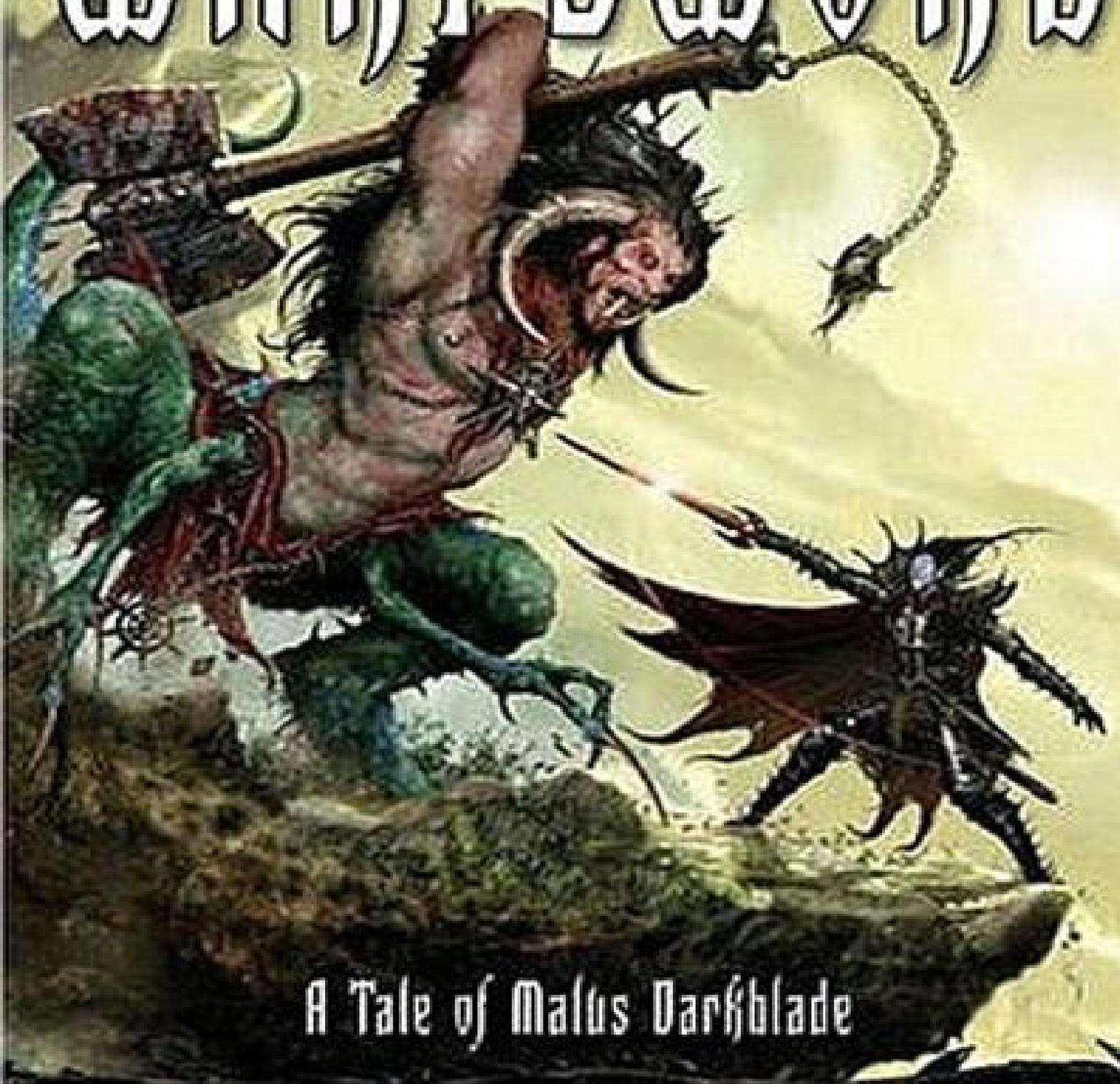


WARHAMMER

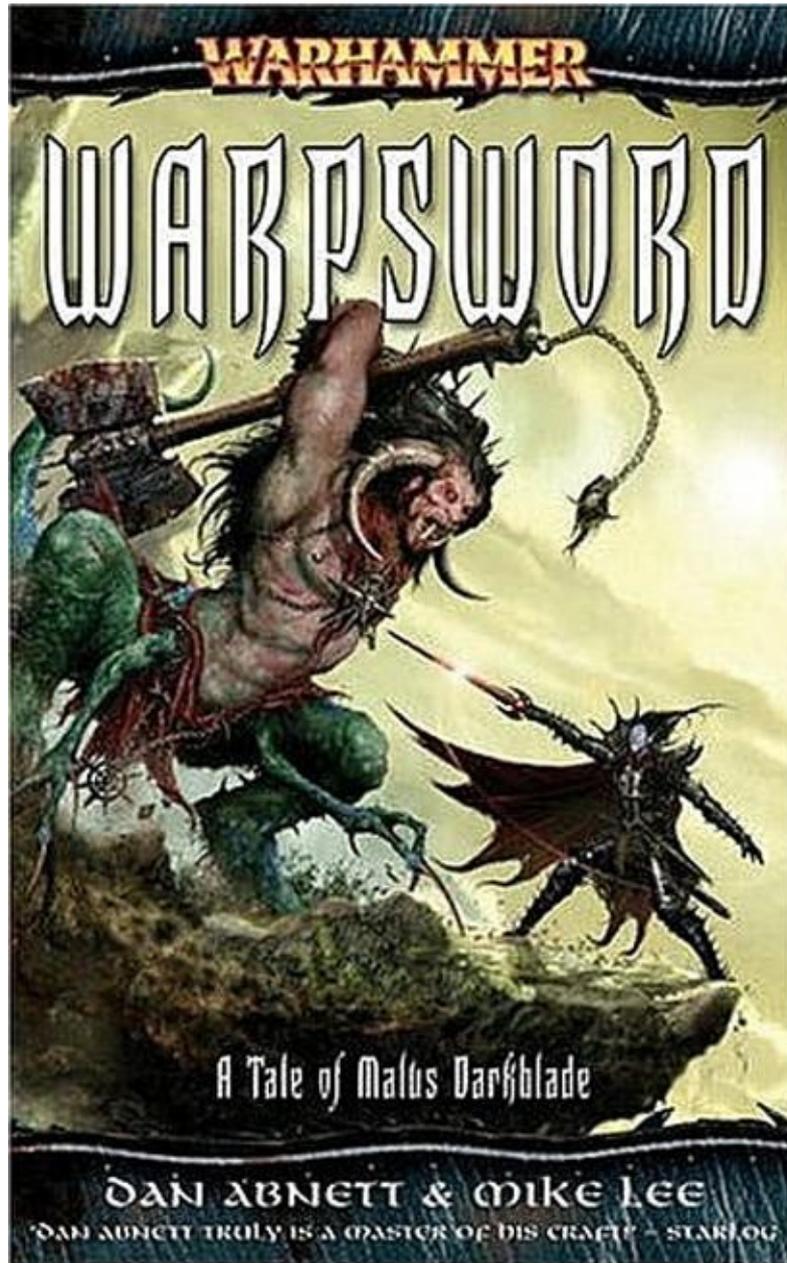
WARPSWORD



A Tale of Malus Darkblade

DAN ABNETT & MIKE LEE

"DAN ABNETT TRULY IS A MASTER OF HIS CRAFT" - STARLOG



A WARHAMMER NOVEL

WARPSWORD

Darkblade - 04

Dan Abnett & Mike Lee

(An Undead Scan v1.1)

This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

Chapter One

BAG OF BONES

Two full moons hung low in the evening sky, gleaming like burnished pearls in a band of indigo just above the sharp mountain crags to the west. Their light cast a shimmer of faded gold across the restless surface of the Sea of Malice, and the wind blowing in from the water was cold and damp. Tendrils of mist coiled along the rocky shore, reaching tentatively northward through the rustling fields of yellow grass and touching lightly on the dark stones of the Slavers' Road. As the night wore on the mist would thicken, swallowing the road entirely and pressing hungrily into the dense forest of dark pine beyond.

The small group of druchii walking along the winding road eyed the swelling fog with a kind of weary dread. After many days of travel along the seacoast, they knew that the wind and the mist would sink through their light summer cloaks like an assassin's knife and settle deep in their bones. They were all young and strong — and had demonstrated so on more than one occasion since leaving their homes — but their muscles ached and their joints were stiff after weeks of sleeping on damp, cold earth. So when one of their number spied a small, cleared area with a fire pit at the edge of the tree line the band stopped in their tracks and spoke amongst themselves in low, hushed tones.

Their leader, a tall woman with finger bones plaited in her black hair, turned and looked along the road to the north, searching for a sign that their destination might only be a short way away. She wanted to press ahead a bit further, but when the man who'd first spied the clearing walked to the fire pit and pointed out a stack of ready firewood tucked beneath a nearby pine, that settled the debate. With a last, searching glance to the north the woman joined her compatriots by the fire pit, throwing back the folds of her cloak and shrugging her travel bags from her shoulders. Lengths of wood clunked and rattled as they were tossed into the pit and the druchii murmured easily amongst themselves, pleased at the thought of a warm fire to keep the fog at bay.

Preoccupied as they were with flint and tinder and unwrapping what remained of their meagre rations, none of them noticed the lean, haggard figure step quietly from the concealing mist close to the shore. Droplets of water glittered like shards of broken glass on the dark surface of Malus Darkblade's heavy, fur-mantled cloak and ran in thin streams across his worn and split-seamed boots. His long black hair hung loose in a thick, matted tangle, almost indistinguishable from the wolf-fur that weighed upon his narrow shoulders. Moonlight limned the hard lines of his weathered face, sharpening the bony angles of his cheekbones and the dagger-point of his pale chin.

