as it pleases, while the city above grows fat once more,' he stated as calmly as he could.

A skulking dreadful silence fell like a wall of lead. Maulokk re-scanned his words, wondering what else he could have said, what other arguments he could have used to sway events into a more favourable light. He had acted properly, and wisely, he had done nothing that was against the Horned Rat. But did the Lords concur? There would be no appeal, no chance of escape, if his motives and achievements were questioned at all, he would perish on this very spot.

'The Council accepts your gifts, Commander Maulokk. But other matters concern us. Deaths to be precise. Would you care to elaborate?' the Seerlord enquired, obviously intending for Maulokk to reveal all he knew, to incriminate himself with panicked ramblings at this supposed life line presented to save himself by confessing all and easing his situation with brutal honesty.

'What deaths in particular would they be, Lord? Many perished in the attack.'

Was it a trick of the light, or did he detect a wry smile from the Seerlord?

'Let us commence with the demise of the Horned Rat's Grey Seers,' he elaborated flatly.

'Bilquik departed without word and did not return. Skarbitik was seeking to contact the Manling cult and walked into a Watch patrol. He was captured by their Wizards, thus I was regrettably forced to have him terminated before he could reveal the plans under torture, for I had confided fully in them all of my schemes and tactics for the forthcoming conflict.'

'And what of Warlord Kritislik of Clan Skreek?' added the Seerlord.

'Slain I suspect in Warlock Master Skrack's plot to have me dealt with by Clan Eshin,' replied Maulokk.

'Is this true Nightlord Sneek?' asked the Seerlord, obviously fully aware of the facts but bringing them to light for the benefit of the other Lords.

The soft voice of the supreme assassin issued, and was completely untainted by emotion or feeling, making it an artificial, cold and barren tone, the leaden timbre like the voice of death itself.

'We did undertake a contract, issued by the Warlord. If he met with a sudden end, we were to send an operative to terminate Commander Maulokk.'

'And you sent this assassin?' asked the Seerlord.

'No. The Commander made the correct payment to have the contract nullified.'

'So what of this Skrack?' the Seerlord inquired lightly.

'He made a more direct attempt on my life shortly afterwards, and I was forced to slay him in personal combat.'

Silence ruled again. The evidence had to point to Maulokk speaking the truth, but had he fully exonerated himself?

'How did your Rat Ogres perform?' quizzed the Seerlord, looking for the faintest glimmer of knowledge to betray Maulokk's awareness of the theft. Maulokk kept his answer short and his face and body under stern reigns, for any slip could justify his instant execution.

'Excellently, as would be expected of all Clan Moulder's creations.'

'What of your new war machines?'

It was his father's voice, adding another success to Maulokk's achievements to further subtly spite the Seerlord. The news of their performance would have reached the ears of the Council a week ago. Maulokk turned to face the vague shadow that was his sire and greatest benefactor.

'The Warp Lightning Projector and Warrockets proved valuable assets and I thank the Council for allowing their humble servant opportunity to test them. I hereby present them to the Council to use as they see fit,' he said reverently.

'It seems that you are to be congratulated, Warlock-Engineer Lord Maulokk,' the Kritislik remarked begrudgingly, the use of his prior title emphasising that his tour of duty as Commander of Middenheim was over. The Seerlord then added to his words with an air of deliberate and patient menace.

'We shall have to give you more challenging tasks in the future.'

Following another invisible, inaudible command, the albino guard emerged into the light and fell in about the Warlock.

Maulokk bowed deeply once more and followed the guards out of the chamber to start the lengthy trek back down to the main gates.

Steadying his racing pulse, he fought to regulate his breath. He had won. Against all odds, obstacles and opinion he had taken his first victory and avoided the pitfalls set for him. The paths ahead would be infinitely more treacherous now. His enemies would become more cunning and subtle and dangerous, but he had to prevail.

The primary doors opened with a squeal of fur tingling pain and he walked out onto the cracked plaza, where stood the pulsating majesty of the Holy of Holies.

Maulokk moved through the milling crowds, walked up to the black Pillar of Commandments and felt its awesome power prick his flesh.

This is my destiny, he thought, lifting up his right hand to the divine glow, the fabric of his palm shifting as the mutating power seemed to assess it with a sentient glare.

The Skaven about the area instantly stopped and began watching intently, thinking him about to touch the sacred Pillar and make his bid for the challenging of a Lord of Decay.

This is the hand I will lay upon the Pillar one day, and then I will take my place upon the Council. This I swear by the Horned Rat, and let death be the only force to stop me.

Lowering his hand, he wheeled and walked back towards the Clan Skryre district, for there was much work to be done and so very little time.