

WARHAMMER

Features characters from the Gotrek & Felix series!



TEMPLE OF THE SERPENT
BY C. L. WERNER

A THANQUOL & BONERIPPER NOVEL

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The illustration depicts a dramatic scene in a jungle setting. On the left, a blue-skinned, reptilian warrior (Thanquol) stands on a rocky outcrop, holding a large, ornate sword aloft. He is wearing a white sash and a gold belt. In the center, a large, horned, and armored figure (Boneripper) is shown in a dynamic, almost dancing pose, holding a staff and a shield. The background is filled with lush greenery, flying creatures, and a bright, glowing light source. The overall style is highly detailed and colorful, characteristic of Warhammer Fantasy art.

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A WARHAMMER NOVEL

Thanquol & Boneripper

TEMPLE OF THE SERPENT

C. L. Werner



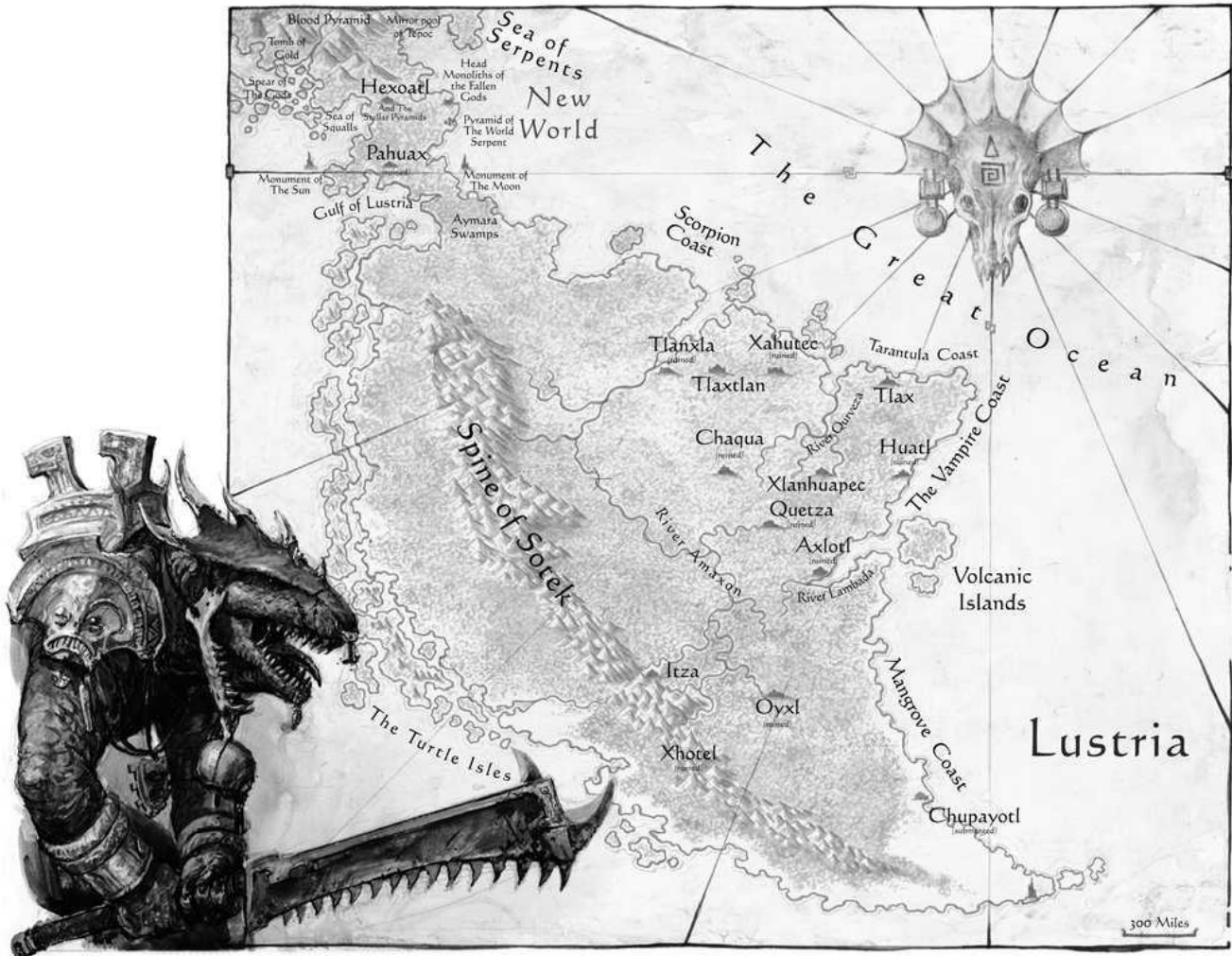
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This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.


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, the 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.



LUSTRIA

 **HEXOATL**
City of the Sun

 **PAHUAX**
City of Ash

SEA OF SERPENTS

W E

Cactus Coast

Scorpion Coast

The Floating Pyramid

Royal Palace of GANAINA

ARANTULA Coast

TLAXTLAN
City of the Moon

TLAX
City of Ghosts

Temple of KARA

Piranha Swamps

TLANXLA
City of the Sky

XAHUTEC
City of Echoes

XLANHUAPEC
City of Mists

HUATL
The Awakening

SPINE OF SOTEK MOUNTAINS

CHAQUA
City of Gold

Gwakamol Crater

QUETZA
The Defiled

Vampire Coast

The Halls of The Holy

ITZA
The First City

AXLOTL
The Star City

Fuming Serpent

Chasm of the Condor

XHOTL
City of Destiny

OYXL
The Eternal City

CHUPAYOTL
The Sunken City



Spitting Serpent

Copper Desert

Mangrove Coast

The Turtle Isles

Culchan Plains

 LIVING CITY
 RUINED CITY



Prologue

Unblinking eyes stared with cold, emotionless intensity at the bloated bulk that sprawled in the half-light of a subterranean chamber. The cloying stench of reptilian musk mixed with the pungent humidity of the air to create an almost tangible fug within the buried grotto. Insects buzzed about the surface of a scum-covered pool while creeping things crawled along the damp walls to bask in the few beams of daylight stabbing through the cracked tiles of the ceiling, drawing the heat of the sun to warm their cold bodies.

The eyes of the watchers ignored the small lizards basking on the walls, their bodies bobbing upwards in little displays of bravado to warn away the other reptiles. Tiny snakes, their bright bodies like ribbons of black and crimson, writhed between the carvings that covered the stone walls, sometimes pausing to taste the foetid air with their flickering tongues. In the darkness, wiry grey spiders mended their webs, shaking shimmering beads of dew from the strands so that their gossamer traps would not be betrayed.

It was something more subtle than the chores of spiders that caused the slit-like pupils of the watchers to widen with interest. From dagger-thin slivers of black, the pupils expanded to nearly overwhelm the amber puddles of their eyes. Leathery crests of scaly skin undulated upon the blunt, wedge-like heads of the watchers in silent expression of the concern that intruded upon their vigil.

The watchers surrounded a bloated, slimy mass, a thing of scummy green and festering yellow, mottled with patches of black dots and stripes. Under their gaze, the pattern of blotches was shifting, fading and changing, assuming new patterns almost faster than the minds of the watchers could follow.

The largest of the watchers straightened its body from where it had crouched upon the damp floor. The crest atop its reptilian head flapped open, a brilliant flash of scarlet that contrasted with the blue-grey scales that covered its wiry body. In response to the skink display, several of the smaller watchers set little thimble-like contrivances over their claws. The tools gleamed in the dim light like tiny stars as they slid into place over the reptilian hands, diamonds reflecting the fiery brilliance of the sun.

Other skinks came forward and set stone tablets in the laps of the diamond-fingered watchers, who then began scratching their claws into the faces of the tablets. Everything was conducted with a deliberate, but somehow calm, haste. The skinks studied the shifting patterns of the slimy body, recording each change in stone.

The amphibian shape soaking within its hibernation pool was oblivious to the hurried labours of the skinks. The golden, bulging eyes of the creature were open, but there was neither sight nor intelligence behind the slumbering gaze. The frog-like slann was as oblivious to the skinks as they were to the lizards and insects that scurried around them. Only its dreams were real to it as it slumbered, dreams that engulfed its mind and caused its skin to shift colour and pattern.

There were many dimensions beyond the physical, many that no brain could ever perceive, much less imagine. Lord Tlaco'amoxtli'ueman was among the oldest of his kind, a being that had been spawned by the Old Ones to understand these dimensions, to see the vectors of the Great Math and their impact upon the higher phases. The harmonies of the equations became increasingly complex as the labours of the Old Ones brought existence further and further from the universal null towards which all things decayed.