Shadows pooled in the hollows of his cheeks and the sunken orbits of his eyes as he studied the four men and two women forming a circle around the fire pit just a few yards away. As he watched, one of the druchii stuffed a wad of tinder beneath the piled logs and took up his flint, scattering a stream of thin red sparks with a few deft strokes before bending low to blow gently on the smouldering wood shavings. Within moments a tongue of fire rose from the tinder and licked along the cured wood, and the druchii all leaned forwards expectantly, reaching out with slim, pale hands for the

warmth that was soon to follow. Malus smiled coldly, scarcely noticing the offshore breeze caress his face with cold, damp fingers. A few moments more, he thought, nodding to himself. They'd taken the bait, but now he had to set the hook.

Within a few minutes the druchii had a roaring fire going, filling the clearing and painting the sides of the dark pines with flickering orange light. The druchii ate cold meals of hard biscuit, dried fish and cheese, and stretched their feet wearily towards the blaze. After a long, hard day of travel the men and women seemed to come unclenched at the heady sensation of warmth and food in their bellies. None of them noticed Malus' approach until he limped like one of the walking dead into the circle of the firelight.

Conversation stopped. Several of the druchii straightened, hands reaching for their swords. Their faces were carefully neutral, but Malus could see the calculating gleam in their eyes. They were sizing him up, deciding whether to treat him as predator or prey. Malus reached both hands from beneath the folds of his faded cloak and showed his empty palms. "Well met, brothers and sisters," Malus said carefully. The words came out in a low, hoarse voice — after two and a half months of living like an animal in the woods along the Slavers' Road he'd had little use for conversation. "Might a fellow traveller share your fire for a while?"

Without waiting for a reply, he unclasped his cloak and pulled it from his shoulders. Beneath, Malus wore a ragged shirt of blackened mail and a battered kheitan of human hide, cut in a rustic style common to the north country. A broad, straight northern sword and a set of knives hung from his belt above a set of faded and torn woollen robes. His black boots were ragged as well, the soles pulling away from their pointed tips. But for a large ruby ring glinting brightly on his right hand and a plain silver band glinting on his left, he looked like a half-starved autarii or a crazed mountain hermit.

Malus spread the cloak carefully on the ground and shrugged a plain cloth bag from his shoulder. Sharp, measuring stares flicked from Malus' face to the stained brown canvas bag and back again. All of the travellers carried similar bags, kept close by their sides. Like Malus, the other druchii were dressed simply: plain robes and kheitans, light armour or none at all, and a single sword or broad knife to deal with encounters on the road. Had they horses and clinking bundles of slave irons they could have been traders on the way to Karond Kar in anticipation of the autumn flesh harvest.

