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THE BURNING

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FEAST OF HORRORS

Chris Wraight

The Burning

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First there was heat, then a sense of dislocation and a curious weightlessness as his body was propelled through humid air. It lathered his skin in a feverish steam-sweat that condensed into vapour as he moved. Pain followed swiftly, focused in pins of agony impaled into his face, setting every nerve aflame. Reality was a series of flashes: light then dark, then hot and red.

Groggy, he lolled on his back. Ash, kicked up from the hard fall, billowed up in a grey pall. Coughing, he tried not to choke on it. Fire, fire in the eyes. Cinder flecks made them itch and sting. Scratch it out. Muffled voices spoke without meaning. The smell was potent, though. It was...

Burning.

A stark moment of revelation, and he realised it was his own flesh. His fingers...

They don't feel like my own... smaller, not as strong.

...were just millimetres from the charred edges of his skin when a strong hand seized him.

'Don't...' a voice warned. The faded quality dampened the sense of urgency it tried to convey. The accent was deep, thick. It had a silken tone that was instantly recognisable yet somehow incongruous.

'What— what happened?'

My voice... strange, as if from someone else's throat. No power, no resonance.

'Dusk-wraiths,' the other replied – he still couldn't see him, his eyes registered only blurs of light and heat – as if that was explanation enough. 'We must move. Come on, get up.'

'I can't see.'

So craven, so weak and... and... mortal. This is not my voice.

'You will. Give it a moment.'

Strong hands gripped him again, hooking under the arms and hoisting him up. Sulphur tanged the breeze, acrid on his tongue. Sight returned slowly.

On the horizon stood a mountain of fire, its peaks wreathed in pyroclastic cloud as it spoke with a voice from the depths of the earth.

I know it. Was I born...?

A great plain of ash spread before him, grey like a tomb, flaking like cremated skin. In the distance, the mountain, imperious over its smaller brothers

and sisters, reached up with craggy fingers to rake the incarnadine sky. Hot clouds billowed in the visceral firmament like blots of dissolute blood. Veins of lava bled down the mountain face, trailing to a vast lake of fire many kilometres away.

Ash, rock, flame – this was a hellish place, somewhere the damned came to suffer eternal torment. It was a red world, a world of magma rivers and razor-edged crags, of sulphuric seas and gorges of flame. It was beyond death.

One foot went in front of the other.

I used to be stronger than this...

His legs worked of their own volition, rather than through an effort of will. They were running when he spoke again, though he didn't know from what.

'Am I dead?'

Was I reborn?

The other turned, resolving through a milky film of slowly regained sight. He was tanned, etched with tribal scars and carrying a long spear. Even with the scaled hide draped across his body and the rough sandals on his feet, the man had a feral but noble bearing.

'No, Dak'ir,' he replied, nonplussed. 'This is Nocturne.'

Home...

Behind him, Dak'ir heard the scrape and whirr of the turbines slowly closing on them. He dared not look back. Half-glances, snatched during the panicked flight, had revealed dark weapons and a long droning engine. Its nose ended in a jagged barb, its flanks were bladed and it *hovered* as if held aloft by the very air hazing around it. A metal stink, wet and hot, followed it in a thick miasma. Platforms either side of its black fuselage carried... *daemons*, black-skinned daemons.

The other had led them into a narrow gorge, scurrying down volcanic scree and through venting geysers of steam. It was hard going, even on foot, even unencumbered by armour or machineries...

I remember my armour.

...yet the turbine whirr followed.

Dusk-wraiths were dogged hunters.

I know them by another name.

Dak'ir heard their shrieking – an unnatural, eldritch clamour – grow with anticipation of the kill.

'Follow!' the other cried. Dak'ir lost him briefly in the smoke rolling across the crags. He fought to maintain pace, heart hammering in his chest...

Why do I only have one?

...but the other was too swift. He knew this plain. Dak'ir felt he should know it too, but it seemed distant in his memory, as if the sights were not his own to recall.

Keeping low, aware of the jagged bursts of displaced air overhead caused by weapons fire, Dak'ir barrelled around a twist in the rock.

Reaching the other side, he found the other was gone. He'd entered a belt of smoke, exuded from some venting crater, and did not appear again. Dak'ir fought his panic, held it at bay.

But I should know no fear...

Panic now and he was dead. He'd not even seen his predators clearly, yet knew in his core the sharp tortures they'd visit on his flesh.

I've seen their victims flayed alive, impaled on spikes...

Crashing through the ring of smoke, Dak'ir closed his eyes. Rough hands dragged him aside and into the shadow of a deep and hidden spur.

The other was there, a finger pressed tightly to his tanned lips.

Something large and fleet skidded past them, impossibly aloft on the hot air, breaching the smoke bank like a serrated knife through skin.

Three seconds lapsed before the whine of engines became the roar of explosions as the skimmer-machine was torn apart, its hellish riders thrown clear or devoured by fire.

An ululating war cry ripped from the other's lips as he hefted his long, hunting spear.

Dak'ir found a recurve bow suddenly in his hands. He knew its contours well. This was his weapon.

And yet, it isn't.

Nocking an arrow, he followed the other to the site of the wreckage.

More tanned warriors were emerging from the smoke and displaced ash. Some carried finely-wrought swords. A number of them even had long rifles, braced to their shoulders and spitting shot.

Dusk-wraiths lolled in the tortured remains of their skimmer-machine. Up close, it reminded Dak'ir of an Acerbian skiff but longer and infinitely more bladed. Skulls and other grotesque fetishes hung from spiked chains looped around its metal hull.

Its riders were armoured in a sort of black carapace reminiscent of an insect's segmented outer shell. Not daemons at all, but still daemonic in their own depraved way. They were tall and lithe, cruelly barbed like their ship. Murderous coals burned in their eyes, like the embers of trapped hate.

I know these creatures, and yet they are not...

Several were dead, even before the spears, bolts and blades cut down the rest.

The slain rotted and festered before Dak'ir's eyes, their armour corroding on the arid breeze like metal rusting impossibly quickly until flaking almost to nothing. Their bodies became ash, meeting the grey patina of the plain and disappearing. By the end, there was nothing to suggest they'd ever been there.

Dak'ir lowered his bow, too stupefied to loose. The slaughter was over anyway.

The other approached him, wiping black ash and rust from his spear, and frowned.

'Brother...'

Yes, I have many brothers, but you are not they.

'Are you all right?' The other came closer. Dak'ir felt the other's hand upon his shoulder and only just realised he himself was similarly attired in sash and sandals.

'I- I don't...'

This is not my armour.

The other gestured for him to sit on a nearby rock. 'Still dazed from the blast,' he said mainly to himself. 'It's me, N'bel.'

I've heard that name before. It's very old.

Dak'ir looked up, his eyes and senses suddenly sharp. The name resonated but he didn't know why.

'Brother...' he echoed, and clasped N'bel's arm in a warrior's greeting. 'I know you.'