Perhaps the Old Ones had needed things of flesh to appreciate the impact of their algebra upon the lower phases, or perhaps they had needed beings such as the slann to understand how the lower dimensions could cast fractions of themselves into the higher in an effort to escape final decay. Whatever their logic, the brains of the slann had been engineered to see the arithmetic behind all existence that they might keep the equations of the Old Ones balanced.

But things had gone wrong. In their experiments the Old Ones had created low phase creatures with the potential for devastating impact upon the higher phases of order. The essences of these beings expressed themselves in simple algorithms, but of immense numerical size, as though in defiance of their inevitable decay and negation. Too late did the slann understand the impact of these arrays upon the higher dimensions. Too late did the Old Ones understand the illogic that had infected their carefully plotted vectors.

The design of the Old Ones collapsed under the corruption of persistent fractals, fractals that were not merely echoes of life, but things that existed in multi-dimensional displacements. Their numerical values did not decay, but swelled by adding into themselves the algorithms of the low phase creatures. Under the madness of these persistent fractals, the equations of the Old Ones were unbalanced, broken by a perverse arithmetic.

The Old Ones had faded from the malignance of the persistent fractals, incapable of enduring within their broken vectors. Sometimes, Lord Tlaco could almost perceive the lingering shades of the shattered vectors, recast into persistent fractals themselves. It was a disharmony that even a mage-priest could not fully comprehend. Were these shards of the masters or simply new fractals cast into the semblance of the old vectors?

The slann considered one of these persistent fractals. It was a repugnance of irrational numbers and unbalanced singularities. Yet at the very core, Lord Tlaco could almost sense a string of the ancient harmonies. It troubled the slann's thoughts. Was this simply another creation of the low phase algorithms coalescing in the higher dimensions, or was it an expression of the broken vectors trying to reassert itself? Could the equation be balanced by the addition of yet another persistent fractal? Would even the Old Ones dare to work in such a reckless manner?

There were no easy answers. The slann knew that this particular fractal had expressed itself in a way that made many of the low phase minions of the mage-priests venerate it. The fractal had manifested as a low phase being and routed the infestation of corrupt

algorithms that had once threatened to return the slann and all of their minions to the universal null.

Lord Tlaco's mind focused upon the discordant memory of those corrupted algorithms. Like so many of the unbalancing influences, they were warm-quick, emotional and illogical. To contemplate them was to contemplate the square root of negation. More so than any other beings, they were the product of persistent fractals, the spawn of debased mathematics and disordered equations. Of all the pollution befouling the patterns of the Old Ones, they were the most debased.

Yet might they not serve to further the vision of the Old Ones? Might they not be used to balance the equation?

The slann shivered in his slumber and considered the dangers of inviting such terrible potentialities into the ordered math of his own domain.

Chapter one

Shadows of Skavenblight

‘We have listened to your report, Grey Seer Thanquol.’

The voice was like the snap of a whip lashing out from the darkness of the immense chamber. The speaker himself was lost in the cloying darkness that filled the hall, nothing more than a shadow and a whisper.

Grey Seer Thanquol stood at the centre of the cavernous chamber, bathed in a sickly green spotlight that all but blinded his sensitive eyes. He could feel the pit below the trap creak and groan beneath him, could smell the faint scent of stagnant water and reptilian musk wafting up from the pit beneath the trap door. It was muttered among the inhabitants of Skavenblight that their tyrannical masters, the Lords of Decay, used the pit to execute those who had displeased them. At a sign from one of the sinister overlords of the skaven race a lever would be thrown and the offending ratman would be dropped into the watery depths far below, there to have his flesh devoured by obscene hybrids of rat and alligator, mutant creations of Clan Moulder.

Thanquol swallowed the knot growing in his throat and controlled the urge to leap from the trap door at the centre of the room. To do so would be to invite certain death. He knew the shadows concealed any number of the Council’s elite bodyguard, mute albino stormvermin chosen for their strength and relative fearlessness. Then there were the members of the Council themselves to consider, a dozen of the most vicious villains ever bred by the teeming hordes of skavendom. Challenging them on their own ground would be an act of lunacy. Thanquol doubted if even the accursed crimson-furred dwarf who had interfered with so many of his past schemes would be mad enough to attempt.

The numbing scent of smouldering warpstone made it difficult for Thanquol to concentrate, to focus his senses on the raised dais at the far end of the chamber and the sinister figures hidden behind it in the dark. He knew that if the need arose, it would be all but impossible to conjure a spell with the warpstone vapours befuddling his thoughts. Ancient and evil, the despotic Council of Thirteen was taking no chances with him. Backed into a corner, even the lowest skaven would show his fangs. When that skaven could command the powerful magic of the Horned Rat, even the Lords of Decay preferred to take no chances.

‘The loss of the Wormstone causes us great concern.’ This voice was oily and foul, the slobbering lisp of a thawing swamp. Thanquol shuddered as he recognised the decayed tones of Arch-Plaguelord Nurglitch, supreme leader of the plague monks of Clan Pestilens. The Council had sent Thanquol as their representative to secure the Wormstone from beneath the man-thing city of Altdorf, but there had been a rival expedition dispatched to steal it from him when he had found it. Thanquol wasn’t sure how many of the Council were behind the plot, but since his rivals had been plague monks led by the ghastly Lord Skrolk, there was no question that Nurglitch had been a prominent patron of the scheme.

Thanquol bruxed his fangs together, grinding his teeth in a fit of nervous anxiety. It would be like Nurglitch to be the first of the Council to express his anger over the loss of the Wormstone, even if it was the self-serving treachery of Clan Pestilens that had resulted in its loss. What lies had Nurglitch told the other Lords of Decay, and what bribes and pacts had he made to ensure they were believed? There was no love between Clan Pestilens and the grey seers, and even less between the plague monks and Thanquol himself. But did Thanquol dare to try and exploit that fissure of mutual hate and distrust? Could he depend on the support of Seerlord Kritislik and his allies on the Council if he accused Nurglitch of treachery? More importantly, if he did so would he be able to scramble off the trap door before Nurglitch had the switch thrown and sent him plummeting into an unclimbable pit of death?

The grey seer squinted into the harsh green spotlight. He couldn’t see any of the Lords of Decay, not even his master Kritislik. Faintly, he could make out the outline of the huge empty seat at the centre of the dais, the one kept empty and waiting for the presence of the Horned Rat himself. Kritislik, as Seerlord, was counted the voice of the skaven god and was allowed to interpret the Horned Rat’s will whenever the Council debated a subject. Thanquol doubted if even the effective double vote this gave Kritislik would be enough to sway the Council into open hostility with Clan Pestilens. The last time the other clans made war with Clan Pestilens, the entire Under-Empire had been ravaged. Worse, Clan Pestilens had nearly succeeded in overcoming the combined might of the other great clans! Only the timely re-appearance of Clan Eshin from the distant lands of Grand Cathay had prevented Clan Pestilens from overthrowing the Council of Thirteen. Even so, their power was such that they could not be denied a position on the Council and a place among the great clans.

No, Thanquol decided, Kritislik won’t put his neck out by openly provoking Nurglitch, and if he does, the other great clans won’t support him.

A decision reached, Thanquol stared at the spot in the darkness where he thought Nurglitch’s voice had spoken. ‘Great and putrescent Plaguelord,’ he said, careful to keep his tone the proper mix of fawning respect and cowering fear. ‘The Wormstone has indeed been lost to us. The cowardice and stupidity of the Under-Altdorf leaders made it impossible to recover the artefact from the

man-things that stole it.' Thanquol coughed and tried not to choke on the next words that hissed past his fangs. 'Even the timely assistance of Clan Pestilens and your brave champion Lord Skrolk was not enough to undo the treachery of the Under-Altldorf leaders.'

There was a grotesque rumble from the darkness, like an ogre being sucked down into a bog. It took Thanquol several breaths to realise that it was the sound of Nurglitch laughing.

'The loss of our brave kin from Clan Pestilens is to be lamented,' the thin snarl of Kritislik cut through the boiling exuberance of Nurglitch's laughter. 'But how is it that the Wormstone was placed in such jeopardy in the first place?'

Thanquol cringed as he heard the Seerlord make his accusation. Kritislik clearly wasn't happy with the way he had appealed to Nurglitch by ignoring the grab the plague monks had made for the Wormstone. His mind fought through the numbing confusion of the incense, racing to find a new scapegoat for the Seerlord's ire.