After a moment the leader of the small band leaned forwards with a soft rustle of layered wool and studied Malus thoughtfully. Her hair was drawn back in a series of tight braids, accentuating her long face and severe features. The woman's brass-coloured eyes shone like polished coins in the firelight. "Have you travelled far, brother?" she asked.

The highborn met the woman's gaze and struggled to conceal his surprise. The woman's eyes marked her as a high priestess of Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God. They set her apart even among other members of Khaine's temple as especially favoured by the Lord of Murder.

Malus nodded slowly. "From Naggor," he replied, thinking to describe his route down the Spear Road past Naggarond but holding back at the last moment. Say no more than you must, he cautioned himself. "And you?"

“From the temple at Clar Karond,” the woman replied, and then nodded to two men to her right. “And they from Hag Graef.”

Malus continued to nod, keeping his face carefully neutral and giving the two men only the briefest of glances. His mind raced and a fist tightened around his heart. A voice hissed inside his head, like a blade drawn across naked bone.

“I warned you of this, little druchii,” the daemon said, its voice dripping with contempt. “They will recognise you any moment and your pathetic scheme will come undone.”

“After tonight you will not be able to return to Hag Graef,” his mother had told him, her voice cutting through the howling wind as the city burned around them. “You must seek the Warpsword of Khaine in the city of Har Ganeth. Your brother Urial awaits you there, seeking to make the sword his own.”

And so he had travelled north and east, slipping from the corpse-choked Vale of Shadow with food taken from the ruins of the Naggorite camp. He moved at night and stayed off the roads whenever he could, knowing that his kin would be sniffing for his trail as soon as they were able. Once the fires had been put out and order restored in the city, his half-brother Isilvar would send his troops into the Vale to check every bloated and torn body to see if he lay among the fallen. When they realised he’d escaped, word would spread, and every druchii in the Land of Chill would be watching for him. For the man or woman who delivered Malus Darkblade — living or dead — into the clutches of the Witch King would reap a drachau’s ransom in wealth and favour. Not because Malus had led an army against his former home, but for the crime of taking the life of his father Lurhan, the Vaulkhar of Hag Graef, and by extension a sworn vassal of Malekith himself. No one slew the Witch King’s property without his leave, and for that Malus had lost everything — rank, property, wealth and ambition, all stricken from him with a single stroke of a sword.

He had thought himself clever, but in the end he’d played right into his enemies’ hands. Now Isilvar was Hag Graef’s vaulkhar and possessor of not only Lurhan’s wealth, but Malus’ as well. His half-sister Nagaira had conspired with Isilvar; together they’d known more about Malus and his secret quest on behalf of the daemon Tz’arkan than he’d realised. They knew of the five relics he needed to find in order to free the daemon from its prison and reclaim his stolen soul. They knew he would seek the Dagger of Torxus in the tomb of Eleuril the Damned, and so they’d arranged for Lurhan to get it first. And he, blind to everything except recovering the relics and ridding himself of the daemon, had done their bidding like a trained dog.

It had taken a week to reach the Slavers’ Road, and two weeks more to reach Har Ganeth, City of Executioners. Malus had stopped there, hesitating warily before the city’s open gates and sombre streets.

The gates of Har Ganeth never shut because the City of Executioners hungered for flesh and blood. It was Khaine’s city, seat of the temple’s worldly power, and no one came or went from it without the approval of the priests who ruled there.

Malus knew they would be watching for him. His half-brother Urial would have seen to that, if nothing else. Urial had every reason to hate and fear Malus, and desired the warpsword for reasons of his own. It figured into an ancient prophecy, one that the crippled highborn believed to be his birthright.

Malus had reason to believe otherwise. Prophecies were often slippery things, and had a tendency to turn in the hand of those who thought to wield them.

Nevertheless, he knew nothing of the city and hadn't a coin to his name to bribe anyone with, so he had no confidence that he could slip quietly into the city and remain hidden beneath Urial's very nose, much less go poking through the temple fortress in search of a sacred relic. More than once he found it bitterly amusing that before, when he had everything to lose he would have just charged headlong into the city, convinced he could think his way out of any mess he found himself in. Now, however, since he'd lost everything, he found himself much more circumspect.

He needed more information about the city and its inhabitants, he'd decided. So he retreated into the wooded foothills north of the city and waited for someone to leave.

The first thing he'd learned was that, unlike every other city in Naggaroth, few people came and went from Har Ganeth. It was almost a week before a lone traveller emerged from the city gates and headed west on horseback. Malus shadowed the solitary figure until nightfall, when the man left the road and built a fire at a campsite along the edge of the tree line. After watching the man for half an hour, Malus walked into the camp and offered to share some of his wine in exchange for a spot close to the fire. After sampling Malus' wine, the man grudgingly agreed.

He was a stranger to the city, as it happened — visiting a cousin in Har Ganeth who kept a chandler's shop close by the temple fortress. As Malus had feared, every stranger entering the city had to report to the temple straightaway and receive the blessing of the priestesses, or else he took his life in his hands. There were only three sorts of people in the City of Executioners: servants of the temple, guests of the temple and sacrifices to Khaine. A druchii caught on the street — by day or night — without the temple's blessing could be slain out of hand as an offering to the Lord of Murder, and the people of the city were zealous in their devotion to the Bloody-Handed God.

The man knew nothing about the temple fortress. Only members of the cult were permitted to enter, leaving the devout to worship at any one of a dozen smaller shrines located across the city. He had heard a recent bit of gossip, though. There were rumours throughout the city that a holy man had appeared before the temple elders bearing signs and portents that the culmination of a great prophecy was at hand. What that meant the man could not say, but there were acolytes in the streets exhorting the faithful to prepare themselves for a time of blood and fire, and bloodied skulls began to appear in piles on every street corner. Fearing that soon his head would be added to one of the piles, the man fled for his life.

The news filled Malus with dismay. They finished the wine in dreary silence, and then he stabbed the man in the heart and went through his belongings for anything useful. Spite feasted on man and horse that night, and Malus had bread and sausage for a week after.

As the days passed Malus settled into a grim routine, stalking travellers leaving the city and learning what he could from them. Sometimes the conversation ended at the point of a knife; other times he chose discretion and slipped away into the darkness once the wine was done. Once he nearly had the tables turned on him, and it was only the Dark Mother's own luck and his familiarity with the forest that allowed him to escape with a whole skin. Little by little, his knowledge of the city grew, but nothing

he learned helped solve the most crucial riddles of all: how to avoid the notice of the temple without winding up an unwilling sacrifice, and how to find the Warpsword of Khaine.