It was called a *drygnirr*, a fire-lizard, one of many that stalked the volcanic plains of Nocturne. It was a kind of salamander, the lesser kin of the monstrous firedrakes that dwelled deep in the mountains near to the magma's warmth. Dak'ir remembered this much of his surroundings as he awaited the metal-shaper.

Scurrying over the scattered rocks, the creature regarded him intently. A fire burned in its eyes, casting a glow about its onyx face. Barring a thin spine of blue, its scales were utterly black.

'What do you want, little lizard?'

'Don't let the others hear you talking to yourself.' N'bel appeared, carrying something in his hands. 'They already doubt an Ignean's mettle in battle.' N'bel leaned in close and clapped a strong palm on Dak'ir's shoulder. 'Not I though, brother.'

Dak'ir nodded at the other Nocturnean's camaraderie, so familiar and yet so strange to him at the same time. He had felt the prejudice at his Ignean heritage

before, too.

That was another time, spoken by another's lips.

When he glanced back towards the rocks, the drygnirr was gone. Perhaps it was just a figment of his imagination, and he wondered briefly if his doubters might be right.

'Here.' N'bel proffered a silver mask. 'Pyrkinn flesh,' he explained as Dak'ir took the mask. 'It'll quicken healing.'

The metal-shaper, a bald-headed, broad-shouldered warrior with folded arms like bands of iron, nodded sagely behind him. Unlike the other tribal warriors, the metal-shaper carried a stout hammer across his back. White ash marked his body in sigils representing the anvil and the tools of the forge. His skin was even darker than N'bel's and his glossy eyes captured the fire of the overhead sun and blazed.

Eyes of fire... Skin as black as onyx...

Dak'ir put on the mask. It only covered half of his face, the wounded part, but he felt the pain ease immediately.

My face was burning when I heard them cry out his name.

'My skin...' he said, realising for the first time that it was much lighter than N'bel's.

'Ha! Ignean-ash. A cave-dweller sees less of the Nocturnean sun, Dak'ir.' N'bel looked concerned. 'Are you sure you're well?'

'Just a little disorientated. What happened to the wraiths?'

N'bel became pensive. 'Gone.' He gestured to the plain beyond where several warriors assembled. One of them wore scaled robes and a snarling lizard mask.

He waved a crooked staff threaded with curving fangs and desiccated reptilian tails. A chest-plate of saurian bones armoured his muscled torso. The others watched him intently as he padded the earth: taking up handfuls, tasting, scenting, releasing and finally repeating all over again.

'The shaman will find their trail, though,' he added sternly. 'The earth never lies.'

On Nocturne, the earth and its people were one. She was a cruel mother, the world of fire, capable of terrible destruction and death uncountable. During the Time of Trial, she would crack and tear, spill her blood and weep tears of lava that threatened to consume the land and the very people scratching an existence on her rocky flesh. The earth gave as it took, however. It was part of the great cycle of birth, death and rebirth. She would take you back, the fire-mother, volatile Nocturne, take you back into her heart and her bosom. Life ended in fire;

so too was it begun.

Resurrection was merely an aspect of tribal culture, of Promethean Creed.

Nothing that ever came to live and die on Nocturne was ever truly gone. It was simply *changed*, reborn into something else.

Am I 'else', am I reborn into this unfamiliar flesh? My bones were like iron, my skin as strong as steel. I was invulnerable. And now... now... just the burning.

The shaman's bond with the earth was great, certainly stronger than any in the modest war party. Ash flakes, smouldering craters, the very grains of the earth spoke to him in a voice only he could understand.

Dak'ir had ridden with them, a long file of tribal warriors mounted on the backs of sauroch.

Scaled, bull-like creatures, the sauroch were known neither for speed nor ferocity. But they were strong and tenacious, their hides thick, and capable of bearing great burdens over long distances. Ash nomads, the transient tribes who shunned the Sanctuaries, travelled the Scorian Desert on their broad backs.

I have soared through the skies on wings of thunder...

In the blood-red of Helldawn, dactylids circled. The winged lizards, combined with the whispers of the earth, had brought the shaman to a rust-red ridge veined with iron-grey. Slowly, the saurochs had followed him and there at a rocky summit the hue of old blood, they found the rest of the dusk-wraiths. Shrieking, screaming, laughing that hollow sound from throats of dust; it was a cacophony. A heavy and oppressive shroud laid upon them all, the sauroch riders.

Dak'ir could not remember the journey, though he did recall the drygnirr watching from the darkness of caves or the peaks of volcanic hills. It shadowed him, neither guide nor predator, merely an observer only he could see. It was as if the creature's eyes could burn right into his soul and strip away the innermost secrets of his mind.

A scryer, psyker... I know you, brother. Your gaze... it burns. I burn.

'We attack from three sides,' N'bel was outlining his plan to the others. He'd dismounted and carved a crude map of the camp with a stick in the dirt, less than twenty warriors gathered around him. He beckoned Dak'ir closer into the circle.

'Brother?' The concern etched N'bel's face as clearly as his honour scars.

I wear them too, burned into my flesh. They are a record of my deeds.

'I'm fine.' Dak'ir nodded for him to continue.

N'bel gave him one last look, before he went on. 'Three prongs,' – he made a trident from his fingers – 'two from the east and west as a diversion. A third, much smaller, party will enter from the north where we are now.'

Dak'ir's gaze strayed to the deep valley below the ridge as he imagined the route N'bel had inscribed with his stick. The path was strewn with crags and sulphur pits. The cinder and ash blown from the nearby caldera of slumbering volcanoes would render the ground red-hot underfoot.

I have walked across fire. I have felt it beat inside my breast. With it I shall... The rest of the litany is lost to me. The burning... it clouds my mind and thoughts.

At the nadir of the valley was a camp of wire and blades. Sharp structures, little more than metal pavilion tents like spikes, carried markings in a strange script. Even the alien letters were edged, as if merely speaking them could cleave your tongue. More skimmer-machines, like the one lying broken on the ash plains, hovered languidly nearby. Some were tethered to bloodied staves of iron; others roamed the perimeter for the entertainment of their riders. Distant figures fled before those machines, pursued by a savage pack.

One, a dark-skinned Nocturnean limping badly, was skewered by a dusk-wraith's spear and Dak'ir averted his gaze. The riders screamed mockingly in tune with their victims, parodying their agony.

It was a slave camp this place and, judging by the sheer number of metal tents dotting the ground below, the flesh-tally was high. Dak'ir counted fifteen of the 'tents'. No telling how many were clustered in those metal cages. A larger one at the centre of the camp drew his eye.

N'bel meant to free his people. The skimmer-machine ambushed on the ash plain had been drawn into a trap so they could follow its trail along the earth and find this graven place. He and Dak'ir had been the bait, the wound upon his face...

The burning.

...was the price of such bravery.

Dak'ir knew this, despite his fragmented memory, the sense of *otherness*, not just about this place, but also this time.

'Dak'ir...'

He turned and caught a flash of lightning on the sun. It was a sword, its blade serrated and gleaming.