'It was Grey Seer Thratquee,' Thanquol said, mentioning the first name that occurred to him. Thratquee was the ancient, corrupt grey seer who led the council of Under-Altldorf. As he thought it over, everything had been Thratquee's fault. If he'd been more aware of what was going on in Under-Altldorf, there was no way Lord Skrolk would have been able to subvert some of its inhabitants and use them in several attempts to murder Thanquol and steal the artefact. Besides, Thanquol didn't like the old priest anyway. 'It was his idea to grind up the Wormstone and use it to poison the humans. Every moment I was in Under-Altldorf, I was under the watch-sniff of his minions. At no time could I get away from my guards and return to tell this most terrible Council of Thratquee's plans. I tried-wanted to stop him...'

'We must congratulate Grey Seer Thratquee for his most keen foresight,' the brutal snap of General Paskrit's voice growled. 'My agents tell me that a tenth of Under-Altldorf's population was killed in the flooding of their warrens, that the damage inflicted upon that upstart burrow will cripple its growth for generations. It will be a long time before they dare think themselves as mighty as Skavenblight!'

'... from executing his plan in a way that would cause the loss of the Wormstone...' Thanquol hurried to elaborate as he heard Paskrit speak.

'The Wormstone would have been most useful to us,' came the unctuous voice of Doomclaw, warlord of Clan Rictus. 'However perhaps it is better lost where it cannot be found again and used against us.'

'... because I believed there was a better-better way to lose-hide the Wormstone.' Thanquol bruxed his fangs again as he spoke. 'It was unfair that the Council was prepared to give Thratquee the acclaim and reward that was rightfully his own!'

'It is to be regretted that the Wormstone has been lost,' the metallic groan of Warlock Lord Morskittar's voice echoed through the Chamber of Thirteen. After centuries of unnatural life, the leader of Clan Skryre was more arcane machine than flesh and blood skaven. 'However, its very existence would have been a threat to the stability of the Under-Empire. Grey Seer Thratquee has done this Council a great service by removing such a tempting morsel from the plate of any ambitious upstarts.'

There was an angry wheeze from the shadows where Nurglitch sat as Morskittar spoke. Hatred of Clan Skryre was probably the only common ground that Clan Pestilens and the grey seers shared.

'The humbling of Under-Altldorf at the same time shows a skaven who knows where his loyalties lie,' mused the shrill chittering voice of Packlord Verminkin, master of Clan Moulder.

Thanquol's eyes narrowed with hate. This was ridiculous! The mad old Thratquee had done nothing but sit in his decadent burrow with his breeders and rot his brain with warpdust! Thanquol had been the one who took all the risks! He had been the one who dared the corruption of touching the Wormstone by having his minions experiment with it! He had been the one who had braved the treacherous blades of assassins and the putrid magic of Lord Skrolk! It was his brilliance that had concocted the plan to poison the reservoir beneath Altldorf and doom both the human city and the upstart skaven metropolis beneath it to a lingering death! It was his bravery that had nearly won the day, defying both the treason of Clan Pestilens and the frightful magic of the human wizard-thing! Not for the cowardice of his minions, if not for the betrayal of his adored apprentice Kratch, if not for the brainless stupidity of his ogre bodyguard Boneripper, he would have succeeded! The Council of Thirteen would be showering him with praises and honours!

'We must take pains to ensure that Thratquee is able to exploit the reconstruction of Under-Altldorf to increase his control over the city,' Kritislik said. 'As Thanquol's report shows, we cannot trust the other members of Under-Altldorf's council... even if they are from our own clan.' The last barb was thrust at Morskittar. The council of Under-Altldorf was bloated with representatives of Clan Skryre, giving the warlock-engineers a distinct dominance in the city.

'Something to take under consideration,' Morskittar agreed, a sullen tone in his iron voice.

Thanquol lashed his tail in annoyance at what he was hearing. Were they really going to make Thratquee de facto warlord of Under-Altldorf? He found himself suddenly wishing Morskittar luck in the inevitable assassination attempts Clan Skryre would mount against Thratquee to prevent such a possibility.

'Something disturbs you, Grey Seer Thanquol?' Nurglitch's voice snarled. Even if Thanquol could not see the Lords of Decay through the shadows and the glare of the green light, they could clearly see him. His display of irritation had not failed to be noticed.

'No-no, great and monstrous Nurglitch,' Thanquol stammered, not quite managing to keep a hint of pride in his fawning contrition. 'It is just that I have come far-far and this one finds himself tired from his journey.'

'Then you are dismissed, Thanquol,' the knife-edged voice of Nightlord Sneek, leader of Clan Eshin and its murderous assassins, spoke from a patch of darkness that seemed somehow even blacker than that which cloaked the other Lords of Decay. 'We would not wish to get between yourself and your rest.'

The way Nightlord Sneek made the parting remark caused Thanquol's fur to stand on end. Even as he bowed and scraped his way from the Council of Thirteen, his pulse was racing, his mind screaming in horror. None of the other Lords of Decay called for him to

remain, a fact Thanquol took as a bad sign. Whatever Sneek was planning, the others had already abandoned him to it!

It wasn't a lot, the small stash of warp-tokens Thanquol was able to take with him when he fled Altdorf, barely the surface of what he had hoped to extort from the bickering clan lords of Under-Altdorf. Certainly it would take more to pay off Nightlord Sneek and make him reconsider the interest he had suddenly shown in the grey seer. The slicing voice of Sneek kept echoing in Thanquol's mind, that whispered threat about helping him rest. Clan Eshin had helped a lot of skaven rest, the kind of rest that usually involved poisoned blades and quick stabs in the dark. Thanquol had even paid for the services of their assassins in the past. He knew only too well their hideous and lethal efficiency. Once the trained killers of Clan Eshin were on a ratman's tail it was only a matter of time...

Thanquol lashed his tail in frustration, his fingers curling tighter about the haft of his staff. He wasn't some flea-ridden clawleader from some three-bat warren! He was Grey Seer Thanquol, the supreme sorcerer-general of the Under-Empire, the most brilliant, valiant and loyal servant to ever serve the Council of Thirteen! If Sneek thought he would be easy prey, then the Nightlord would learn how wrong he was! Thanquol was the chosen of the Horned Rat himself, blessed by the god of all skaven!

Of course, the Horned Rat's blessings had been rather mixed of late. It was all the fault of his incompetent and treacherous underlings of course. That snivelling fool Skrim Gnawtail and that backstabbing cur Kratch! If not for them, the Wormstone would have been his and his alone, to use in whatever way he saw fit. That ancient idiot Thratquee and all of the decadent inhabitants of Under-Altdorf would have been scoured from the tunnels of skavendom if Thanquol's craven minions hadn't let him down!

The grey seer ground his teeth together and stared up at the night sky. Unlike the rest of the Under-Empire, much of Skavenblight was upon the surface, infesting the crumbled ruins of the ancient human city that had once dominated what would later become the Blighted Marshes. Some even whispered that the Shattered Tower, within which the Council of Thirteen held their chambers, had been built not by skaven paws but reared by human hands. Such heresy was, of course, punished by a good tongue-cutting whenever it was spoken, but as he glanced up at the crooked spire which dominated the cityscape, Thanquol had to admit it had the ugly stamp of human engineering to it, perhaps even a trace of dwarf-thing too. Naturally, even if the thought came to him, he wasn't fool enough to ever speak of it.

Thanquol turned his gaze back to the wide street around him. The avenue was packed with a scrabbling, struggling mass of ratkin, a sea of fur and fangs that bobbed and weaved, squirmed and squeezed in their efforts to navigate through the city. The air was thick with the smell of decaying timber, rancid fur, musk and excrement, the distinct tang of black corn in the skaven droppings giving the city a scent unique to itself. The snarls, whines and chittering of ratmen rang from the crumbling stone walls that flanked the street.

Much of the city was sinking into its foundations, slowly collapsing into the maze of burrows and ratruns teeming generations of skaven had dug beneath it. Everywhere, timber supports and buttresses hugged the sagging walls, trying to stave off the creeping ruin. Many structures had become so mired in mud and earth that their lower floors were lost beneath the ground. Some still sported the weathered husks of once elegant columns and promenades, a few even had the faint remnants of tiled frescos peeping out from beneath the layers of grime that coated them. Before one tilted manor, the misshapen bulk of a corroded iron statue stood upon a cracked marble pillar, a mass of rust that might once have been a sword raised high in a lump that once could have been an arm.