It never once occurred to Malus to ask either Tz'arkan or his mother Eldire for help. The silver ring he wore had been a gift from his mother, one of the most potent sorceresses and seers in the Land of Chill. He could use it to speak with her on nights when the moon was bright. As for the daemon, it had never passed up a chance to tempt him with tastes of its supernatural powers — but after the night in the burning city, its behaviour had changed. It was warier now, questioning Malus' every move and offering nothing unless asked. The daemon feared Eldire's power for some reason, and that both pleased and troubled Malus.

As the summer wore on the pattern of travel changed. Druchii began heading for Har Ganeth — singly at first, and then in small groups of up to half-a-dozen, arriving at all hours of the day and night. They came down the Slavers' Road from the west or crossed the Sea of Malice in boats, and they all travelled surreptitiously, without fanfare or finery. They came from all walks of life, as near as Malus could tell: highborn and lowborn, princes, bakers and thieves and everything in between, and once they entered Har Ganeth, they didn't emerge again. Malus found himself thinking about Urial and his prophecy once more, and wondered whether there might be something to it after all.

Seeking answers, Malus headed down the road and looked for a solitary traveller to share a bottle of wine with.

The first man he found welcomed him like a long-lost brother and barely took a sip of wine before trying to cut Malus' throat. He'd laughed like a lunatic as they'd rolled across the damp ground, wresting over the man's serrated knife. When Malus had finally gained the upper hand and searched the body afterwards he found a brown canvas bag filled with body parts: hands, ears, noses and genitals, many still sticky with gore.

Malus approached a second man a day later, and received another warm welcome. This time he was ready when the druchii leapt at him with a knife. He, too, had a bag full of freshly severed bits of flesh. In a fit of pique Malus tossed the druchii's head into the bag and took it with him.

After that he watched the people on the road much more closely. Man or woman, young or old, they all carried a sword or a broad-bladed knife and a stained bag hung from shoulder or belt.

Was there some holy ceremony in the offing calling the faithful to the city to present their offerings to Khaine? He'd never heard of such a thing before. One thing was clear, however: the travellers seemed happy to kill any stranger they met except those carrying bags of their own. Malus had no idea why that mattered, but finally a glimmer of a plan began to take shape in his mind.

* * *

“Wine, brothers and sisters?” Malus pulled a clay bottle from a second carry-bag and offered it to the group. One of the men from Hag Graef leaned forwards and took the bottle eagerly. Malus caught the man's eye as he surrendered the wine, but saw no glint of recognition there.

“I hadn’t realised there were any followers of the true faith living at the Black Ark,” the temple maiden said.

The true faith? What did that mean, Malus thought? “I hadn’t known of any in Karond Kar either,” he answered. “I suppose that makes us even.” Eager to change the subject, he nodded his head eastward. “We’ll be in Har Ganeth by midday tomorrow.”

The other travellers from the Karond Kar murmured in approval. “We should have listened to you after all, holy one,” the second woman said to the temple maiden. “If we’d continued on we would have reached the holy city by midnight.”

“Let’s go then,” one of the men declared. “We have a sacred duty, do we not? The heretic and his minions could be battling with the faithful even now—”

The temple maiden cut the man off with a curt wave of her hand. Her gaze never left Malus. “You look as if you’ve been wandering in the mountains for weeks,” she said to the highborn.

Malus affected a shrug, his mind churning. The heretic? That had to mean Urial. Who else had recently come to Har Ganeth shouting about the end of the world?

“I... well,” Malus stammered, looking away, “I confess that I’ve tarried a while on the road, holy one.” He reached over and hefted the bloodstained sack. “There are meagre pickings on the Spear Road this time of year, and I didn’t want to reach Har Ganeth with a poor offering for the god.”

Several of the faithful nodded their heads approvingly. He’d taken a wild guess about the contents of the bag, and the gamble had paid off. The temple maiden considered him for a moment more, and then leaned back against a fallen log and resumed her meal.

The man from Clar Karond eyed Malus. “Have you seen many other faithful on the road, brother?”

“Oh, yes,” Malus nodded. “They’ve come from all over. I’d wager there are thousands in the holy city, ready to fight the heretic.”

At the news, the man’s eyes glinted with a savage light. “At last! The day of reckoning is at hand. We’ve suffered the heretic’s lies long enough!”

“I couldn’t agree more, brother,” Malus said with feeling. The man from Hag Graef passed the bottle back to him and he took a hearty swallow. This was going to work. If he kept his wits about him he could slip into the city with the rest of the faithful and no one — least of all Urial — would be the wiser.

Grinning broadly, the man from Clar Karond reached for the wine. “With so many of the true faith returning to the city the streets must be busy indeed,” he said. “We have a place prepared for us at the home of Sethra Veyl. Where will you be staying?”

“With my cousin,” Malus replied. “He is a chandler, with a shop close to the temple fortress.”

The man from Clar Karond froze, his hand still reaching for the bottle. His grin faded. Suddenly Malus noticed that everyone else had fallen silent.

The temple maiden rose to her feet, a curved dagger in her hand. “Seize the heretic,” she hissed.

Chapter Two

EYES OF BRASS

Malus bit back a curse. So much for blending in with the herd, he thought bitterly. Thinking quickly, he grabbed his bag of offerings and rose slowly to his feet.

“Where I choose to stay inside the city is my business,” he said sharply, fixing the temple maiden with a steely glare. “Just because I’m careful doesn’t make me one of the enemy. Obviously you’re as concerned about infiltrators in our ranks as I am, or you wouldn’t be asking all these questions.”

Malus saw the two men from Hag Graef hesitate, their weapons half-drawn. They looked to the temple maiden for guidance.

She paused, the muscles in her jaw clenching as she wrestled with her bloodlust. The maiden opened her mouth to speak, but whatever she meant to say was lost as her female companion shrieked like a scalded slave and threw herself at Malus.