I know this blade... No. I know of one much like it. Its chained teeth sing a symphony of death.

'You lost it on the ash plain. A warrior is only as good as his weapon, brother.'

You sound like someone I knew, someone I fought with a long time ago... or will a long time from now.

Dak'ir nodded and looked down into the valley. The slavers' depraved revels

were painting the earth a deep, visceral red. The heavy scent of fresh copper tainted the sulphur breeze.

‘With whom do I ride, N’bel?’

That was better. I sound something like myself, the old strength returning...

N’bel brought his sauroch up alongside Dak’ir’s. They were both so close to the edge. Another step and they’d be charging down the scree.

‘You are with the northern party.’ He smiled, but there was no mirth to it. ‘You ride with me, brother.’

They abandoned the saurochs a hundred metres from the camp, going the rest of the way on foot. The valley was littered with rocks and deep crevices thick with sulphurous smoke. There were plenty of places to hide from the dusk-wraith sentries. The earth and Nocturne’s people were one. They could blend together as fire blends with rock.

Dak’ir sent a whickering metal shaft through the creature’s neck. It crumpled, clutching its punctured throat. By the time he and N’bel had reached it, the dusk-wraith was already an emaciated husk.

‘Why do they wither to ash like this?’ he hissed.

Because they aren’t really here... ‘Focus on the burning. Use it.’ These are not my words inside my mind...

N’bel shook his head. ‘No matter how many we kill, there is always the same remaining at the camp. If I believed in it, I would say they cannot die because they are not truly alive.’

And neither are you, my brother...

A second sentry fell to a hurled spear. Another Nocturnean pairing appeared briefly before becoming lost again in the rocks and smoke.

The heart of the slaver camp was close. They’d penetrated the outer ring and were moving into the vicinity of the metal tents. The sun was still low, low enough to cast long, red shadows across the desert.

Dak’ir was about to advance when he saw the drygnirr again. It crouched atop the shell of a dusk-wraith’s corpse, blinking with eyes of flame.

‘Why do you watch me?’

He sees into your mind... my mind. I feel it... the burning... Vulkan, give me strength.

The drygnirr was occluded by a sudden stream of smoke. Once it had cleared, the creature was gone again.

Another shaft nocked to his bow, Dak’ir moved on.

Six of them crept silently into the dusk-wraiths’ camp, slaying sentries

invisibly as they went. The rest of the slavers were swollen on carnage, in a drug-induced soporific slumber brought on by the brazier pans blazing lambently around the camp.

Upon reaching the first of the tents, a warning cry rang out.

The others had launched their attack. East and west, sauroch riders drove at the slavers to steal their attention.

‘Swiftly now,’ whispered N’bel, up off his haunches and running low to the first of the tents.

Dak’ir was right behind him.

N’bel ushered him on to the next tent, but gripped Dak’ir’s arm before he could go.

‘What?’

‘That’s where you’ll find what you seek.’ N’bel was pointing to the larger structure, the one at the heart of the camp. ‘*He awaits.*’

‘Who, brother? Who awaits?’

I can smell his decaying breath, feel it against my cheek, despite the burning...

‘Your enemy is there.’

‘My enemy? But what about the people?’ Dak’ir was struggling but N’bel would not let him go. Dusk-wraiths had noticed the commotion. Their forces were moving through the camp.

N’bel smiled. ‘We are already dead, Dak’ir. We’ve been dead for aeons, brother. Now, go!’ He pushed Dak’ir off, who stumbled and almost fell.

He was about to turn, to demand the truth, when a burst of rifle fire sliced overhead. Shard ammunition tore up the earth and shredded the flank of a tent. Dak’ir was about to loose when he saw another dusk-wraith, then a third and a fourth, heading towards them.

The large tent was near. He dropped his bow and ran.

The whine of automatic fire from the dusk-wraiths’ weapons hurt his ears. They merged with the baying of the saurochs as they were slaughtered. Somewhere a skimmer-machine exploded.

‘We are dead, Dak’ir, but you still live. Go!’ N’bel’s final words were a shout. Dak’ir didn’t look back.

Crashing bolter fire rings my ears. I am within my gunmetal cocoon, surging to the planet below.

His path to the large tent was suddenly blocked by one of the dusk-wraiths. She was masked, the face long and elongated to tapered spikes at chin and forehead, and grinned evilly. The sun glinting off her wicked blades, held in either hand, turned the metal to the colour of blood. She was lithe and deadly,

with the body of an athlete and a torturer's confidence.

She rushed Dak'ir, a murderer's snarl pulling at ruby lips visible through a slit in the mask.

He scraped his sword along the ground, kicking up a line of cinder-flecked dust into her face. She hissed as the hot flakes stung her, but drove on.

Dak'ir felt a cut to his ribs, then the warm splash of blood down his side. They'd crossed each other, like duelling riders, blade to blade.

I must control my breathing, remember the routines learned in the solitorium. My hearts beat with the thrill of battle.

She came again, the dusk-wraith witch, slashing down with her blades as a pair. Dak'ir parried, sparks spitting off the metal of his sword. A kick to his stomach sent him sprawling across the hot sand and into the tent.

Pain lanced his body. It was like he was on fire.

Must... fight... it... The burning... will consume me if I don't.

Dak'ir waited several moments in the dark, watching the slivered entrance, waiting for his assailant. But she never came. He was alone.

The air smelled strange, like being underground, and the scent of soot and ash was redolent. As his eyes slowly adjusted, Dak'ir reached out a hand to touch the walls of the tent. Half expecting a barb or spike, he was cautious, but instead of a cut, all he felt was stone. The walls were rough and craggy, and hot against his tentative fingers.

The sensation was momentary. As he felt his way ahead in the dark, the walls changed again, smooth and cold as metal should be.

There were no captives, nor any dusk-wraiths. Yet, N'bel had mentioned an enemy.

The tent was larger within than it appeared on the outside. At the end of its gloomy length, Dak'ir saw a figure seated upon a throne. It was a silhouette, a veritable giant, and armoured unless he was mistaken.

'Come forth!' Dak'ir challenged, brandishing his sword.

The figure did not answer, did not even flinch.

'If you are my enemy then face me.'

Still nothing.

Dak'ir crept closer.

From the corner of his eye he thought he saw movement... a flash of reptilian eyes, a streak of blue on black. But when he looked, the drygnirr wasn't there.

He watches, even now... even as I burn.

The figure on the throne was mocking him, Dak'ir was certain. He would cut the—

A thrown spear tore into the side of the tent and a shaft of light spilled in. It lit

the figure, a silhouette no longer. His armour was pitted and broken, as if it had been corroded by time or—

The melta's beam cutting across the temple. There is nothing I can do, even when it touches my face...

Though badly damaged, much of the paint chipped away, Dak'ir saw the armour had once been green. A pair of wings with a flame in the centre emblazoned the warrior's shattered breastplate. Fingers of bone poked out from his ruined gauntlets. A chest cavity of dust-choked ribs yawned through the ragged gaps in his plastron. A skull, locked in a rictus-grin, regarded Dak'ir where a battle-helm had long ceased to be.