Home, Thanquol thought as the smells, sounds and sights of Skavenblight crawled across his senses. Wherever he went, there was nothing to compare with the press of Skavenblight's masses, feeling the presence of hundreds of thousands of ratmen all around him. Even Under-Altdorf felt deserted and empty next to Skavenblight. This was the way the world was meant to be, filled to bursting with the swarming masses of the Under-Empire. A world alive with the numberless hordes of the skaven, all looking up from the gutter, looking for the leadership only Grey Seer Thanquol could give them.

Thanquol stroked his whiskers as he thought about the happy vision of himself as unquestioned master of skavendom. One day he would dare place his paw upon the Pillar of Commandments, that obelisk of pure warpstone set down before the Shattered Tower by the Horned Rat himself. He had no doubt that he would survive the ordeal, survive to challenge Grey Seer Kritislik and take his place upon the Council. Then, then he would begin to eliminate the other Lords of Decay. That bloated pustule Nurglitch and that scrap-metal mage-rat Morskittar and that slinking throatcutter Sneek...

Thanquol nearly spurted the musk of fear as he thought of Nightlord Sneek. The black-clad murderers of Clan Eshin were a nightmare to every ratman, from the lowest clanrat to the most exalted warlord. They could be anywhere, lurking with their poisoned knives and their deadly blowguns. Thanquol's eyes narrowed with suspicion, squinting as he studied the mass of skaven filling the street around him. Suddenly, the press of so many ratmen swarming on every side wasn't so reassuring as it had been a few moments before. Almost involuntarily, he backed away from a clutch of scabby clanrats wearing the colours of a clan he didn't recognise. He watched them pass, one hand locked about the tiny chunk of warpstone he had secreted in a pocket of his robe. Were they watching him more closely than they should? Perhaps he should simply blast them with a spell and worry about whether they worked for Clan Eshin later.

Shaking his head, Thanquol decided against striking prematurely. A display of magic might annihilate his enemies, but it would also panic the skaven filling the street. Being stampeded by the crowd would make him just as dead as any assassin's blade. He continued to watch the three clanrats until they were lost in the mass of furry bodies. Most likely, they had simply recognised him and been overawed by his formidable presence. Yes, that was certainly it.

A sharp growl to the hulking brute towering behind him, and Thanquol made his way through the swarm of ratkin. It had taken most of his carefully hoarded warp-tokens to buy the behemoth, but after that sinister encounter with Nightlord Sneek, he reasoned that he had to do something to protect himself. The rat ogre had been the biggest, nastiest one he could find in the beast pens, a brown-furred giant with fists like boulders and a face filled with dagger-like fangs. He'd named the monster Boneripper after the brave, clever bodyguard that had fought so valiantly to protect him from Lord Skrolk's treachery and the profane magic of the grey

mage-man.

The crowd parted before Thanquol's advance, Boneripper looming over them like the very shadow of doom. There were frightened squeaks, whines of fawning protest and frequent spurts of musk. A rat ogre, he reflected, was a marvellous instrument for reminding the lower castes who their betters were.

A flash of darkness among the throng arrested Thanquol's attention. Had that been a flash of black cloak? The sort of cloak an assassin might wear? Thanquol chided himself for such foolishness. It was ludicrous! Why would an assassin bother to wear black when he could so effortlessly blend in with the crowd without it! It wasn't as if they were required to wear a uniform, to carry a placard that announced their profession to any skaven they might meet!

Through the crowd, Thanquol saw a black-cloaked skaven creeping purposefully towards him, one paw curled beneath the folds of the creeper's cloak. Thanquol blinked in disbelief. It was still ridiculous, but that creep really was hiding a knife under his cloak! As he looked again, he saw a second cloaked ratman slinking towards him, and still a third coming from the opposite direction.

Thanquol quickly edged himself away from the approaching killers, his fingers curling around the chunk of warpstone in his pocket. He was a bit more willing to risk the stampede now that there was no question that Sneek's assassins were coming for him.

Abruptly, Boneripper's huge maw dropped open in a fierce roar. The rat ogre's huge paws slammed against his chest, pounding drumlike tattoo that rumbled over the heads of the skaven filling the street. The monster's beady red eyes were ablaze with malice. He took a ponderous step towards the closest assassin, crushing a hapless bystander beneath his immense foot.

Thanquol gloated as he saw the look of terror crawling onto the murderer's face. They hadn't been expecting this. He had been very careful picking his bodyguard, choosing one that had been trained to hate the cloaked adepts of Clan Eshin. The rat ogre's body was still criss-crossed with the scars the packmasters had left when they had beaten hate into the beast's tiny brain. The effectiveness of that training, however, was quite obvious as Boneripper stomped a gory path through the crowd, focused upon rending the assassin limb from limb.

'Yes-yes!' Thanquol hissed through his fangs. 'Kill them, Boneripper! Kill the faithless little maggots!'

Hearing his master's voice snapped the last composure Boneripper possessed. Uttering a deep, groaning roar, the rat ogre ploughed through the massed skaven, hurling squealing ratmen aside with each sweep of his claws, crushing those too slow or too terrified to scramble out of his way beneath his clawed feet. The black-cloaked assassin stood paralysed as he saw the immense behemoth charging towards him. The killer threw back his cloak, revealing the knife he held. Shrieking in terror, he threw his weapon at Boneripper. The poisoned edge sank into the rat ogre's shoulder with a meaty *thwack*.

Boneripper paused in his rush. He turned his head and stared at the knife sticking out of his body. The brute reached down, ripping the blade from his flesh, staring at it with confused eyes. His huge nose twitched as he sniffed the ugly green muck dripping from the knife's poisoned edge. It took a moment for the smell to register with his dull brain, but when the rat ogre remembered the lessons he had been so painfully taught by the packmasters, he came alive with fury. The knife crumpled into an unrecognisable lump of steel as Boneripper angrily closed his fist around it.

The assassin squealed in fright and turned to flee, horrified that Boneripper had survived the poison. He couldn't know the toxic provender the packmasters had reared the rat ogre on, the slowly increased doses of venom they had injected into his veins since he had been a whelp. The result had made Boneripper's body develop a pronounced resistance to a wide range of diseases and toxins.

The rat ogre reached down to the street beside him, snatching a cowering skaven from the flagstones. The wretch screamed and writhed in Boneripper's grasp, but his efforts went unnoticed by the brute. Glaring at the assassin as he started to scurry away, Boneripper flung the screaming ratman at him. The living missile wailed as he flew across the street, slashing fleeing spectators with his flailing claws. The skaven smashed into the assassin as though fired from a cannon. Both ratmen were hurled through the air, battering a path through the packed street.

In the aftermath, the panicked mass of the crowd struggled even more fiercely to flee, but their very numbers hampered any real hope of progress. Crippled, cringing ratmen, limbs shattered by the impact of Boneripper's living missile, crawled along the ground trying desperately to avoid being crushed by the feet of other ratkin. The skaven Boneripper had thrown was a shattered mess of broken bones and bloody fur smashed against the stone wall on the other side of the street. Beneath the dripping carcass, the crumpled body of the assassin struggled. The impact had snapped the killer's spine, leaving him helpless from the waist down.

Boneripper lumbered through the shrieking mob, stalking through the packed skaven with powerful strides. Soon he towered over the crippled assassin. The rat ogre stared down at the trapped ratman, then brought his clawed foot smashing down into the assassin's skull.

Thanquol grinned in savage challenge as he watched Boneripper kill the assassin. He glanced to either side, pleased when he saw the other two killers slinking back into the crowd, clearly less than eager to have any part in attacking the grey seer after watching their comrade slain so brutally. Thanquol snarled a command to Boneripper, gesturing with his claw to one of the retreating murderers. He felt a flare of angry frustration when the brute ignored him, too intent on pounding the skull of the first assassin into paste to pay attention to his master's voice.

With an effort, Thanquol calmed himself. It was just as well that the others escaped. They would bear word of their experience back to the other skulking murderers of Clan Eshin. They would tell their fellows that to face Grey Seer Thanquol was to face their own deaths! Yes, the assassins would know that killing Grey Seer Thanquol was no easy task!

A troubling thought came to Thanquol then and his fur began to rise in anxiety. It had been easy. Much too easy. Positively bumbling on the part of the assassins to let themselves be spotted so quickly. Perhaps they were simply murderers in training, neophytes at the arts of assassination. But why would Sneek send amateurs to kill someone of his formidable powers?