The woman’s serrated dagger whistled through the air as she slashed at Malus’ throat. He blocked the stroke with the stained bag of offerings, and the razor-edged blade split the damp cloth like wet paper. Withered, rotting body parts flew across the campsite, some landing in the fire with a sizzle and a flare of sparks. Malus planted his back foot and snapped the empty bag at the woman’s eyes, checking her advance. Then he reversed his grip on the wine bottle and smashed it against the side of her head. She fell with a howl of rage and her companions took up the cry, rushing across the damp earth towards Malus with weapons held before them.

Malus back-pedalled, cursing fiercely as he dragged his broad sword from its scabbard. The zealots rushed at him from both sides, swinging wildly with swords and knives. The highborn blocked a knife stroke with his half drawn sword and then twisted wildly to the left to dodge a downward slash of a sword that struck sparks from his shirt of blackened mail. With a roar he freed his blade and drove the zealots back a step with a fierce swipe at their eyes, but less than a second later they were back on the attack, hemming Malus in with a net of glinting steel.

What the zealots lacked in martial skill they made up for in utter fearlessness, apparently unafraid of losing their lives in the process of bringing Malus down. They kept up their relentless advance, forcing Malus to remain on the defensive against the flashing points of sword and knife. He could tell that the zealots were gauging his reflexes, and the attacks were falling into a deadly rhythm. The two men from Hag Graef pressed him from the right, while the temple maiden and the man from Clar Karond circled to his left. One of the men from Hag Graef reached in with a long thrust to Malus’ neck. As he swept the blade aside with a quick shift of his sword, the temple maiden’s dagger flickered in at the same moment and dug into his side. Mail rings popped and the dagger point carved a furrow through his leather kheitan, but the armour stopped the worst of the blow. Snarling, Malus aimed a savage blow at the maiden’s neck, but she nimbly leapt back out of the highborn’s long reach. As she did, the second man from Hag Graef stepped in and sank his dagger into Malus’ right thigh.

The blow was overextended and weak and the point of the blade sank only a few inches into the muscle of Malus' leg, but the fiery explosion of pain made the highborn stumble. The man from Hag Graef showed his red-tinged blade to his fellows and cackled with glee, showing crudely filed teeth.

Malus met the man's frenzied stare and let out a furious bellow, swinging at the hand holding the bloodstained blade. The man leapt back, just as the temple maiden had done, but the move was wasted, because the highborn's attack was only a feint. Checking his blow at the last moment, Malus reversed his swing, just as the man from Clar Karond rushed in on his left. The man was at full extension, slashing low with his knife, and Malus' heavy sword buried itself in the side of his head. The druchii staggered beneath the blow, a choking, bloody rasp hissing past his shattered jaw. Then he let go of his knife and gripped Malus' sword in his bare hands, trapping it in a death grip.

The zealot fell, blood pouring from his ravaged face and hands, and pulled Malus along with him. Without thinking Malus put his boot in the man's face and took hold of his sword hilt with both hands, but he was not fast enough to pull his weapon free. The dagger-man from Hag Graef tackled him around the waist, knocking the highborn off his feet.

Malus hit the ground with a roar, feeling the sword wrenched from his grip. The zealot's dagger was trapped beneath the highborn for the moment. Malus pounded and clawed at the druchii's head, but the zealot tucked in his chin and closed his eyes tight against the highborn's stabbing fingers.

The highborn changed tack, fumbling for his dagger, but the temple maiden and the remaining zealots swept down on him, weapons ready. "Hold his arms," she ordered. The maiden ran a pink tongue over gleaming white teeth. "I want him to watch while I sip from his living heart."

Malus thrashed and kicked, but the men from Hag Graef seized his wrists and pulled his arms back over his head. The maiden knelt and with one hand hiked up Malus' mail shirt until the leather kheitan was exposed. Her saw-edged blade would make quick work of the tough leather. She set the point of the knife just beneath Malus' ribs and flashed the highborn a lustful smile. "Servant of the false Swordbearer," she hissed, "you were a fool to think you could face us alone. You placed your faith in a false prophet and now you will pay the price."

The highborn tried to wrench free one last time, drawing muffled curses from the zealots, but their grip was like iron. Finally he subsided, shaking his head. "Alone? I think not," Malus said coldly. "Let me show you where I place my faith, temple whore." The highborn drew a lungful of air and bellowed. "Spite!"

There was a shrieking hiss, like water poured on a hot forge, and a huge, dark shape burst from the deep shadows beneath the trees. The nauglir was small for its breed, no more than twenty-four feet long from blunt snout to tapered tail, but its gaping jaws held fangs as long as daggers and its taloned forepaws were as broad as a man's chest. It propelled itself forwards on two powerful hind legs, shaking the earth with its tread. Lean, cable-like muscle rolled fluidly beneath its armoured green hide as it charged like a lion at the stunned zealots. The woman from Clar Karond was rising to her feet, blood streaming from the side of her face as the cold one reached her. Her scream was

cut off with a thick, wet crunch as Spite's jaws closed on her torso and bit her in half. The war beast never broke stride, throwing the lower half of the druchii's body high in the air with a sharp toss of his head and a thunderous roar.

The temple maiden met Spite's hunting bellow with a shriek of her own, but it was like a war scream in the face of a howling storm. She leapt to her feet, dagger ready, but the dagger-man from Hag Graef let out a terrified scream and ran for his life.

Spite was on them in moments, clawed feet crashing down to either side of Malus and the zealots holding him. Gobbets of flesh and poisonous slime dripped from the cold one's jaws as it snapped at the man still holding Malus' arm. The highborn cursed and screamed along with his foes, rolling on his side and pulling at his trapped arm for all he was worth. The cold one would just as easily bite off Malus' arm in the heat of the moment and never know the difference.

The man from Hag Graef refused to let go of Malus, yelling his own curses at the scaly war beast and the temple maiden alike. Spite lunged at the man, snapping his drooling jaws, but the zealot ducked at the last moment and narrowly avoided losing his head.

Still screaming in fury, the temple maiden tried to drive her knife into the cold one's neck, but she didn't reckon on the thickness of the nauglir's leathery hide. The serrated blade sank barely a couple of inches into the dark green scales and was caught fast. Spite snarled and rounded on the maiden, but the woman anticipated the move and leapt backwards, out of reach of the war beast's jaws. Or so she'd hoped.