A word, a name, trembled on Dak'ir's lips as he approached the armoured cadaver.

'Ka... Ka...'

He was my captain. My guilt gives him form in this place.

Dak'ir was less than half a metre away – 'Ka... Ka...' – when the corpse-warrior reached out with his deathless hands and seized Dak'ir by the neck.

'Diiiiieeee...' it hissed, naming itself and damning Dak'ir in one word, though its rictus jaw never moved.

Yes, that was his name. I cannot forget.

Dak'ir was choking. He scrabbled at the bony fingers but they wouldn't relent. Blood pulsed in his ears and he felt his eyes bulging as his brain was starved of oxygen.

The burning... Use it!

He had to drag some breath into his lungs or be strangled by the terrible undead thing before him. That was when he noticed the air bleeding out of the room, devoured hungrily by the flames wreathing his body. It burned, a flame so invasive it went to the nerves and threatened to overwhelm Dak'ir.

The skeleton's grip loosened.

Dak'ir choked through fire-cracked lips.

'What is happening?'

Let it burn us. Embrace the flame. It is yours to mould...

The fire became an inferno. It roared outwards in a wave, cascading from Dak'ir's body, exploding the skeleton to ash with its fury, yet he was untouched.

Pain wracked him, bringing him to his knees as the fire rolled out, devouring the tent, sloughing the metal. It boiled outwards in a white-hot tempest. Blinking against the rising sun, Dak'ir watched the rest of the camp as it was consumed. His brothers fled before the flame but none could outrun it. N'bel fell last of all, screaming as the burning stripped flesh from bone and turned a man into a dark shadow upon the scorched earth.

It was out of his control now, a fiery maelstrom engulfing all upon the plain, consuming all of Nocturne in a relentless wave.

Dak'ir threw his head back, as the fire turned on him at last, and screamed.

Pyriel staggered as the blast wave struck him. He was standing in the pyre-chamber below Mount Deathfire. Crushing the totem creature of the drygnirr in his fist, now little more than a simulacra wrought of flame, he hastily erected a psychic shield against which the waves of conflagration broke eagerly. He could barely see the figure crouched at the eye of the flame storm, but heard Dak'ir's screaming clearly.

White fire lit the Librarian starkly, flickering across the blue of his power armour and the many arcane artefacts chained about his person. The drakescale cloak Pyriel wore on his back snapped and curled with the tangible heat.

Sweat beaded the Librarian's forehead. He felt it running down to the nape of his neck. Never before had he been so tested, never before seen such a potent reaction to the burning. To his horror, the edges of his psychic barrier were cracking against the fire tide. He tried to reinforce them but found he had neared his limits.

'Vulkan's strength...' he gasped, beseeching his primarch, and was answered.

Master Vel'cona emerged from a cascade of flame into the room, his eyes ablaze with cerulean power. His armour, only a suggestion through the heat haze, was more ancient than Pyriel's. Akin in some ways to the earth shamans of old Nocturne, it was festooned with reptilian bones and dripped in scale.

Together, the two Librarians pushed the fire tide back until it was nought but wisps of smoke. A blackened crater outlined Dak'ir's crouched position. He was naked, steam and fire exuding from his scarred flesh. The searing legacy of the melta beam he'd suffered on Stratos flared angrily on the side of his face, a physical reminder of how he was different to his fire-born brothers. The burning had destroyed his armour, rendering it an ashen patina shrouding his body.

Though he remained still and upright, his head tucked into his chest, arms drawn up around his legs protectively, Dak'ir was unconscious.

The entire pyre-chamber was a charred, soot-stained ruin. It was little more than bare rock, its entrance sealed by a pair of reinforced blast doors, but fire-blackened wall to wall. The only void was where Pyriel had been standing. The air was so hot it hazed, and reeked heavily of sulphur.

The ash cocoon encasing Dak'ir cracked and he slumped to the earth.

Vel'cona regarded the would-be Lexicanum impassively. 'He has survived the burning.'

It wasn't a question, but Pyriel answered it anyway.

'Yes.' He was still breathless from his exertions but recovering.

'And?' Vel'cona turned his penetrating gaze on to the other Librarian. The fuliginous darkness of the room seemed to coalesce around him, rendering him indistinct and shadowed.

'Incredible power, like nothing I've ever seen.'

Vel'cona's eyes flared like blazing blue sapphires in the gloom. 'Can it be controlled?'

Pyriel removed his battle-helm, revealing a sweat-swathed face. His scalp was excessively damp. Only now was the cerulean fire in his ember-red eyes fading, such was the power he'd been forced to call upon. He delivered his answer in a low voice.

'On this occasion, he could not.'

'Saviour or destroyer...' Vel'cona muttered. 'Nocturne in the balance... A lowborn, one of the earth, will pass through the gate of fire.'

Pyriel was confused. 'Master?'

'The Tome of Fire reveals much,' said Vel'cona on his way out of the chamber. He had to use a bolt of psychic force to open the metal blast doors. They were fused together. 'But it does not tell us everything. Who can say what the Ignean's role will be in the turning tide? His flame may flicker and die, it may roar into a conflagration. Much is not yet known, but I sense a visitor approaching who may help us in our understanding.'

Pyriel had been hoping for a more straight-forward explanation, but he had learned long ago not to question the vagaries of the Chief Librarian of the Salamanders.

'What is your will, master?'

'Keep training him.'

'And if he loses control again?'

'Do what you must,' Vel'cona's voice echoed from the darkness beyond the fire-smote room. 'Destroy him.'

Feast of Horrors

Chris Wraight

Helmut Detlef drew his steed to a halt. The sun was low behind him. The shadows in the forest were long, and the tortured branches beckoned the onset of a bitter night. If he'd been alone, Detlef might have felt anxiety. The deep woods were no place for a young, inexperienced squire to be after dark.

But he wasn't alone. The figure next to him sat astride a massive war-horse. He was decked in full plate armour and carried a long, rune-carved sword. A thick beard spilled over his chest, falling over the Imperial crest embossed on the metal. His cloak hung down from gold-rimmed pauldrons and the open-faced helm was crowned with a laurel wreath. Only one man was permitted to don such ancient armour – the Emperor's Champion, Ludwig Schwarzhelm, dispenser of Imperial Law and wielder of the dread Sword of Justice.

By comparison, Detlef's titles – squire, errand runner, occasional herald – were pretty unimpressive. Still, just to serve under such a man was an honour almost beyond reckoning. Detlef was barely out of the village and less than two years' service into the Reikland halberdiers. In the months since joining Schwarzhelm he'd already seen things men twice his age would hardly dream of.

'That's it?' he said, pointing ahead.

'That's it,' replied Schwarzhelm. His voice was iron-hard, tinged with a faint Averland accent. Schwarzhelm spoke rarely. When he did, it was wise to take note.