On impulse, Thanquol spun about and dropped into a crouch. There was a wail of agony just behind him. The grey seer risked a

glance, saw one of the skaven that had been cowering near him during Boneripper's rampage lying on the ground, his body twitching in a violent spasm. A dart as long as Thanquol's finger was buried in the stricken ratman's cheek.

The grey seer's eyes went wide with fright. The killers he had sent Boneripper after weren't the assassins! They were the diversion! Something to keep Thanquol occupied while the real assassin made his move!

Thanquol threw himself across the ground, rolling along the muck-strewn stones. He imagined he could hear something whistle past his face, but there was no imagination behind the pained shriek of the skaven behind him. The ratman was hopping on one foot pawing at the black needle sticking out of his other foot. A moment later, the skaven fell in a twitching mass, froth bubbling from his mouth.

Above! The dart had come from above! Thanquol glared at the stone wall, gnashing his teeth as he saw his attacker. Clinging to the ancient stones like some mammoth spider, the assassin was swathed in black from the base of his tail to the tip of his muzzle, only his beady red eyes left exposed by the cloth mask wrapped around his face. A sniff told Thanquol this was indeed a true assassin, the glands that produced the distinctive personal scent having been removed in one of Clan Eshin's macabre rituals.

The assassin glared back at Thanquol and raised a long, slender blowgun to his cloth-covered lips. The grey seer ducked his head, pressing himself against the filthy ground, trying to hide his face from the coming attack. This time he distinctly heard the dart as it raced through the air. He felt something brush against him, holding his breath in horror as he waited for the poison to do its lethal work.

It took Thanquol a heartbeat to realise what had happened. The dart had missed him, glancing off his horn. Fear and rage warred for mastery of him when he realised how close he had come to dying. Fear put up a good fight, but in the end it was rage that won out.

Thanquol lifted himself from the ground, his eyes focused on the assassin clinging to the wall above him. The grey seer's hand closed about the chunk of warpstone in his pocket, breaking off a tiny fragment and popping it into his mouth. The assassin seemed paralysed with horror, as unable to move as the decoy had been when faced by Boneripper's unstoppable charge.

A sickly green light crackled within the depths of Thanquol's eyes as the magical energies of the warpstone flowed through his mind and seeped into his soul. He could feel the awesome power of the Horned Rat rippling through him, the magical winds seeping into his body. He ground his fangs together, his brain flooded with images of destruction. He would incinerate this entire street and everything in it, leave the buildings nothing but heaps of slag. He would burn the assassin's shadow into the very stone with the fury of his magic and send his soul shrieking into Kweethul's sunken hell! Then he would cast down the Shattered Tower and drag Sneek's shattered corpse from the rubble...

Shaking his head, Thanquol fought down the overwhelming influence of the warpstone. He focused on what was at hand. All he needed to do was kill the assassin, nothing more.

Suddenly, Thanquol's concentration was shattered by a deafening shriek of terror. The air was pungent with the stink of musk and the very ground shook with the violence of hundreds of ratmen stampeding. The grey seer turned and watched as the panicked crowd surged away from him, horrified by the crackling lightning dancing about the head of his staff, frightened by the malignant aura that had settled about him like a mantle as he invoked the awful magic of the Horned Rat. The mob surged away from him as quickly as far as it could. But even the wide streets of Skavenblight could not accommodate the mass of struggling, frantic ratmen. They soon became packed and pressed together at either end of the street, unable to flee further. When that happened, the blind terror of the mob drove them back, turned them around to find escape in the other direction.

From either end of the street, a wave of squealing, snarling skaven came stampeding. Between the two panicked hordes stood Grey Seer Thanquol, suddenly feeling very small and vulnerable for all the magic burning through his veins.

The assassin chattered maliciously from his perch upon the wall. Thanquol scowled spitefully as the murderer climbed to the roof of the building and retreated from view. This had been the plan all along, he realised. The assassin wasn't trying to kill Thanquol with the darts, he was trying to provoke him into using his magic to defend himself, thereby throwing the mob into a panic. When Thanquol was crushed beneath the paws of the crowd there would be no evidence that his death had been the work of Clan Eshin.

Defiantly, Thanquol stood his ground. Mostly because there was nowhere to run. He raised his staff, sent a crackling blast of green lightning searing into the foremost ranks of the stampeding skaven. Several ratmen shrieked and fell, their bodies quickly crushed beneath the feet of the mob. In a blind panic, the skaven were oblivious even to the death-dealing sorcery of Thanquol. The grey seer turned and sent a second blast searing through the ranks of the mass of skaven rushing towards him from the other end of the street. Again, the mob refused to break.

Thanquol spurted the musk of fear. He could blast a hundred of the craven vermin into cinders and still there would be enough of them left to crush his body beneath their feet!

As he contemplated his doom, a huge shape charged at him from across the street. Thanquol spun, sending a blast of lightning crackling past Boneripper's face. The panic of the skaven mob had infected Boneripper's tiny brain! The slack-witted brute was turning on him!

Thanquol did not have time to send another blast of magic at Boneripper before the beast was upon him. Huge claws closed around the grey seer's body, pinning his arms to his sides and lifting him from the ground. Thanquol struggled and cursed, trying to wriggle free of his treacherous bodyguard's grip.

The panicked mob of skaven came crashing together, savagely attacking one another as the two sides met. The street became a sea of flashing fangs and raking claws as the frightened skaven tore at each other. The pungent stink of black skaven blood filled Thanquol's senses.

Boneripper lifted the grey seer still higher, keeping him well above the frenzied mob's reach.

Fear drained out of Thanquol and he bit back the last of the curses he had been heaping on his bodyguard's head. Such a clever servant, he considered, to see his master's distress and come rushing to his aid.

He would need to find some suitable way to reward Boneripper for such selfless service.

Perhaps he would let Boneripper eat Sneek's heart after he tore it from the Nightlord's mutilated chest.

CHAPTER TWO

Streets of Skavenblight

Grey Seer Thanquol sat in the gloom of his rented burrow and carefully plotted his next move. Nightlord Sneek had failed in his first attempt to murder him, but he knew the master of Clan Eshin would try again. Once the assassins had a skaven's scent, they never lost it.

The warpstone-induced madness had passed. Thanquol wasn't thinking in terms of killing Sneek. The very thought set his body trembling with fear. No, the only way to save his hide was to find out why Clan Eshin wanted him dead. Then he would need to find a way to make them change their mind. The only other alternative was to try and find an ally powerful enough to protect him from Sneek. That wouldn't be an easy task. None of the warlord clans, even the mighty Mors, was strong enough to defy Eshin. The warlock-engineers of Clan Skryre were cosy as fleas with the assassins, developing all kinds of new murder devices for them. No help there.

Clan Moulder was a possibility, if the ungrateful beastmasters didn't blame him for the slave revolt that had nearly destroyed He Pit! Now was not the time to remind them that the attack on their city had been the work of the rebellious mutant Lurk Snitchtongue, not the steadfast and selfless Grey Seer Thanquol. Pestilens, the traditional adversaries of Eshin, was an even worse proposition. Thanquol had earned his fame at the expense of Pestilens by defeating the renegade Plaguelord Skratsquik. Now he'd undermined their efforts to steal the Wormstone and been an unwilling participant in the destruction of Nurglitch's favourite disciple, Lord Skroth. The only reason the plague monks would protect him from Sneek would be so they could kill him themselves.

Thanquol picked a flea from his fur, staring in distaste at his grungy surroundings. It had been too dangerous to return to his own chambers: that would be the first place his would-be killers would look for him. The burrow his failing store of warp-tokens had allowed him to rent was little more than a hole clawed out from the muddy foundations of Skavenblight. The dirt walls dripped with moisture, ugly orange roots protruding from them at every turn. The ceiling was sagging, a few rotten beams and pillars cobbled from broken bricks the only thing keeping it from collapsing into the burrow. For accoutrements, Thanquol had a pile of insect-infested straw that smelled like it had last been changed when the Grey Lords were in power. A dilapidated desk pilfered from some Tilean villa leaned against a corner while an iron-banded trunk slowly rotted in another. This, the services of a diseased human slave, three meals a day and all the stagnant water he could suck from a bronze pipe in the tunnel outside his chamber had cost Thanquol seventeen precious warp-tokens.