Just as she made her move Malus caught her ankle with his free hand and checked her flight. The maiden stumbled, but Spite caught her before she hit the ground. Her scream of rage turned into a rising shriek of pain as the nauglir shook her like a rat in a terrier's jaws and then flung her at the man still holding Malus' arm. Both zealots went tumbling across the ground, the impact nearly wrenching the highborn's arm out of its socket before the druchii's grip was broken.

Spite leapt after his stunned prey, bloodstained jaws gaping, and Malus fumbled his dagger free as the man pinning his legs saw his chance to escape and tried to get clear. The zealot rolled to his feet, eyes bright with hate, and Malus threw his dagger left-handed, burying it in the man's throat.

By the time Malus staggered to his feet the only sound in the clearing was the crackle of the fire and the brittle crunch of bones. Spite stood over the remains of the temple maiden and the man from Hag Graef, devouring clothes, flesh and bone in quick, snapping bites. The highborn gave the cold one a wide berth while it fed, looking for the man who'd fled towards the Slavers' Road. After a moment he caught a glimpse of a pale face, several hundred yards along the road to the north-east. He could not see any details, but Malus could imagine the man running as hard as his legs would take him, casting terrified glances over his shoulder every few yards for fear that the terrible nauglir had given chase.

"Spite!" Malus called. The cold one looked up from its meal, steam rising from the hot blood coating its snout. It snapped its jaws once, scattering streams of gory slime, and then loped heavily towards the highborn like a faithful hound.

Malus pointed down the road. "There, beast of the deep earth," he said coldly. "Smell his fear? Hunt, Spite. Hunt!"

The nauglir raised its snout, nostrils flaring, let out a rumbling growl and started off at a ground-eating trot. It wouldn't be long before the zealot cast a glance over his shoulder and saw nothing but red eyes and dagger-like teeth.

Malus turned back to the corpses of the faithful and bit back a snarl of dismay. "Damnation," he said wearily, reclaiming first his dagger and then his heavy sword. "One day I'll have a plan that works to perfection. The shock of it will likely kill me."

"You were a fool to think they would be deceived, little druchii," Tz'arkan sneered. "All cults are born of secrets and deception, the better to identify outsiders. One wrong word, one wrong look, and your skull will be sitting atop a pile on a Har Ganeth street corner."

"And what would you have me do?" Malus shot back. "March into Har Ganeth and ask them politely for the sword?"

The daemon's presence slithered against his ribs like silk. Malus had come to think of the sensation as Tz'arkan's version of a smile. "Why not? It was meant for you, after all."

Malus let out an involuntary snarl and began searching through the zealots' bags. One of them was bound to have a bottle of wine. "I'm not interested in your riddles," he growled. "I am not bound by fate or prophecy — least of all yours."

Back in ancient times, when the druchii still ruled lost Nagarythe, the cult of Khaine was outlawed for its violent excesses and refusal to acknowledge the authority of cursed Aenarion, king of the elves. In those days, the faithful who worshipped the Bloody-Handed God clung to a prophecy that one day the Lord of Murder would send his chosen servant to lead the druchii to eternal glory in a time of blood and fire.

Urial thought he was that man, chosen by Khaine for his purity and devotion in spite of his physical deformities. He certainly fit the criteria set forth in the prophecy. But then, so did Malus.

The Scourge was destined to take up the Warpsword of Khaine. If Urial was indeed the figure of prophecy, he was going to be very surprised indeed when Malus pried the blade out of his half-brother's cold, dead hands. He had to have that blade, and to the Outer Darkness with the rest.

"Your mother has filled your head with lies," Tz'arkan hissed.

"You sound jealous," Malus replied absently, tossing aside the last of the bags. No wonder the zealots were such miserable wretches. Not a drop of wine among them. It was unnatural.

"I have never lied to you," the daemon said querulously. "I have shared my power with you when you needed it, even when it caused me great pain to do so."

"And you've destroyed me into the bargain," Malus snapped. "No wealth, no rank, no prospects — I've lost it all thanks to you."

"Trinkets," the daemon sneered. "Cheap gewgaws unfit for one such as you." Tz'arkan slithered gently beneath Malus' skin, setting the highborn's teeth on edge. "Have you ever considered that perhaps this quest is but a test?"

"A test?" Malus spat. "Of what?"

Again, came the silky, scaly rustle of the daemon's smile. "Malus, dear Malus. Think for a moment. I am not born of flesh. I am Tz'arkan, Drinker of Worlds. I am eternal. Do you honestly think I suffer in my crystal prison to the north?"

The answer seemed evident. “Of course.”

“Foolish druchii. To you, a millennium of entrapment is a horror beyond imagining, but to me? It is an eye blink. If I remain bound to that crystal until the sun goes dark in the heavens it would be about as onerous as wiling away a long afternoon.”

The highborn paused. “So you do not truly care if you are freed?”

Tz’arkan laughed. “I will be free, Malus. That is beyond doubt. The question is whether you will be able to free me.”

Malus frowned. “Now you’re speaking in riddles.”

“No, you’re being obtuse. Must I spell it out for you? I care nothing for pitiful little worlds, or the nations of pale grubs that writhe upon them. I am like unto a god, Malus. You could be, too. If you are worthy.”

The highborn laughed, shaking his head in amazement. “And you expect me to believe that? You’d make me a god, just like that?”

He expected the daemon to sneer at him. Instead, Tz’arkan’s reply was strangely sombre. “How else do you think gods are born?”

The thought brought Malus up short.

He’s lying, the highborn thought. He must be. He’s trying to get the upper hand again now that Eldire has allied herself with me. And yet... it all made a terrible kind of sense.

Malus thought it over. “All right,” he said slowly. “Give me my soul back.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” the highborn said. “If this isn’t about your freedom, there’s no need to hold my soul to compel my cooperation. Give it back, and I’ll get your relics for you.”

The daemon writhed within Malus’ chest. “Impertinent druchii! I offer you power undreamt of, and you insult me!”

“I’ll take that as a no,” Malus said, pleased at the thought of discomfiting the daemon. Slowly but surely, he was learning how the game was played.

Tz’arkan roiled like a storm inside his chest, but Malus gritted his teeth and tried to focus on the matter at hand. He had thought that with a bag of bones and a quick wit he could pretend to be a pilgrim and bluff his way into the city, but he’d underestimated the tensions running within the cult. It sounded as if the temple was on the verge of civil war.