The trees clustered near the road on either side of them, overhanging as close as they dared as if eager to snatch the unwary traveller and pull him into the dark heart of the forest. So it had been for the many days since they'd ridden from the battlefield in Ostland. The Forest of Shadows had been true to its name every step of the way.

A few yards ahead, the wood gave way to a clearing. In the failing light it looked drab and sodden, though the bastion rising from it was anything but. Here, miles from the nearest town and isolated within the cloying bosom of the forest, a sprawling manor house stood sentinel. The walls were built from stone framed with age-blackened oak. Elaborate gables decorated the steep-sided roofs rising sharply against the sky. The seal of Ostland, a bull's head, had been engraved ostentatiously over the vast main doorway, and statues in the shape of griffons, wyverns and other beasts stared out across the bleak vista. Warm

firelight shone from the narrow mullioned windows and columns of thick smoke rose from the many chimneys.

‘How should I address him?’ asked Detlef, feeling his ignorance. The task of learning his duties had been steep, and Schwarzhelm was intolerant of mistakes.

‘He’s a baron. Use “My lord”.’

Or, more completely, Baron Helvon Drakenmeister Egbert von Rauken, liege lord of an estate that covered hundreds of square miles. Detlef might once have found that intimidating, but after serving with Schwarzhelm, very little compared.

‘I’ll ride ahead to announce you.’

Schwarzhelm nodded. His grey eyes glittered, in his craggy, unsmiling face.

‘You do that.’

Their arrival had been unexpected. Despite that, the Baron’s household managed to put on a good show. Servants preparing to turn in for the night were dragged from their chambers and put to work in the kitchens. The household was roused and told to put on its finery. By the time the sun had finally dipped below the western horizon, a banquet fit for their visitor had been thrown together. Detlef found the process intensely amusing. The combination of irritation and fear on the faces of the mansion staff was worth the long trek on its own.

Rauken’s banqueting hall, like all the rooms in the house, was a study in baroque excess. The high-beamed roof was decorated with tasteless frescos of Imperial myths, all lit by an oversized fire roaring in the marble-framed hearth. The floor was also marble, black and white chequers like the nave of an Imperial chapel. The table looked as if it had been carved from a single slab of wood, even though it was over thirty feet long. Its surface had been polished to a glassy sheen, reflecting the light of the dozens of candelabras and sending it winking and flashing from the crystal goblets and silver plates.

The guests, a dozen of them, were no less opulent. All looked well-fed and comfortably padded. The ladies were decked in frocks of wildly varied shades, draped with tassels, bows and lines of pearls. Even at such short notice they’d managed to arrange their greying hair in heaps of tottering grandeur, laced with lines of gold wire and emerald studs. Their sagging faces were plastered with lead whitener, their lips and cheeks heavily rouged. Their male companions were also finely turned out, replete with sashes, medals, powdered wigs and jewel-encrusted codpieces. They strutted to their places, jowls wobbling with anticipation as the food arrived.

From his seat on the edge of the chamber, Detlef watched them intently,

trying to pick out the ones Schwarzhelm had told him about. Most of the party were Rauken's blood-kin, but some of his more senior aides had been invited. Among them was Osbert Hulptraum, Rauken's personal physician, a fat waddling grey-faced man with a balding pate and bags under his eyes. Next to him sat Julius Adenauer, the chancellor, all thin lips, clawed fingers and sidelong glances. His scraggy beard looked wispy even in the low light, and he minced around like a parody of a woman.

At the head of the table sat Rauken himself. He was massively corpulent, red-cheeked, with a bulbous nose laced with broken veins. He'd chosen to cover himself in robes of velvet, not that they did much to hide his generous belly. As he beckoned the guests to take their seats, his many chins shivered like jelly.

'We are honoured,' he said, his voice surprisingly high. 'Truly honoured. It's not every day this house hosts one of the finest heroes of the Empire.'

A murmur of appreciation ran across the throng. Schwarzhelm, sitting at Rauken's right hand – the place of honour – remained impassive. He'd heard it all before. He'd exchanged his armour for simple robes in the red and white of the Imperial palace, but still looked by far the most regal presence in the room.

'So let us eat,' Rauken said, 'and celebrate this happy occasion.'

The guests needed no encouragement. Soon they were shovelling heaps of food on to their plates – lambs' livers, roast pigeon, jugged hare, moist sweetbreads, slabs of pheasant pie, slops of something dark brown with quail's eggs floating in it, pig's cheeks in jelly, all washed down with generous slugs of a dark red wine brought all the way, Detlef had learned, from the vines of the Duc d'Alembourg-Rauken in Guillet Marchand on the banks of the Brienne.

Like all the servants present, Detlef had been seated behind his master in case he was needed during the meal. His stomach growled as he watched the guests begin to cram the fine food into their mouths. At least his position let him hear the conversation.

'So to what do we owe this honour, my lord?' asked Rauken, munching delicately on a fig stuffed with mincemeat.

'The Emperor likes me to meet all his subjects,' said Schwarzhelm. He'd not touched the food, and had taken strips of dried meat from a pouch at his belt.

'Well then, I hope we've not been amiss with the tithes. Adenauer, are we up to date?'

'We are, my lord,' replied the chancellor, dabbing grease from his chin. 'The records are available for scrutiny.'

'Very good,' said Rauken, looking at Schwarzhelm nervously. 'You're not eating, my lord?'

'Not muck like this. I prefer my own.'

Schwarzhelm's flat refusal cut through the conversation like a blunt axe-blade. There was a nervous laugh from one of the women, soon cut off when she realised he wasn't joking.

Detlef smiled to himself. The dinner promised to be an amusing one. It was only then that he caught the eye of the serving girl sitting beside him. She was as fleshy and rosy-cheeked as the rest of them, but much younger. He found his eyes drawn to her chest, appealingly exposed by a low-cut, tight-laced bodice.

She smiled at him, and her eyes shone in the candlelight.

'Have you eaten?' she whispered.

'No,' he hissed back. 'I'm starving.'

'Come and find me when this is over. We'll see what we can do about that.'

Detlef grinned. This evening was getting better all the time.

By midnight, the chairs had been kicked back and the guests had tottered back to their rooms, belching and wiping their mouths. Baron von Rauken had taken his leave last of all, having heroically demolished a four-tier suet pudding arranged in a pretty good approximation of the Grand Belltower in Talabheim.

Soon the room was empty apart from Schwarzhelm and Detlef. The candles had burned low and the polished tabletop was slick with grease. Detlef found himself gazing at the extensive remains on the salvers, his stomach rumbling.

'Avoid it,' said Schwarzhelm. 'This is no food for a soldier.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Detlef, privately hoping he'd go away so he could attack the pickled pig-shins.

'Get some sleep.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'After you've cleaned my armour.'

'Yes, my lord.'

Schwarzhelm looked at him carefully. As ever, his expression was inscrutable. It was like trying to read the granite cliffs of the Worlds Edge Mountains.

'Where are your quarters?'

'Above the kitchen.'