That was what angered him the most. His formidable reputation should have been enough to bully the burrow-master down to at least seven warp-tokens. It was almost as if the ratman hadn't wanted Thanquol in his tunnels. Even after Boneripper broke a few of the insolent swine's fingers, he'd stuck to his price. The filthy rat knew that Thanquol was in hiding and had used that knowledge to mercilessly extort money from him. Thanquol didn't like to think that news of his problems with Clan Eshin had percolated down even into the squalor of the Sink, but it certainly looked that way. He had hoped to lose himself among the teeming masses of Skavenblight's lesser clans while he plotted his next move. But if the wretches around him were more afraid of Clan Eshin than they were of Grey Seer Thanquol...

He ground his fangs together in aggravation. If the filthy sewer rats of the flea-clans thought they could snitch to Sneek about his being down in the Sink he'd gut every last one of the vermin! He'd burn down their hovels and collapse their burrows! He'd string their living guts from one end of Skavenblight to the other! He'd feed their nethers...

Thanquol snapped from his vengeful ruminations, his nose bristling as the stink of human blood struck his senses. He could see the dim outline of the man-thing slave at the entrance to his burrow. The dim-witted thing had probably been stumbling about in the dark again. Humans were as good as blind down in the tunnels anyway. Thanquol was sorely tempted to let Boneripper take a bite out of the idiot thing, but was less than optimistic about his chances of training the rat ogre to do domestic chores.

'I did not call you,' Thanquol snapped irritably, lashing his tail against the floor.

The slave staggered a few steps deeper into his burrow and Thanquol was able to see the wretch better. He could see the scabby, sickly skin of the slave, clinging tight to his bones. He could see the thin, scraggly hair growing in patches on the human's sore-strewn scalp. Most of all, however, he could see the wet, dripping wound that stretched across the man-thing's neck.

Someone had slit the slave's throat from ear to ear.

Alarm flared down Thanquol's spine while fear-musk spurted from his glands. The grey seer leapt towards the pile of straw, tearing through it to retrieve his sword and staff, cursing himself for using his last piece of warpstone in the street.

Clan Eshin had found him! Clan Eshin was here!

Something blacker than black oozed into the burrow from the darkness of the tunnel. For a frantic moment, Thanquol imagined

that the shadow wizard had followed him from Altdorf. Then the blackness moved towards him, moved with a speed beyond even wizard-thing. He could see a black-furred hand gripping a dripping blade.

But Grey Seer Thanquol was not the only one who saw. Bellowing his fury, Boneripper lurched up from the floor, his back cracking against the sagging ceiling of the burrow. Thumping his claws against his chest, the crouching rat ogre lumbered towards the assassin.

The killer spun away from Thanquol, springing at Boneripper in a fluid motion that carried him under the hulking monster's claws. The rat ogre snarled in pain, his jaws snapping at the murderous shadow as it sprang away from him. Boneripper took a single step in pursuit, then crashed noisily to the floor. In that brief moment of contact, the assassin had expertly severed the tendons in each of the rat ogre's legs.

Boneripper snarled and snapped from the floor, dragging himself after the assassin. Thanquol hoped killing the brute would distract his attacker long enough for him to call upon his own powers to annihilate the scum. He could feel sorcerous energies gathering about him, seeping down into his veins. He felt a pang of longing for warpstone that churned his belly into a little knot of agony. His system felt empty drawing magic into it without warpstone to support the effort. Angrily, Thanquol gnashed his fangs and redoubled his exertions. If he did not strike quickly, there wouldn't be any more warpstone, either now or later.

Impossibly, even with a raging rat ogre roaring at him, the assassin noticed Thanquol's efforts. Even as the grey seer's eyes began to glow with power, a sharpened length of steel flew through the darkness. The knife slammed into Thanquol's staff, splintering the wood and missing the grey seer by inches. He stared in horror at the evil-smelling blade and the green venom dripping from its edge. The poison wasn't applied, it was oozing from the black metal itself. A weeping blade, a weapon carried by only the most expert of Eshin's killers!

Repulsed, horrified, Thanquol pulled the revolting thing free and threw it to the floor. His concentration broken, the grey seer's eyes no longer glowed as he cringed against the wall of his burrow.

The assassin, however, was again focused upon Boneripper. With a leap and a roll, the skaven swept beneath the rat ogre's claws bringing the blades he carried in his hands scything through the tendons of the powerful arms. The killer ended his attack just beneath Boneripper's lashing jaws. A third blade, clutched in the coils of the assassin's tail, stabbed upwards, scraping past Boneripper's fangs to punch through the roof of his mouth and pierce the tiny brain inside his thick skull.

Boneripper shivered, gasped, and then crashed against the floor. The assassin chattered coldly and stepped away from his kill, turning towards Thanquol once more.

The death of his bodyguard had taken less than a few heartbeats, too little time for even Thanquol to find an opportunity to escape. Now, as he watched the black-cloaked murderer creep towards him, sheer desperation gripped Thanquol's mind. Drawing quickly upon the dregs of magical energy still left in his body from his still-born spell, Thanquol sent a bolt of raw aethyric energy sizzling towards the assassin. The nimble ratman easily dived out of the spell's path. It continued onwards, smashing into one of the supports. A great groaning noise sounded from overhead. Eyes wide with horror, Thanquol watched as the ceiling came crashing down.

Thanquol expected to be crushed. For an instant, he thought he had been as his body was seized and all the air smashed from his lungs. Only when he was in the tunnel outside, coughing dust from his mouth, did he realise he was still alive.

At least for the moment. Looking up from the floor of the tunnel, Thanquol found himself gazing at a sinister figure swathed in black. Black fur, black leather leggings, black silk trousers and blouse, black cloak and hood. Even the assassin's scaly tail had been dyed black and the teeth in his muzzle had been stained to match the rest of him. Only the eyes were different, red and gleaming with amused malice. The eyes, and the green poison glowing on the edge of the knife he still held in his tail.

'You owe your fur to the Nightlord,' the assassin said. His voice sent shivers down Thanquol's spine. It was a thin whispering sound, the kind of noise a dagger makes as it sharpens against a stone.

Thanquol's head swam as he heard the words. Clearly it had been no effort on his part that had saved him from the collapse. But why would the assassin save him after coming so far into the depths of the Sink to kill him?

The grey seer bared his fangs in a threatening display and made a show of brushing mud from his robes. 'Since it was you who put my life in fear-doubt, I am...'

The assassin bared his own fangs, his tail arcing to his side, its menacing blade poised to strike. 'You owe your fur to the Nightlord,' the skaven repeated, his whisper becoming a growl. 'Because all-all he sent me to do was find-bring you.'

Thanquol wasn't sure exactly where in Skavenblight Clan Eshin had built Sneek's pagoda. It was somewhere deep under the city, the pressure on his ears told him that, yet there was also the stagnant smell of the Blighted Marshes in his nose that told him he was near the surface. Eshin made a habit of using dwarf slaves to build their strongholds, and the dwarf-things had many ways of tricking skaven. Perhaps they used extremely dense rock in the ceiling to increase the sense of pressure, or maybe they had some way of piping the smell of the marshes deep underground. It was a puzzle Thanquol promised himself he would look into.

Allowing, of course, that he ever left this place alive.

He stood in a dark, spacious chamber. The floor beneath his claws was piled with elaborately woven rugs, their pattern tickling the pads of his paws. The ceiling was lost somewhere in the darkness above him, the walls obscured by silken veils that swayed and trembled in the warm breeze that crawled through the room. A thick, heady scent of incense pressed in around him, filling his nose with a not unpleasant stinging feeling, like a faint echo of the warpstone snuff he enjoyed upon occasion.

Considering his favourite diversion, Thanquol dug a paw into the pocket of his robe. He stared in confusion at the slow, clumsy way his hand moved. There was a warning snarl from behind him, and a powerful claw dug painfully into his shoulder. Thanquol

spun around at the contact, a spasm of fear running through him as he realised how slow his reactions were.

The incense! Far more potent than even that employed by the Lords of Decay in the Shattered Tower, it was intoxicating his nerves with its soporific stink, rendering him slow and clumsy. His thoughts were no less sharp, however, and a grim gleam crept in Thanquol's eye as he saw how slowly the Eshin guard moved to restrain him. Whatever the vapour was, the assassins were not immune to it either.

The guard bared his blackened fangs, reading the change in Thanquol's posture as a sign of the grey seer's discovery. Like lightning, his paw drew a dripping knife from beneath his blouse. Thanquol pulled away, trying to ward away the assassin with his paws. This was the same killer who had murdered Boneripper. He was under no delusion about his ability to meet the assassin's speed, even without the incense dulling his reflexes.