Still, now he knew more about the situation than he did previously. He knew that the faithful were flocking to Har Ganeth to stop the false Swordbearer, which was encouraging. He also knew that the zealots were gathering at the house of Sethra Veyl.

Deep in thought, Malus walked over to the remains of the temple maiden. Spite hadn’t left much. Her head and part of one shoulder lay amid the pieces of the man she’d landed on. The maiden’s face was frozen in a rictus of hate, defiant until the end.

The highborn knelt, studying the face. What he needed was an extra layer to his disguise, something that would make the zealots think twice about suspecting him.

“All right, daemon,” he said thoughtfully. “Forget giving me the power of a god. Right now I’ll settle for a pair of brass-coloured eyes.”

* * *

Tz'arkan had obliged without hesitation. That was a bad sign.

The pain had been immense, and it seemed to last for hours. There was a point when Malus thought that the daemon had decided to take him literally and turn his eyes to molten metal. After a while longer he wasn't thinking much of anything, hugging his arms tightly around his chest to keep from clawing his own eyes out.

The fog had reached the wood line and the fire had burned down to embers by the time the pain subsided. His face was flushed and each eye blink sent shivers of agony through his body.

Malus could hear Spite moving around the clearing, nibbling idly at the remains of the zealots. After some thought, the highborn rolled painfully onto his hands and knees and crawled towards the embers of the fire. Even the dull red light of the coals sent needles of pain into his eyes, but after some searching, he managed to find the maiden's offering bag. Malus called the cold one over and fumbled his way into the saddle. Then he pointed Spite up the road towards Har Ganeth and gave the nauglir its head.

They rode through the night. Malus swayed in the saddle, holding his eyes tightly shut. Well past midnight, his parched throat felt so tight he could barely breathe, and he groped behind his saddle for a water skin. The highborn drank deep of the brackish liquid, and then on impulse he poured a little into each eye. The pain was so sudden and sharp he cried out, but afterwards his eyes felt much better.

False dawn was colouring the mountains to the east when they reached the City of Executioners. The sea breeze shifted, carrying with it the burnt copper tang of blood, and Malus slowly opened his eyes.

The city shimmered like a ghost in the pearlescent light.

Har Ganeth, the Fortress of Ice. Before the druchii built Karond Kar at the mouth of the Slavers' Straits, Har Ganeth had been the northernmost city in the Land of Chill. Its walls and towers had been built from the purest white marble, quarried from the mountains near the Houses of the Dead. The Fortress of Ice was cold and cruel and everlasting, a symbol of the merciless druchii heart.

That had been before Malekith had given control of the city to the temple of Khaine, before the night of slaughter centuries past when the streets had turned to rivers of blood.

Walls of stone towered thirty feet above Malus, their sheer faces painted in layers of crimson from foot to crown. The bloodstained walls could be seen for miles, but up close, with the dawn light wakening the white marble beneath, Malus stared in wonder at hundreds upon hundreds of bloody hand prints, layered one on top of another to create subtle shades and murderous hues. The red sheen looked fresh. Malus was tempted despite himself to touch it, to add to it, deepening the mosaic of slaughter one thin layer more.

The city gate was unusually broad and low, wide enough for six mounted knights to ride comfortably abreast but not with their lances held high. An enormous gatehouse loomed overhead, its wide face pierced by arrow slits and murder holes. Oil gutters hung like arched tongues from the carved mouths of dragons and basilisks, ready to pour searing death on any invader. The gates of Har Ganeth were long gone, however, and its portcullis dismantled. The gateway yawned like the wide mouth of a leviathan,

ever hungry for more prey.

There were no guards upon the battlements, no green light of witchfires burning behind the arrow slits. Beyond the gate Malus saw streets cloaked in eddies of pale fog.

Somewhere in the distance, a voice cried out in anger and pain. Malus put his heels to Spite's flanks and entered the City of Executioners, seeking the house of Sethra Veyl.

Chapter Three

CITY OF RAVENS

Malus soon lost count of the dead.

They lay everywhere in Har Ganeth's streets and gutters, contorted by pain and violence and left to cool in drying pools of gore. Some were piled in narrow alleys like old rubbish; others lay slumped against the red-tinged marble walls, having painted the stone with bright swathes of their own blood. Most were druchii like him, although more than once Malus caught sight of the corpse of a slave, stripped naked but for his collar of service. Every victim had been hacked to death. Many bore the gruesome wounds of axe or draich, the great two-handed swords favoured by the temple Executioners. There were men and women, young druchii and old. Some died fighting, with swords and daggers in hand and mortal wounds to head and neck. Others simply ran and took their wounds in the back. The end result was the same.

Many of the victims had been beheaded. Their skulls had been added to pyramids of similar trophies, some stacked as high as a mounted man along the sides of the roadway or next to the door of a business or home. Nearly all of the piles of skulls rested in thick layers of dirty grey dust. The sight puzzled Malus at first, until he noticed that there was a gruesome stratum to the pyramids. The heads nearest the top were the freshest, of course, still cased in tattered flesh and skin. Closer to the bottom vermin and the elements had stripped them clean, leaving a layer of bleached bone at the very base. In time, even those sturdy bones crumbled, pressed down by the weight of the bones above and ground into pale dust.

The city stank like a battlefield. In the open squares it was bad enough, but climbing the narrow, winding streets towards the upper districts was like walking through a dimly lit abattoir. Spite grumbled and sniffed at the heavy odour of rotting blood and spilled organs, and Malus fought the urge to cover his face with a fold of his cloak. Even in the brutal battles on the road to Hag Graef he'd never seen the like.

The City of Executioners had been built on commanding ground on the shore of the Sea of Chill. At first just a collection of forbidding spires rising into the sky from atop a broad, granite hill, over the centuries the city had spread like a mantle of white stone down the hill slopes and along the flat ground around the hill's base. When Har Ganeth was given over to the temple by edict of the Witch King the temple in the lower city had been abandoned and the elders seized the districts surrounding the crown of the high hill. Many of the city's richest citizens had been turned out of their homes, and the buildings demolished to create the massive temple fortress that surrounded the drachau's stained white towers in a fist of dark stone. No matter where one stood in the lower city one felt the ominous shadow of the temple of Khaine.