'Stay in them tonight. And keep your sword by your bed.'

Detlef felt a sudden qualm. 'Do you expect trouble?'

'I don't call on these fat wastrels for enjoyment,' Schwarzhelm said, not hiding the contempt in his voice. 'The Emperor's worried about this one.'

'Is he behind on his taxes?' asked Detlef.

'On the contrary. He's paid them all.'

Detlef shook his head. The ways of the aristocracy were a mystery to him.

‘I’ll keep an eye out, then.’

Schwarzhelm grunted in what might have been approval.

‘Maybe I’ll take one of these for later,’ said the knight, pulling a juicy chunk of bull’s stomach from the table. Without a further look at his squire, he stalked off to his room, slamming the door behind him.

Detlef waited for the heavy footfalls to recede, then started to help himself. Knowing what was to come, his stomach gurgled with anticipation.

‘Take it easy,’ Detlef said to himself. ‘Just a few of the good bits to keep my strength up. Then I have an appointment to keep.’

An hour later, and the house was still and silent. High up in the west tower, the physician Hulptraum paced up and down inside his bedchamber. He was still dressed in the black robes of his office. His bed was untouched, and a large goblet of wine stood drained on his desk. He looked agitated, and his fingers twitched. Next to the goblet was a long, curved dagger. It was hard to see the hilt in the meagre candlelight, but the blade had some script engraved on it. The language wasn’t Reikspiel.

‘Tonight,’ he hissed. ‘Of all nights...’

There was a knock at the door. Hulptraum started, his eyes bulging. ‘Who is it?’

‘Adenauer. Can I come in?’

Hulptraum put the knife into the top drawer of the desk and slid it shut. ‘Of course.’

Adenauer entered, looking terrible. His skin, pale before, was now deathly white. His wispy beard seemed to have become little more than a curling fuzz and his eyes were rheumy and staring.

‘Osbert, you’ve got to help me,’ he said, through gritted teeth. One hand was clutching his distended stomach, the other was clasped against his temple.

‘You’re still here?’ asked the physician, not obviously evincing sympathy.

‘What do you mean? I’m ill, man. Surely you can see that?’

Hulptraum smiled coldly. ‘I’m a doctor. And yes, you’re ill. You should be down in the kitchen with the others.’

Adenauer looked bewildered. ‘Can’t you give me something? I... oh, gods below...’

He started to belch loudly. A thin line of sputum ran down his chin and his body bent double.

Hulptraum remained supremely indifferent. ‘I don’t have time for this, Julius.’

Nothing I could give you now would help. The fact is, this has been prepared for months. All for this night. This one night. The night he turned up.'

Adenauer was now on his knees. The sputum became a watery trail of blood. His stomach was writhing under his robes, as if an animal were trying to get out of it.

'Sigmar!' he cried, spasming in agony. 'Help me!'

Hulpraum crouched down beside him, ignoring the increasingly putrid stench coming from the chancellor. 'He can't help you now, old friend. You'd better get down to the kitchen. You'll find the others there too.'

Adenauer's eyes didn't look as if they were seeing very much. Sores had begun to pulse on his face, spreading with terrifying speed. His tongue flickered out, black as ink, leaving loops of saliva trailing down to his chest. He collapsed on the floor, clenched with pain.

Hulpraum got up and returned to the desk. He retrieved the dagger, ignoring the thrashing of the transforming chancellor.

'You will not prevent this,' he hissed, no longer talking to Adenauer. 'I don't care who you are. You will not prevent this.'

With that, he left the room, padding out into the corridor beyond. Behind him, Adenauer retched piteously. Caked lumps of bile slapped to the floor, steaming gently. He remained stricken for a few moments longer, heaving and weeping, streaming from every orifice.

Then something seemed to change. He lifted his thin face. It ran with mucus like tears. The eyes, or what was left of them, shone a pale marsh-gas green.

'The kitchen!' Adenauer gurgled, though the voice was more like that of an animal. It looked as if he'd finally understood something. 'The kitchen!'

Then he too was gone, dragging himself across the floor leaving a trail of slime behind him. The door closed, and the candle shuddered out.

No candles burned in Schwarzhelm's chamber. The shutters were locked tight and the darkness was absolute. Nothing moved. Deep down in the house, there was a distant creak, then silence again.

Heartbeats passed in the dark.

Slowly, silently, the door-handle began to turn. The door swung open on oiled hinges. It was just as dark outside as within. Something entered. Quietly, slowly, it made its way to the bed. A blade was raised over the mattress.

It hung there, invisible, unmoving, for a terrible moment.

Then it plunged down, once, twice, three times, stabbing into the soft flesh beneath. Still no noise. The knife was an artful weapon. It had killed many times

before over many thousands of years and knew how to find the right spot.

Hulptraum stood, shaking, lost in the dark. He could feel the warm blood on the knife trickle over his fingers. It was done. Thank the Father, the feast was safe.

Moving carefully, he went over to a table on the far wall. He had to make sure.

He struck the flint and a flame sparked into life. He lit the candle's wick and light spread across his hand. The shaking was subsiding. He'd done it. He'd saved it all. He turned around.

Schwarzhelm smashed him hard in the face, snapping his neck and sending him spinning across the table and slamming against the wall. Hulptraum slid to the floor. Blood foamed from his open mouth, locked in a final expression of shock. The dagger clanged to the stone floor.

'Pathetic,' Schwarzhelm muttered.

He walked over to where he'd hung his sword. The bull's stomach was still leaking fluid across the bed. He took the holy blade and unsheathed it. Still dressed in his robes, he made for the door.

Rauken did have something to hide then. Time to uncover it.

Detlef belched loudly. Perhaps he'd overindulged. Still, at least he'd taken the edge off his hunger. Now he had an appointment to attend to. A final look around his bedchamber revealed Schwarzhelm's armour lying in pieces in the corner, still mottled with grime from the journey. He could polish it all before dawn – the old curmudgeon wouldn't need the suit before then.

Then he caught sight of his short sword lying by the bed, just where Schwarzhelm had warned him to keep it. Perhaps he ought to take that with him. He still wasn't convinced there was anything much to worry about, but it might impress... what was her name? He'd have to remember before he found her. In his experience, women – even as willing and fruity as this one – liked to have the little things observed.

Gretta? Hildegard? Brunnhilde?

He grabbed the sword and crept out of the chamber. It would come back to him.

The corridor was drenched in shadow. It seemed almost preternaturally dark, as if the natural light had been sucked from the air and somehow disposed of. He held his candle ahead of him with one hand and kept a tight grip on the sword hilt with the other. There were no sounds, no signs of anyone else about. Now all he had to do was remember the way to her room.

Past the scullery and the game-hanging room, then down towards the kitchen. Should be easy enough.

Detlef shuffled along, feeling the old wooden floor flex under him. He passed a series of doors in the gloom, all closed. The house gently creaked and snapped around him. Dimly, he could hear the scratching of trees outside as the night winds ran through their emaciated branches.