'Peace, Grey Seer Thanquol,' a voice like the whisper of a drawn dagger scratched at the edge of Thanquol's hearing. The Eshin guard-rat released him and he turned back around to find himself facing a raised dais upon which stood an elaborately engraved throne, a seat of musky-scented wood carved from top to foot with writhing dragons and leering devils. Impossibly, the sputtering light of the warpstone braziers smouldering to either side of the chair illuminated the crown and sides, but left the seat itself in perfect shadow. From that shadow, a pair of sinister red eyes glistened in serene malevolence. A shiver crawled down Thanquol's spine as he understood who it was sitting in the darkness.

Nightlord Sneek's black-furred paw emerged into the light to beckon him forwards. Thanquol could see the long, ghastly nails that tipped each of Sneek's fingers, grotesque things that had not been gnawed or trimmed since he'd risen to the ranks of the Council. Now each was almost as long as the Nightlord's hands. They had been painted with curious characters, the weird writing of the men of Cathay. It was a language unknown even to most of the Lords of Decay, a secret known only to the Nightlord and his closest disciples. Thanquol wondered what sinister message was written on those talons and who was meant to read them.

The guard-rat sheathed his weeping blade, shuffling back to lean against one of the Cathayan columns that lined the centre of the chamber. His eyes, however, continued to regard Thanquol with unnerving intensity.

'Come forward, Grey Seer Thanquol,' Sneek repeated. 'There is much I would speak-say with the famous-honoured Thanquol.' The Nightlord's paw vanished back into the shadow and there came the sound of hands clapping together. From behind the silken veils, a train of skavenslaves emerged, bearing platters of sweetmeats and pungent Tilean cheeses, jugs of bloodwine and pots of the pungent green liquid Clan Eshin had become addicted to during their long sojourn in Cathay.

Thanquol eyed the victuals suspiciously, even as his stomach rebelliously growled. He started to reach for a tray of sweetmeats before common sense drew his hand back. It seemed a lot of work to bring him here just to poison him, but the Lords of Decay were not known for the practicality of their often-murderous whims. Thanquol pushed the tray away from him. He knew enough about the weird rituals of Eshin to turn and bow to the Nightlord's throne as he refused his hospitality.

There was just the slightest hint of a chuckle from the shadows, then Sneek clapped his hands together a second time. The slave carrying the smelly pot of tea scurried up the steps of the dais to present the beverage to his master.

'You are curious why I call you, Thanquol,' Sneek's thin whisper cut through the darkness of his lair. 'I find myself in need of a grey seer. One with every reason to be loyal to me.'

Thanquol licked his fangs nervously. Loyalty to Clan Eshin was something of a lifetime commitment, however short that might be. 'I-I am honoured by your confidence, exalted murder-master, but my oath-service to the Horned Rat is my bond. I can serve-obey no other.'

'Kritislik and Tisqueek are even now selling your mangy pelt to curry favour with Nurglitch,' Sneek said. 'The seerlords hope to use Clan Pestilens to curb the ambitions of Clan Skryre. Giving Nurglitch your glands in a warpstone bowl will go far to impressing that diseased pustule of their sincerity.'

Thanquol felt his knees buckle beneath him and he slumped to the floor. Kritislik was betraying him to Clan Pestilens? After he had selflessly risked his life to keep the Wormstone out of Nurglitch's paws? The plague monks were heretics, worshipping some grotesque daemon-thing and pretending it was the Horned One! He knew Kritislik hated Warplord Morskittar with a passion, but to condone the blasphemous ways of Pestilens in order to restrain the warlock-engineers was utter madness! Age had finally crippled Kritislik's senses, or else the poison Tisqueek kept trying to lace the senior seerlord's food with was finally having an effect!

Again Nightlord Sneek clapped his paws. In response, the veils behind his throne parted. A pair of sinister-looking skaven emerged from the blackness beyond the veils. One was a cloaked killer, his face wrapped in strips of darkened leather, his left hand encased within a wickedly sharp steel fighting claw. The other was a lean, emaciated ratman with a sickly pelt of charcoal-coloured fur. He wore a dark robe of Cathayan silk and leaned upon a gnarled staff. Thanquol stared in alarm at the talismans dangling from thongs affixed to the staff. The stories were true, then. Clan Eshin had their own heathen sorcerers, versed in some arcane art they had learned in the mysterious east.

'This is Shiwan Stalkscent,' Sneek said, one of his grotesquely long claws indicating the cloaked skaven. The assassin gave Thanquol a mocking bow, then ran the back of his paw across his dripping nose. Sneek indicated the other skaven. 'This is Shen Tsinge,' his whispery voice rasped. The sorcerer simply bared his fangs at Thanquol. 'They have been entrusted with an honour-tas of importance to me. To ensure they succeed, I am sending you with them, Grey Seer Thanquol.'

Thanquol stared at the two sinister skaven. He could see the hate in their eyes. Shiwan, like most of Eshin's assassins, had his scent glands removed so there was nothing in his smell to make Thanquol any wiser about the emotions coursing through him. She however, stank of hostility, the envious fug of a whelp pushed from its brood-mother's teat by a stronger sibling. His own exploits were known far and wide throughout the Under-Empire, yet these two showed not the slightest trace of intimidation in his presence. To be so open about challenging a grey seer meant more than impiety. It suggested a hideous degree of ability and ambition as well.

‘I wish-pray them much-much success on their venture,’ Thanquol said, repeating his deferential bow to the Nightlord. ‘Unfortunately my duty demands I stay-stay in Skavenblight.’

The chilling chuckle of Nightlord Sneek wheezed from the darkness. ‘If you leave, Thanquol, it will cause me much unhappiness.’ Sneek waved his open palms in a helpless gesture. ‘I would need to send Deathmaster Snikch looking for you again. Only this time he would not bring you back.’

Eyes wide as saucers, Thanquol turned in horror to the guard-rat leaning against the Cathayan column. Deathmaster Snikch grinned at him with a muzzle filled with blackened fangs. Thanquol couldn’t keep a squeal of terror from rumbling up his throat.

‘Perhaps you have reconsidered?’ Nightlord Sneek did not even give Thanquol time to answer him. ‘To offset the ambitions of Seerlord Kritislik and prevent alliance between the grey seers and Clan Pestilens, I find it necessary to treat with the plague priests in my own way.’ Sneek clapped his paws together. In response, Shen Tsinge scurried forward, approaching the base of the dais.

‘Many breedings ago, when Grey Lords yet ruled the Under-Empire, Clan Pestilens build-make own empire far across great waters. Long-long they stay, lost-forgot by all skaven.’ Shen lifted his finger for emphasis as he made his next point. ‘Plague monk fight-fight cold-things to rule-keep jungle. Many-many battles they fight-fight, but always plague monks win. Then cold-things call great magic. Bring new-new god-devil into world.’

Thanquol’s heart hammered in his chest. No skaven had failed to hear of the horrible devil-god that had routed Clan Pestilens from their ancient homeland and pursued them into the swamps of the Southlands. Sotek the Snake Daemon, whose jaws could swallow an entire warren in a single bite!

‘Long-time ago, we steal-take map from plaguelords,’ Shiwan boasted, wiping his paw across his nose again as a string of mucus brushed his whiskers. ‘Map show-tell old cold-thing place where they call snake-devil.’

‘Cold-things build-make temple of serpent there,’ Shen explained. ‘Keep snake-devil fed with skaven hearts. Great prophet of snake-devil there, listening for snake-devil’s words.’

Nightlord Sneek clapped his paws together again. Shen and Shiwan bowed to their master and were silent. Sneek pointed one of his talons at Thanquol. ‘Pestilens has tried many times to kill the snake-prophet. If Eshin succeeds where the plaguelords have failed it will make them afraid. Too afraid to oppose my power.’

Thanquol shuddered at the idea. Sneaking into the very temple of Sotek to kill the snake-devil’s high priest! It was on his tongue to suggest a certain dwarf-thing and his human pet for the job when an even more disturbing thought occurred to him. Sneek wasn’t worried about Pestilens making alliances against the rest of the Council; he wanted Pestilens to ally with Eshin! By murdering the arch-foe of the plaguelords, Eshin would be able to treat with them from a position of dominance and dictate the terms of their alliance. In the last civil war, only the opposition of the assassins had prevented the plague monks from overwhelming all the other clans. If the two united together there might be nothing that could stop them!

‘You are quiet, Grey Seer Thanquol,’ Nightlord Sneek said. ‘Are you thinking of leaving us?’