Like all druchii cities, Har Ganeth was a warren of narrow, twisting streets and alleys, purposely designed to confound intruders. Tall, narrow buildings channelled would-be invaders into dead ends and cul-de-sacs where they would find themselves at the mercy of citizens waiting on wrought-iron balconies high overhead. But for a few main thoroughfares meant for commerce or war, no road was wide enough to admit more than two riders abreast, and in many cases the streets were narrower still.

Sunlight rarely found its way into these claustrophobic lanes, and even in daylight every other house was lit by an intricately wrought, iron lamp hung outside the heavy oak door.

Upon entering Har Ganeth, Malus had found himself in the city's merchant district. Eddies of pale fog swirled around Spite's flanks as Malus led his mount past shuttered warehouses and through market commons littered with trash. Next came the slave quarter, with its broad squares and ironbound cages. The first of the city's many shrines lay just off the quarter, and it was here that the highborn saw the first signs of slaughter. Malus couldn't help but wonder how much flesh was bought at the markets and marched across the square just to bleed on the altar of the Lord of Murder.

The narrow streets of the artisans' quarters lay past Khaine's shrine, and further still were the flesh houses and blood pits of the entertainment district. Every lodging-house and tavern was tightly shut; their stoops empty of the indigent or the drunk. There were no signs of exhausted revelry, only piles of leering, tattered heads. For weeks he'd fantasised about a bath, bottles of wine and a soft bed in such a lodging-house, but the eerie stillness of the district drove all temptations from his mind.

Beyond the neighbourhood of lodging-houses and taverns the road began to climb the wide hill. The tall, shabby houses of the lowborn rose around him, and the way ahead became difficult. Malus' hair stood on end as he led Spite into the close-set streets. The narrow windows were shuttered and the overhanging balconies were empty, but he could not shake the sensation that he was being watched. The highborn drew his heavy sword and rested it in his lap, suddenly wishing he'd thought to put on the plate armour bound up in rolls of cloth and hung from the back of Spite's saddle.

The more scenes of carnage he passed, the more his wariness grew. Some of the bodies still steamed in the chilly morning air, suggesting that the killers were close by. The thought of a running battle with a mob of fanatics — on their home ground — set the highborn's teeth on edge.

He knew, from his conversations with travellers, that the highborn districts lay around the top of the hill, but he wasn't certain how to get there. How long could he wander down the maze-like streets before he stumbled across an armed band looking for more trophies to stack outside their door? Would his appearance give the attackers pause? Malus had no way of knowing. Nothing he'd seen so far made any sense to him. For the first time since the long, harrowing trip back from the Chaos Wastes, Malus felt vulnerable and exposed.

It wasn't as if he could go door-to-door and ask the way to the house of Sethra Veyl. Briefly he contemplated heading straight for the temple and simply presenting himself there — surely with a heresy simmering in the city the priestesses wouldn't scrutinise any offer of help too closely. The solution was simple and direct, but it gave Malus pause. There had to be a reason why the faithful were being lodged in houses in the city proper. Perhaps the temple ranks had been infiltrated? If so, how could he be certain that the priestess he spoke with wasn't a secret ally of Urial? With no other recourse open to him he nudged Spite onward, ears straining for the sounds of movement from the alleys or the balconies overhead.

As the dawn broke to the east Malus heard the first stirrings of life, high up in the shadows of the eaves along the street. Feathers rustled and bits of loose stone rattled

down the stained facades of the houses. To Malus, far below, the shadowed ledges up near the slate roofs seemed to bob and writhe with invisible life. Then, with a querulous squawk and the beat of heavy wings, an enormous raven launched itself from the shadows and swooped low over Malus' head before alighting at the peak of a pyramid of fresh trophies. The carrion bird glared impetuously at the passing highborn before cocking its sleek head and contemplating its resplendent red feast.

Within minutes the air was black with gore-crows, flapping and calling to one another as they soared down the city streets. They passed so close to Malus that he felt the wind of their wings against his face, and they showed no fear at all of Spite. Once the cold one stepped right over a sprawled body covered in hungry ravens, and the birds paid no attention whatever to the lumbering nauglir.

The constant chatter of the birds made Malus uneasy. Some of the ravens even croaked at Malus in passable druhir. "Sword and axe!" one bird called. "Skulls! Skulls!" cried another. "Blood and souls! Blood and souls!" croaked a third. Their eyes glittered cruelly as they jabbed at torn flesh with their daggerlike beaks.

He kicked Spite into a trot and rode on. Every house looked just like the next: stained walls and iron-banded doors of dark oak, without sign or symbol to identify who lived inside. At every turn Malus chose the uphill path, scattering ragged clouds of squawking birds before the nauglir's one-ton tread.

When Malus heard the ringing clash of steel and the screams of wounded men he turned Spite in the direction of the sounds without hesitation, his previous fears eclipsed by the morbid celebration of the birds.

He headed up a long, straight lane, certain the fight was dead ahead. Moments later Malus reached a dogleg and found himself abruptly heading downhill.

Snarling, he pulled on the reins and turned Spite around in the cramped space to retrace his steps, and headed down another road that appeared to circle the hillside in the general direction of the battle.

That ended at a cul-de-sac piled with old bones and bare, white skulls. A lone, elderly druchii stood at the rail of an overhanging balcony, glaring down at Malus as he brought Spite about. The cold one knocked over piles of bones and crunched them underfoot, snapping irritably at the pall of fine dust kicked into the air. Snarling, the highborn kicked the nauglir into a canter, eager to be out from under the old man's silent stare.

He nearly missed the knife-slit of an alley as they careened back along the street. Malus caught the path out of the corner of his eye and reined Spite in roughly, causing the war beast to growl angrily and back-pedal along the cobblestones. The alley seemed to point in the direction of the fight, and was barely wide enough for the cold one to wriggle through. The fit was so tight that Malus had to draw up his feet and rest them on the saddle's cantle as the nauglir stalked down the narrow passage.

The alley intersected another street that seemed to climb the side of the hill at an angle. Malus reined in, cursing the damn labyrinth under his breath. Then he heard the unmistakable ring of steel slicing flesh and a man's agonised shout just ahead. "Slowly now, Spite," Malus said quietly, prodding the cold one's flanks with his spurs.

They turned up the cross street and followed only a few dozen yards to the first bend. Predictably, the road came to a dead end just ten yards farther on. It was there