At the end of the corridor, a staircase led directly downwards. From where he stood, it seemed like there was a little more light coming from the bottom of it. Detlef picked up the pace. Perhaps Gertrude had left a candle lit for him.

He reached the base of the stairs. Another corridor yawned away with fresh doors leading from it on either side. One of them was open. He thrust the candle through the doorframe. The light reflected from the corpses hanging there, eyes glinting like mirrors.

Pheasants, rabbits, hares, all strung out in bunches on iron hooks. The game-hanging room. He was close. Detlef pressed on, heading further down the corridor. There was a light at the end of it, leaking around the edges of a closed wooden door. Excitement began to build within him. Brigitta had been as good as her word.

He reached the door, making sure his sword was properly visible. All the nice girls liked a soldier. Then, with as much of a flourish as he could muster with both hands full, he pushed against the wood.

The door swung open easily. Marsh-green light flooded out from the space beyond, throwing Detlef's shadow back down the corridor. What lay beyond wasn't Gertrude, Brigitta or Brunnhilde.

Detlef found that, despite all his anticipation, he wasn't really disappointed. He was too busy screaming.

Schwarzhelm hurried down the corridors, lantern in hand. There was no one about on the upper levels. The whole place was deserted. That in itself was cause for worry. He'd slammed open a dozen doors, uncaring whom he disturbed, and the chambers had all been empty.

He barged into Detlef's room, keeping the light high. He saw his own armour, untouched, heaped in the corner. There was a tin plate on the bed with a few crumbs on it and nothing else. There was no sword, and no squire.

'Damned idiot,' he muttered, heading back out. At the end of the corridor, a staircase led down. Very faintly, he could see a greenish glow. His heart went cold. He drew his sword, and the steel hummed gently as it left the scabbard. The Sword of Justice was ancient, and the spirit of the weapon knew when it

would taste battle. Schwarzhelm could feel it thirsting already. There were unholy things close by.

He broke into a run, thudding down the stairs and past the empty, gaping doorways. He saw the open portal at the end of the corridor, glowing a pale green like phosphor. Shapes loomed beyond, hazy in a mist of swirling, stinking vapour.

‘Grace of Sigmar,’ Schwarzhelm whispered, maintaining his stride and letting the lantern smash to the floor – it would be no further use.

He charged through the doorway. Green light was everywhere, a sickly, cloying illumination that seemed to writhe in the air of its own accord. The walls dripped with slops of bile-yellow sludge that ran into the mortar and slithered over the stones. The stench was astonishing – a mix of rotting flesh, vomit, dung, sewage and bilge-water. He felt spores latch on him as he plunged in, popping and splattering as his powerful limbs worked.

Once this must have been the bakery. There was something that might have been an oven, now lost under polyps of mouldy dough-like growths. There were flies everywhere, buzzing and swarming over the slime-soaked surfaces. They were vast, shiny horrors, less like insects and more like pustules with wings.

‘Detlef!’ roared Schwarzhelm trying to spot the exit through the swirling miasma.

His call was answered, but not by his squire. The guests from the meal dragged themselves towards him, hauling their burst stomachs behind them. What was left of their skin hung like rags from glistening sinew, flapping against the tendons and their crumbling, yellow teeth.

‘Hail, Lord Schwarzhelm!’ they mocked, reaching for him with pudgy, blotched fingers. ‘Welcome to the Feast!’

Schwarzhelm ploughed straight into them, hacking and heaving with his blade. The steel sliced through the carrion-flesh, sending gobbets of viscera sailing through the foetid air. There were a dozen of them, just as before, and they dragged at his robes, hands clawing. He battered them aside, hammering with the edge of his sword before plunging the tip deep into their ragged innards. They were carved apart like mutton, feeling no pain, only clutching at him, scrabbling at his flesh, trying to latch their slack, dangling jaws on to his arm.

Schwarzhelm didn’t have time for this. He kicked out at them, shaking one from his boot before crunching his foot through a sore-riddled scalp, crushing the skull like an egg. They kept coming even when their limbs had been severed and their spines cracked. Only decapitation seemed to finish them. Twelve times the Sword of Justice flashed in the gloom, and twelve times a severed head thumped against the stone and rolled through the glowing slurry of body parts.

He pushed the remaining skittering, twitching torsos aside and pressed on, racing through the bakery and into the corridor beyond. So this was the horror Rauken had been cradling.

The further he went, the worse it got. The walls of the corridor were covered in a flesh-coloured sheen, run through with pulsing arteries of black fluid. There were faces trapped within, raving with horror. Some had managed to claw a hand out, scrabbling against the suffocating film. Others hung still, the black fluid pumping into them, turning them into some fresh new recipe.

Schwarzhelm killed as many as he could, delivering mercy to those who still breathed and death to those who'd passed beyond human. The steel sliced through the tight-stretched hide, tearing the veils of flesh and spilling the noxious liquid across the floor. As he splashed through it, a thin screaming broke out from further ahead. He was coming to the heart of it.

The next room was vast and boiling hot, full of massive copper kettles and iron cauldrons, all simmering with foul soups and monstrous stews. Lumps of human gristle flopped from their sides, sliding to the gore-soaked floor and sizzling of their own accord. Thick-bodied, spiked-legged spiders scuttled through the mire, scampering between the bursting egg-sacs of flies and long, white-fleshed worms. Vials of translucent plasma bubbled furiously, spilling their contents over piled slabs of rancid, crawling meat. Everything was in motion, a grotesque parody of a wholesome kitchen.

At the centre was Rauken. His body had grown to obscene proportions, bursting from the clothes that once covered it. His flesh, glistening with sweat and patterned with veins, spilled out like a vast unlocked tumour. Dark shapes scurried about under the skin, and a long purple tongue lolled down to his flab-folded chest, draping ropes of lumpy saliva behind it. When he saw Schwarzhelm, he grinned, exposing rows of black, blunt teeth.

'Welcome, honoured guest!' he cried, voice thick with phlegm. 'A good night to visit us!'

Schwarzhelm said nothing. He tore into the monster, hacking at the yielding flesh. It carved away easily, exposing rotten innards infested with burrowing grubs. Rauken scarcely seemed to feel it. He opened his swollen jaws and launched a column of vomit straight at the knight. Schwarzhelm ducked under the worst of it, the stomach acid eating through his robes and burning his flesh. He ploughed on, cleaving away the rolls of stinking flab, getting closer to the head with every stroke.

'You can't spoil this party!' raved the baron, gathering itself for another monstrous chunder. 'We've only just got started!'

More vomit exploded out. Schwarzhelm felt a sharp pain as the bile slammed

into his chest, sheering the cloth away and burrowing into his skin. Flies blundered into his eyes, spiders ran across his arms, leeches crawled around his ankles. He was being dragged down into the filth.