An eager hiss of anticipation rasped through Deathmaster Snikch’s fangs as Sneek spoke. Thanquol resisted the urge to turn and see if he was drawing one of his poisoned blades.

‘No-no!’ Thanquol assured the Nightlord. ‘I was only worrying that there are traitors trying to stop-stop your great and glorious plan, oh murderous daimyo! Only a few days ago I was attacked in the streets...’

The Nightlord’s talons stabbed accusingly at the grey seer. ‘There are no traitors in Clan Eshin!’ Sneek’s voice was a rumbling growl now, the serene whisper cracking in the heat of his fury. ‘An adept would sooner slit his own belly than defy me!’

Thanquol’s fur crawled as he felt the Nightlord’s rage fixed on him. However, the only way to escape that anger was to feed it.

‘Grand slayer of kings, I do not doubt-question your mighty power! First among the Lords of Decay, feared even by those who upon the Council! Yet I speak-say no lie when I tell you an assassin of your clan tried to murder me in the street! The slinking-coward used darts from a blowgun to goad me into using my meagre knowledge of magic to defend myself, knowing such a display of power would set the crowd into a mindless panic. He thought to hide his crime by crushing me beneath their paws!’

Nightlord Sneek’s paws disappeared back into the shadow. ‘I will look into this, Thanquol. If you have spoken true, I will have the traitor’s spleen in my hand. If you are trying to trick me, Deathmaster Snikch will bring me your spleen instead.’

Thanquol risked a sidewise glance at the lounging master-killer. Snikch grinned back at him, his pink tongue licking his painted teeth. There was no place in the Under-Empire anyone could hide from the Deathmaster.

Clapping paws ended Thanquol’s audience with the Nightlord. ‘Shiwan and Shen will attend you,’ Sneek said. ‘They are fully versed in my plans. Follow-obey them, Thanquol. Defy their orders and I shall consider it defying my own.’

Deathmaster Snikch’s bloodthirsty chuckle at the Nightlord’s threat was still ringing in Thanquol’s ears as Shiwan and Shen led him into one of the narrow tunnels hidden behind the veils.

Chang Fang was a skaven with big problems. As he made his way through the streets of Skavenblight, he hugged the manskin cloak tight around his body. He’d dyed his fur, rubbed the disembodied glands of two clanrats into his skin, discarded all of his weapons and equipment lest their smell betray him. In every way and in every detail he tried to present the appearance of a Clan Muskrit bog hunter. From smell to posture to appearance, he tried to make himself inconspicuous.

He was realistic about his chances of fooling his kinsrats of Clan Eshin. If he lived until dawn it would be a wonder worthy of the Horned Rat.

The disguised assassin ground his fangs together and cursed for the thousandth time the scent of Grey Seer Thanquol. The maggot should have been dead, crushed beneath the stampeding paws of a hundred skaven. An ignoble death for a conniving, cowardly, self-important flea! Long overdue, far too long delayed. Thanquol needed to be shown that he could not betray his fellow skaven

with impunity. There were consequences and Chang Fang intended the grey seer would suffer them!

His own ruin was Thanquol's fault. The grey seer had used Chang Squik in his crazed scheme to destroy the man-thing nest called Nuln. To cover his own incompetence, Thanquol had abandoned Chang Squik to die, then blamed his many failures on the dead assassin.

Chang Squik had been trained as part of the same triad of assassins as Chang Fang; the disgrace suffered by Chang Squik infected the reputations of the survivors of the triad. No one would hire the services of an assassin tainted with the stink of failure, even Clam Eshin. Unable to expand the fortunes of their clan through murder, Chang Fang and Chang Kritch had been expunged from the ranks of the assassins. Chang Kritch had opened his belly in shame, but Chang Fang had endured. The need for vengeance had sustained him.

He would survive! He would escape the daggers of his kin and he would find Grey Seer Thanquol again!

Chang Fang lashed his tail in annoyance, nearly tripping an overburdened skaven slave scurrying down the street beside him. It was unfair! How was he to know the Nightlord wanted the damn grey seer for one of his schemes! By the time he found out, he'd already made the attempt to kill his hated enemy. Of course, that only made things even worse. To interfere with the Nightlord was bad enough, but for an assassin, even a disgraced one, to fail to kill his target was a crime that could be redeemed only with blood. It was not to be his own, then he must kill Thanquol. Otherwise the Horned Rat would gnaw on his soul when he died.

The assassin's face split in a vicious snarl, his claws curling into his palms. It would be Thanquol's blood, not his own! Somehow he would find the slippery grey seer and make him pay.

A green-robed figure intruded upon Chang Fang's thoughts of vengeance. So intently had the assassin been watching for others like his kind that he had not noticed the plague monks as they oozed their way through the teeming mass of skaven that filled the narrow street. Chang Fang maintained his pose of bog-hunter and tried to squirm past the odious monk. He realised his mistake when the monk's decayed paw closed around his arm. He brought his foot smashing into the ratman's belly in a savage kick that sent him crashing through the throng around them.

Chang Fang did not wait to see how badly the kick had crippled the plague monk, instead turning to vanish into the crowd. His escape was blocked, however, by a solid mass of tattered robes and mangy fur. A rusty knife pressed against his chest.

'Greetings, murder-meat,' the knife-holding plague monk coughed. 'Our master would speak-say much-much. You come with us or yes-yes.'

The plague monks were silent as they marched their captive through the dingy alleyways of Skavenblight, down dark corridors so desolate that they barely had to push anyone out of their way. Soon, the strange procession stood before a partially collapsed stone structure, its broken blocks jutting up from the mud around it. One of the plague monks indicated a window gaping a few feet above the mud. Another of the monks pushed Chang Fang towards it.

Briefly the thought of fighting back flashed through Chang Fang's mind. Quickly it was discarded. Even if he won clear of so many foes, the skirmish was sure to be noticed. The Nightlord's spies were everywhere. Besides, if the plague monks wanted him dead, he would already be so.

Chang Fang squirmed through the window, sliding into the room beyond. The floor of the room above had been torn down to open the ceiling of the mud-choked chamber he now found himself in. The air was rank with the pestilent stench of rot and decay. Half-eaten things were piled on the floor before a bloated warpstone idol only the deranged imagination of the plaguelords would see as representing the Horned Rat. If his glands hadn't been removed, Chang Fang would have spurted the musk of fear just looking at the noxious thing.

Revolted, he turned his eyes from the idol. Now he saw that it was not the only occupant of the slimy room. Several green-robed plague monks were seated on the floor, each of them furiously polishing a small chunk of warpstone. Behind them, seated atop one of the fallen blocks of stone, was a shape almost as ghastly as the obese idol. It was a bloated ratman, his skin peeling, his hair hanging in lumpy patches, his flesh a sickly green where it was not blotched with sores and boils. The ratman's muzzle was a decayed stump, his rotten lips unable to cover his fangs. Most hideous of all were his eyes. One was an empty hole in his face, the other was a polished piece of pure warpstone. Despite the impossibility, Chang Fang knew the creature could see him with that warpstone eye.

'They work to fashion a new eye for Lord Skrolk,' the grisly thing on the stone block declared, pointing a withered finger at his empty eye socket. 'The one whose work I choose will be made a deacon. The others will be made into meat.'

Chang Fang shivered to hear the plaguelord's bubbling, decayed voice and the callous indifference he displayed towards the fate of his underlings. If he treated his own clan in such fashion, what could Chang Fang expect?

'Terrible Lord Skrolk, horror of all skavendom, if this wretched-foolish one has-has offended...'

Skrolk's rotting face pulled back in a snarl. 'Do not test-tempt my patience! I know-see you are Chang Fang!'

The assassin recoiled from the threatening voice as though it were the roar of a swamp dragon. Unconsciously, he dropped into Clam Eshin fighting stance. His eyes darted across the room looking for a means of escape. It would take too long to climb the walls and there were more monks waiting outside the window. Perhaps behind the idol...

Lord Skrolk made a placating gesture with his paw. 'We are friends, Chang Fang,' he croaked. 'We share a common enemy.'

Suddenly escape no longer interested Chang Fang. 'Thanquol,' he growled.

The plaguelord's wormy tail lashed angrily against the stone block. 'I've had a long-long swim thanks to him,' Skrolk hissed. 'Except for his treason, I would have presented a great-great treasure to my master. Now my tongue grows heavy with excuses.'

Chang Fang ground his teeth together. 'He is protected by the Nightlord,' he cursed. 'We can't touch Thanquol without suffering his wrath.'

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