With a massive effort, Schwarzhelm wrenched free of the clutching horrors and whirled his blade round in a back-handed arc. The steel severed Rauken's bloated head clean free, lopping it from the shoulders and sending it squelching and bouncing into a vat of steaming effluvium. The vast bag of flesh shuddered and subsided, leaking an acrid soup of blood and sputum. Ripples of fatty essence sagged, shrank and then lay still.

Schwarzhelm struggled free of it, slapping the creeping horrors from his limbs and tearing the vomit-drenched rags from his chest. There was a movement behind him and he span around, blade at the ready.

He turned it aside. It was Detlef.

The boy looked ready to die from fear. His face was as pale as milk and tears of horror ran down his cheeks.

'What is this?' he shrieked, eyes staring.

Schwarzhelm clamped a hand on his shoulder, holding him firmly in place.

'Be strong,' he commanded. 'Get out – the way up is clear. Summon help, then wait for me at the gates.'

'You're not coming with me?'

Schwarzhelm shook his head. 'I've only killed the diners,' he growled. 'I haven't yet found the cook.'

The haze grew thicker. It was like wading through a fog of green motes. Schwarzhelm went carefully, feeling the viscous floor suck at his boots. Beyond the kitchen there was a little door, half-hidden behind the collection of bubbling vats. The flies buzzed furiously, clustering at his eyes and mouth. He breathed through his nose and ploughed on.

The room opened out before him. It was small, maybe twenty feet square and low-ceilinged. Perhaps some storechamber in the past. Now the jars and earthenware pots overflowed with mould, the contents long given over to decay. The air was barely breathable, heavy with spores and damp. Strings of fungus ran like spiders' webs from floor to roof, some glowing with a faint phosphorescence, obscuring what was in the centre.

'You're not the one I was expecting,' came a woman's voice. Schwarzhelm sliced his way through the ropes of corruption, feeling the burn as they slithered down his exposed flesh. 'Where's the boy? His flesh was ripe for feeding up.'

The last of the strings fell away. In the centre of the floor squatted a horribly

overweight woman. She was surrounded by rolls of flaking parchment, all covered in endless lists of ingredients. Sores clustered at her thick lips, weeping a constant stream of dirt-brown fluid. She was dressed in what had once been a tight-laced corset, but the fabric had burst and her distended body flopped across it. The skin was addled with plague. Some parts of her had been eaten away entirely, exposing slick white fat or wasted muscle. Others glowed an angry red, with shiny skin pulled tight over some raging infestation. Boils jostled for prominence with warts, virulent rashes encircled pulsing nodules ready to burst. Her exposed thighs were like long-rotten sides of pork, and her eyes were filmy and rimed with blood.

‘He’s gone,’ said Schwarzhelm. ‘I’m not so easily wooed.’

The woman laughed, and a thin gruel-like liquid cascaded down her multiple chins. ‘A shame,’ she gurgled. ‘I don’t think you’ve had many women in your life. Karl Franz’s loyal monk, eh? That’s not what they say about Helborg. Now there’s a man I could cook for.’

Schwarzhelm remained unmoved. ‘What are you?’

‘Oh, just the kitchen maid. I get around. When I came here, the food was terrible. Now, as you can see, it’s much improved.’ She frowned. ‘This was to have been our party-night. I think you’ve rather spoiled it. How did you know?’

‘I didn’t,’ said Schwarzhelm, preparing to strike. ‘The Emperor’s instincts are normally good.’

He charged towards her, swinging the sword in a glittering arc. The monstrous woman opened her jaws. They stretched open far beyond the tolerance of mortal tendons. Rows of needle-teeth glimmered, licked by a blood-red tongue covered in suckers. Her fingers reached up to block the swipe, nails long and curled.

Schwarzhelm worked quickly, drawing on his peerless skill with the blade. The fingernails flashed past him as he weaved past her defences, chunks of blubber carved off with precise, perfectly aimed stabs.

Her neck shot out, extending like a snake’s. Her teeth snapped as she went for his jugular. He pulled back and she chomped off a mouthful of beard, spitting the hairs out in disgust. Then he was back in close, jabbing at her pendulous torso, trying to get the opening he needed.

They swung and parried, teeth and nails against the flickering steel of the Sword of Justice. The blade bit deep, throwing up fountains of pus and cloying, sticky essence. The woman struck back, raking her fingernails across Schwarzhelm’s chest, digging the points into his flesh.

He roared with pain, spittle flying from his mouth. He tore away from her, blood pouring down his robes. The neck snapped out again, aiming for his eyes.

He pulled away at the last moment, slipping in a puddle of slop at his feet and dropping one hand down.

‘Ha!’ she spat, and launched herself at him.

Schwarzhelm’s instinct was to pull back, to scabble away, anything to avoid being enveloped in that horrific tide of disease and putrescence.

But instinct could be trumped by experience. He had his opening. As fast as thought, he lunged forward under the shadow of the looming horror, pointing the Sword of Justice upwards and grasping the hilt with both hands. There was a sudden flash of realisation in her eyes, but the momentum was irresistible. The steel passed through her neck, driven deep through the morass of twisted tubes and nodules.

She screamed, teeth still snapping at Schwarzhelm’s face, flailing as the rune-bound metal seared at her rancid innards.

This time Schwarzhelm didn’t retreat. He kept his face near hers. He didn’t smile even then, but a dark look of triumph lit in his eyes. He twisted the blade in deeper, feeling it do its work.

‘Dinner’s over,’ he said.

Dawn broke, grey and cold. His legs aching, his chest tight, Schwarzhelm pushed open the great doors to the castle, letting the dank air of the forest stream in. It was thick with the mulch of the woods, but compared to the filth of the kitchens below it was like a blast of fresh mountain breeze. He limped out, cradling his bleeding chest with his free hand. The cult had been purged. All were dead. All that remained was to burn the castle, and others would see to that. Once again he had done his duty. The law had been dispensed and the task was complete. Almost.

Just beyond the gates, a lone figure shivered, hunched on the ground and clutching his ankles. Schwarzhelm went over to him. Detlef didn’t seem to hear him approach. His eyes were glassy and his lower lip trembled.

‘Did you find anyone up here?’ Schwarzhelm asked. Though it didn’t come naturally, he tried to keep his voice gentle.

Detlef nodded. ‘A boy from the village. He’s gone to get the priest. There are men coming.’

The squire’s voice shook as he spoke. He looked terrible. He had every right to. No mortal man should have had to witness such things.

‘Good work, lad.’

Schwarzhelm looked down at his blade, still naked in his hands. Diseased viscera had lodged in the runes. It would take an age to purify.

He turned his gaze to Detlef. It was a pity. The boy was young. His appetites were hot, and he must have been hungry. There were so many excuses, even though he'd warned him not to eat the food. This final blow was the worst of them all. He'd shown promise. Schwarzhelm had liked him.

Detlef looked up, eyes imploring. Even now, the sores had started to emerge around his mouth.

'Is it over?' he asked piteously, the tears of horror still glistening on his cheek. Schwarzhelm raised his blade, aiming carefully. It would at least be quick.

'Yes,' he said, grief heavy within him. 'Yes, it is.'